

Book reviews

Terania Creek: Rainforest Wars

Nigel Turvey

Glass House Books, Carindale, Queensland

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For many readers of this journal, the names Terania Creek, the Nightcap and the Washpool recall images of confusing confrontations between loggers, ‘hippies’ and police that appeared on their TV screens around 1980. For northern NSW foresters of the time, they are names associated with a perception of the beginning of the end of professionalism in forestry when the best intent and practice of the professionals could be overturned and negated by the political whims of born-again conservationists. In scenes that have been repeated again and again throughout Australia, it is not surprising that foresters who have gone through the experience have ended up cynical, shell-shocked and weary and not a little confused as to how this could have happened in their quiet neck of the woods and what they could have done to prevent it.

In 1990 Ian Watson wrote about the events of Terania Creek, among the first forest confrontations to attract the media’s attention (Watson 1990). He interviewed mostly timber industry workers and conservationists, and analysed the battle as one between the middle-class intellectual values of the latter and the working-class utilitarian values of the former. Many of his interviews were conducted only a few years after the events, so the passion and immediacy are evident. Through his quotes he gives a graphic account of the strong feelings of the antagonists.

Sixteen years later we have another account of the events, this time by a forester educated in Ireland but who has spent most of his professional life in Australia. Nigel Turvey is probably better known as a forest soils scientist than an historian, but in this slim volume he brings his considerable research skills to bear on demystifying the Terania Creek conflict and subsequent events which ended in the banning of rainforest logging in New South Wales. Like Ian Watson, he interviewed a wide range of participants, including foresters, policemen and politicians. He has reviewed and referenced an impressive array of documentation. His account is easy to read and is broken down somewhat thematically but more or less chronologically. In places he disconcertingly drops threads and then picks them up in a later chapter, resulting in a need to repeat details to restore the context.

Turvey begins by briefly setting the scene — the mystique of the primeval rainforest and the confusion over what the public perceives as ‘rainforest’. He unfolds the saga from the decision to selectively log in 1979 a 77-ha compartment in Terania Creek which happened to be adjacent to the farm recently acquired by the Nicholsons to escape the city. The confrontations in the bush are recounted from the perspectives of the various players, as are the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring by both sides to keep the media engaged and sympathetic to their respective views,

despite the competing news events such as the Lindy Chamberlain case.

The judicial inquiry set up in 1979 by Premier Wran following his call to halt logging in Terania Creek receives a less comprehensive treatment by Turvey. Ross Florence (*pers. comm.*) notes that ‘there were 116 hearing days and 170 organisations/persons granted leave to appear — yet his account of the hearings focuses almost entirely on the stripping of Len Webb’s credibility’.

Turvey gives a plausible account of the split in the NSW Cabinet between those supporting the jobs of the timber workers and those opposed to logging the rainforest, including the pivotal role played by Premier Wran’s wife. Wran announced in 1982 a permanent ban on rainforest logging in NSW and began a process of moving state forest lands into national parks. To date almost a million hectares have been transferred by this political solution.

In the main, Turvey’s account is balanced and factual, without negating the importance of emotions and feelings in the ‘war’. Importantly for readers of this journal he pays particular attention to the role of foresters and the Forestry Commission and the impact the conflict had on both. The public saw foresters as aligned with the timber industry (they all wore hard hats on the TV) which stood in dogged opposition to the saviours of the last remaining remnants of the rainforest, and the urban sentiment swung towards the latter. In his final chapter entitled ‘Lessons and Landscapes’, Nigel places some of the blame on the poor communication and ‘hubris’ of the foresters and sawmillers.

This is a book which should be read by any who wonder why the forestry profession has suffered ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’, who wonder how and why political decisions are made in forest conflicts and who have a desire to understand what really was happening in the far north-east of New South Wales around 1980. The book is well presented with some interesting photographs, including one of an attractive protester wearing a policeman’s cap while giving the owner a scalp massage. A classic indeed!

Reference

Watson, I. (1990) *Fighting over the Forests*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 173 pp.

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