

Chapter 3 Forest Deep and Dark

Early pioneers arriving in the New England uplands had pushed inland from the Hunter across the northern tablelands towards the black soil plains of the north-west. The rolling grasslands of the tableland and western plains were the coveted prize of squatters whose workforce of shepherds were originally convicts. Since about 1830 pioneering families bullocked their way through Nowland's gap to settle the New England Tableland as squatters. Armidale, the official administration centre, had established itself as an inland township by the 1850's. Along the coast timber cutters lead a wave of pioneer settlements that eventually connected to the uplands via aboriginal song lines and trails that gradually enlarged to carry the drays and carts of colonial transport. Of significance to our Quinn clan were the trails leading down from Beardy Plains around Glen Innes towards Big River and Clarence Mouth at the coast.

Dad and I joined a party of cutters heading down to the coastal cedar camps in the mid-'50s. We travelled south-east from Beardy Plains through Oban, then easterly past the impressive Ebor Falls. One of the sawyers in our party tried to cross the flooding river a little too close to the edge of the upper falls. We watched in horror as he toppled from a rock ledge to join the water cascading into a pool about a dozen yards below. His scream on falling was cut short as his boot lodged in a crevice in the rock that left him dangling topsy-turvy halfway down the upper fall. The roaring falls submerged his muffled screams and threatened to drown him as he hung upside down inside a curtain of falling water.



Upper and Lower,



Ebor Upper Falls.

Somehow he managed to dislodge his foot so that he plummeted into the pool halfway down the upper falls, bouncing off a ledge or two as he fell. We rushed to his aid expecting only to save his corpse from being swept out of sight over the lower falls, at least five times as high as the one where he fell. His frantic calls let us know he was still alive and somehow had miraculously survived the upper falls. With redoubled efforts we were able to save him, for there was next to no chance of survival if the torrent swept him over the lower

falls. Dad was able to drag him from the raging stream before he could be swept away to certain death¹.

Frontier life was fraught with dangers and death was a regular companion of the pioneers. I had not even started working with those 'men of death', as timber cutters were known, and yet we were facing death and deadly dangers on a daily basis. From Ebor, Dad had planned to head down to Thora and work in the camps along the Bellinger River, but instead, we headed north east towards Coutts Crossing on the Orara. Dad had heard there was more work in the forests south of the Clarence. Coastal shipping was getting more organised, and river wharves were being built upriver for loading lumber and other produce. Known as Big River, the Clarence could carry larger ships further inland once the bar at the mouth had been crossed. The word was out that Clarence mouth even had a pilot to assist shipping in navigating those ever changing and treacherous sand bars at Clarence Mouth.

Great expectations were in the air for what lay ahead. However, my initiation into life as a labourer was painfully abrupt. The cutters were hard men and many still carried wheels across their back from the lash of the cat during their convict days. Hard work and soul destroying drudgery were the lot of most cedar cutters, who endured the universally monotonous and toilsome existence of the labouring class. My job as water boy introduced me to a way of life where exploitation was the name of the game. I was no shirker, and I served them well with water. Later when I started supplying our camp with fresh fish and meat, they encouraged me to forget water carrying to keep them supplied with bush tucker.



The all but impenetrable forests of the coastal plains were gradually being opened up, falling to the efforts of timber cutters like me Da. Farmers followed the timber getters, setting fire to the remaining forest, and opened up the cleared coastal plains to agriculture serviced by coastal shipping. A first step was to penetrate a forest: 'of gigantic trees, matted and interwoven to their summit by wild vines and creepers and often presenting the appearance of an enormous wall covered from top to bottom with ivy forming an impenetrable barrier for a man to pass unless he were to hew his way through, a puzzle even for a bird to pass through it'.²

After fighting through the maze of brush and undergrowth to locate a cedar for felling, brush hooks were used to clear around the base so that they could swing an axe. Long

wooden handles were attached to the heavy slightly curved blade of the hooks 'to keep its operator out of range of lashing spines and stinging leaves, not to mention the odd affronted snake.'³ Razor sharp tools were often a cause of serious injury while a fall from a jiggerboard could leave these 'men of death' impaled on a spike below. The enormous trees were the most dangerous things in the forest enmeshed as they were in vines that could ultimately decide which direction either broken branches, called 'widow makers' or the bole itself, would plummet to earth. These dealers with death have only seconds to escape from their elevated jiggerboard following the explosive sound that signalled splitting heartwood. A breeze may sway the interlocking overhead canopy to snap the trunk but still delay its fall, tearing branches down upon the feller below. Would his escape route impale him on the surrounding spikes; would the cutter choose a path directly under a falling bough; would the tree be buoyed up by the canopy vines and slip off the stump, to crash to earth on the fleeing cutter? 'In attacking the bases of trees more than a hundred feet tall, the fellers were invoking chaos.'⁴

'From first to last the calamity may have taken three seconds or less; even had there been time for action, no one could predict the ultimate position of that one hundred and fifty feet of tree as it struck the ground.'⁵

As water boy in the logging camp, I walked into a very steep learning curve. My job became a struggle to survive, a matter of life or death. Keeping as distant as I could from the utter uncertainty of the actual fall of the vine-tangled trees, I had to make myself useful providing for the thirst of busy cutters. Teams comprised of loggers, fellers, cutters and sawyers, gradually worked deeper and deeper into the hinterland as cedars growing nigh rivers and streams were exhausted near the coast. Often guided by aboriginals they sought and felled giant trees deep in the forests of the coastal plane between Clarence Mouth and the Tablelands to the West.



In the almost impenetrable forest, logging teams laboured for months on end, removing the mightiest softwoods, leaving havoc and desolation in the enfolding hardwood forest. Once felled the 'light' logs were dragged and floated to the coast for shipping to the growing colonial centres along Australia's eastern seaboard. The herculean efforts of these 'men of death' opened the flat expanse of the plains to a flood of farmers who turned the rich

forest floor into cleared grazing pastures and sooner or later into fields of head-high sugar cane. The hardwood forest was then cleared by fire as its timber was too difficult to work and too heavy to float. Progress has its price, and the environmental cost did not compute in colonial calculations.⁶

Straight boles of the sought after Cedars were most prized, and often tallest forest giants were felled thirty feet above ground level, leaving monolithic stumps as monuments to their skilful despoliation. The axe men aimed to cut selected trees higher than restricting undergrowth and above the enormous buttresses that supported these giants. Jiggerboards stepped spirally around the lower trunk would elevate and support the cutters seemingly in mid-air.⁷ Such dangerous high-level felling practice avoided contortions caused in the timber by buttress root supports that rendered the lower boles unsuitable as planks. Both sides of the enormous trunks needed to be attacked by balancing precariously from pointed poles driven into notches, often several yards up both sides of the stump to be.

In the tangle of undergrowth left below the stumps made by the cutters, bullockers cajoled and cursed their teams; and I learned to swear, and dodge their lash as they dragged the fallen giants, with diameters often greater than the tallest feller, to the nearest stream or else to clearings in the dense bush. The mighty boles were then sawn into manageable lengths that could be manoeuvred over a saw pit for planking. There the sawyers worked in tandem to manipulate the mighty cross-cut saws, often in a vertical plane. In this case, a top notch Sawyer had the heavy load of drawing the enormous blade upward in preparation for the down draw that showered his partner in the pit below, with shavings and splinters.

Short of stature and stockily built, Dad's fine sense of balance often saved him from the indignity of a fall from atop a log that could be two or three yards across. It would indeed have been an ignominious fall to the sawdust and slush in the bottom of the pit more than ten feet below. The dangers and demands of pit work were nothing compared to the risks encountered in felling some of those forest giants. Known as 'Men of Death' everyone, the workers who won Red Gold were hard men, hard drinkers.⁸ And many were still locked into convict gangs. Often dressed for working the forest in only hessian or canvas bags worn over the shoulders like a dress, they lived on the job in huts and makeshift gunyahs.

Their bellowing call of 'Timmberrr!' sometimes followed the explosive crack of a tree about to topple. Echoing through the primordial forest, the noise warned all that 100 yards of another timber giant was toppling to earth, crashing the undergrowth and crushing everything in its path. Axemen are at their thirstiest after their exertions have felled these giants and I was expected to be on hand immediately to slake their thirst and celebrate their efforts.

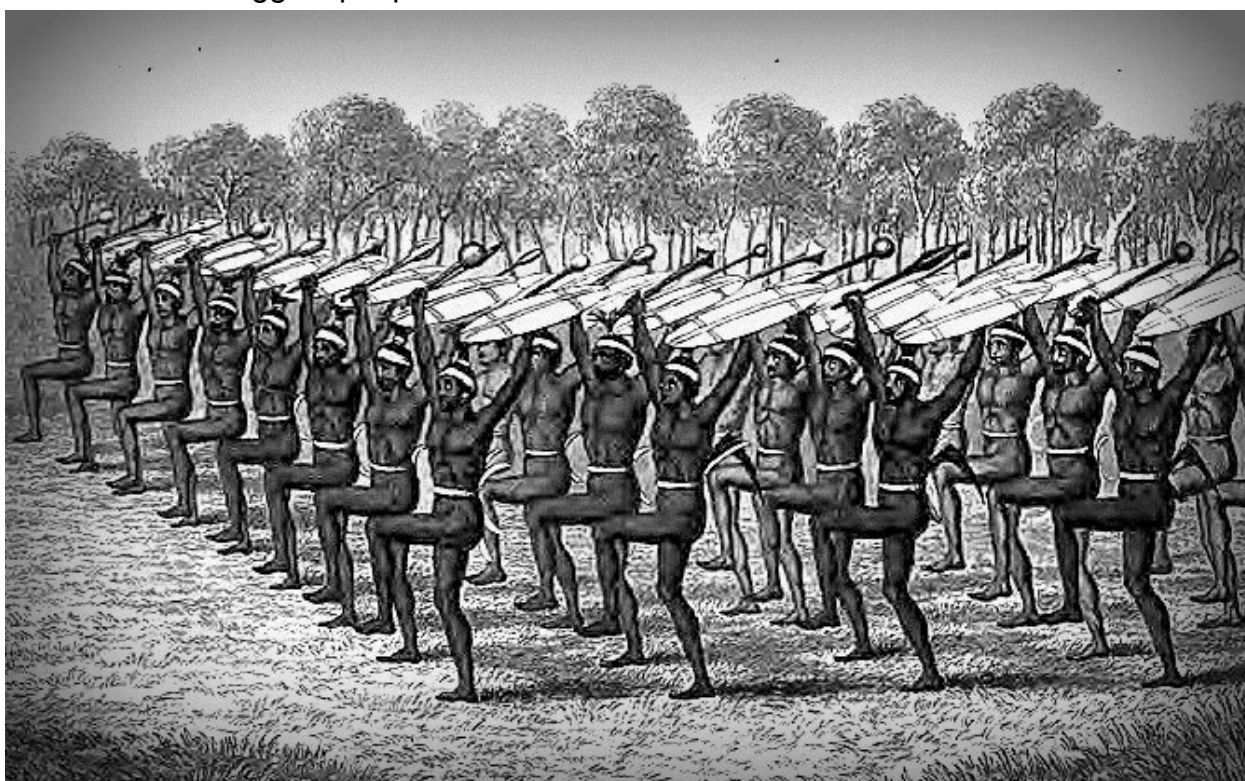
One must learn very quickly in the bush to penetrate the tangle of vines and creepers as gently as possible. Survival is all a matter of balance, push too hard and the bush will push back, often with disastrous results. Stinging ants called jumpers bit with a vengeance, but nature provided the juice of fern root nearby as a remedy. Their bites were mild compared to the sting of a nettle tree. 'The slightest touch of one of these leaves, occasions a most acute stinging pain; but horses suffer infinitely worse than men as their skin rises in large blisters, and great temporary constitutional derangement can ensue such as throwing himself on the ground snorting convulsively with pain.'⁹ Clement Hodgkins provided good evidence of the unknown terrors of the bush.

Storms in that tropical jungle could hardly be explained but by experience. And when it stormed it rained and thundered. Again Clement Hodgkins is very clear in his descriptions of this aspect of the rain forest:

'The pattering of the rain on the dense mass of foliage overhead and vivid flashes of lightning announced the approach of a storm. It was some time before the rain reached us through the thick foliage of the tall trees and matted creepers, but when it did at length penetrate through this temporary protection, it was worse for us than if we had been in the open forest, for after the storm had passed over, the trees continued to distil large drops of water on us during the remainder of the night. Leeches attach themselves to the

boots of persons traversing the brush and soon manage to crawl under the trowsers or gaiters and find the skin. They then gorge themselves with blood, whilst the small punctures they make, remain painful and inflamed for several days afterwards. I have frequently, after standing at rest for a few moments in a brush, picked off a dozen leeches at a time from my legs, which they had commenced sucking; and my feet generally became covered with blood, whenever I had to survey rivers or creeks along their brushy banks'.¹⁰ Hodgkinson shared such valuable insight into bush conditions and details of the lives of local aboriginals as well.

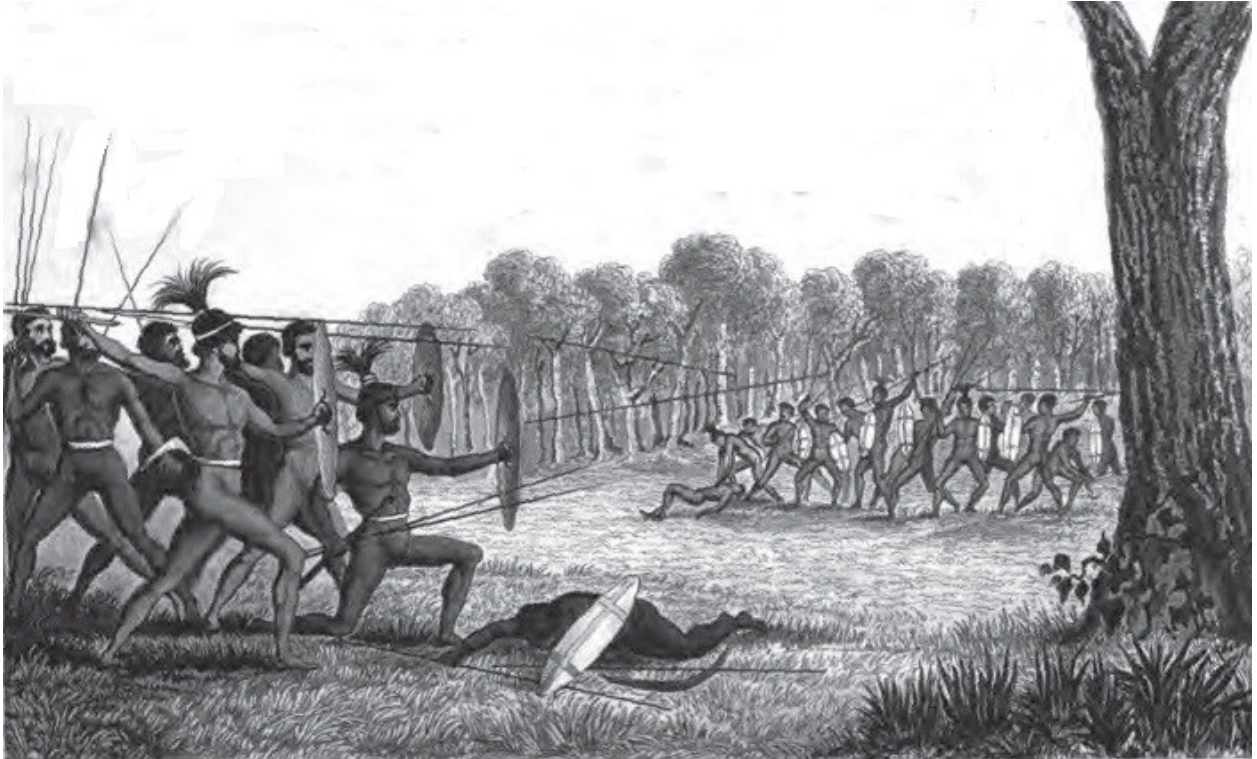
Hunting was a team effort with clan members strung out along a front, driving prey, kangaroo, pademelon, whatever, forward to flush them from cover. Fighting was nearly as exciting as the hunt but with teams from opposing mobs involved. Warfare between the tribes from different rivers was generally a matter of honour. Government Surveyor Clement Hodgkinson describes just such a battle in his 1842 report. *Dance of Defiance of the Yarrabandini Tribe*¹¹ He investigated the area in the early forties about the time I was born. To simplify the complexity of tribal relations, I omit the participation of women in this dispute. Their role was intimately entwined in the story from beginning to end, and I hope you get to read the original one day. The action took place upstream from Kempsey on the MacLeay River, and both clans were Dhanggatti peoples.



A war party of Ngagu from 'Tryal Bay tribe was coming up to fight the Yarra-Bandini natives, marching in Indian file, having their bodies painted with red stripes, and their bark shields whitened with pipe clay and adorned with double red crosses. They advanced with a measured tramp, carrying their spears aloft at a uniform slope, with their shields on the left side. They had just arrived where we were standing when the Yarra-Bandini blacks ... dashed out of the adjoining brush, and throwing themselves into regular rows, five or six deep, commenced a furious dance in defiance of the other party, leaping up and down at a measured tread, whilst they beat time with their nulla-nullas and waddies, accompanying each jump with a short, loud shout. As soon as their adversaries had arrived opposite to them, each party halted, whilst the chief men on both sides advanced, and commenced a most animated dialogue, occasionally threatening each other with their spears.

After a long altercation, the two hostile tribes mingled together, as though they were on the best terms with each other; they encamped, however, for the night, at some

distance apart. Next morning the fight commenced, in which, according to the usual custom, the three natives who had been the original cause of the quarrel, stood prominently forward, exposed to the spears of the Tryal bay blacks for some time, without receiving any assistance from their companions, until one of them received a spear wound on the instep and another on the knee. The fight then became general, but no further damage was done, as each party was equally adroit in warding off, with their shields, the missiles that were flying about. This engagement seemed to conclude the quarrel. It was, however, some time before the other quarrels which had arisen from this affair, were fought out, after which a general peace had to be consolidated by solemn corroboree, danced successively on the grounds of each of the belligerent tribes'.¹²



Thus were disputes settled without the mayhem of white man's wars. Such was the wisdom of black nations along the east coast. I was so fortunate in finding a friend in the forests along the Clarence River who changed my life forever from drudgery to delight. He taught me to love the land as a sacred gift, to step lightly in a way that white folk know not. But that is a tale for a future telling.

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¹True event c1930's as related by Don Quinn, grandson of Hugh Quinn.

²Op Cit. ABC RN Hindsight Sunday 24 July 2011 quoting C Hodhkins op. cit

³Greer, Germaine. (2014). P 173-4, White beech etc.,: London : Bloomsbury, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6448251>

⁴Ibid Greer, Germaine. (2014). P 175

⁵O'Reilly p103

<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=YWrCAwAAQBAJ&q=red+cedar#v=snippet&q=red%20cedar&f=false>

⁶Ibid ABC RN Hindsight Sunday 24 July 2011

⁷Photo credit Horowhenua Historical Society Inc http://horowhenua.kete.net.nz/image_files/12354/2002.010.0008.jpg

⁸ABC archived Doc Axemen <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/axemen/historymore.htm>

⁹Op. cit .Hodgkinson, Clement. (1845). p 30 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn740742>

¹⁰Ibid Hodgkinson, Clement. (1845). p 60 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn740742>

¹¹Ibid Hodgkinson, Clement. (1842). Dance of defiance of Yarra-bandini tribe. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135587630>

¹²Ibid Hodgkinson, Clement. (1845). Op. cit. p 239 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn740742>

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