

‘Dat terrible teng at Berry-dale’

Harry, at Cooma

Goodnight Barlow

4 August 2005

Dear Members,

If you drive south from Berridale towards the mountains you pass the golf course on the left just a few miles out of town, and just past that you’ll see a yellow paddock and a rocky outcrop, about half a mile from the road. That’s all that remains of Lake Coolamatong.

Lake Coolamatong holds no water but at least it holds some happy memories for me. I used to stay at Berridale at the home of one of my school friends on weekends so we could ride pushbikes out to the lake for a dawn session on the stocked rainbows. We didn’t catch a lot of fish, maybe one or none each, but what we did catch were fabulous great green creatures with a crimson band down each side. I remember one dawn looking around and finding a fox cub sitting quietly only ten yards away watching me fish. All in all, it was a very pleasant and easy place to fish.

We also had some fun in town. Berridale is a very small place and nothing much happens on Saturday night for teenagers, but in those days a group of born-again Christians used to hire the old hall for Saturday night prayer meetings. We got in there one afternoon and rigged up an old shop dummy we’d found at the tip in a long white sheet and a wig pinched from the school drama class costume box. We drew a beard on the dummy with Texta pen, sprinkled Johnson’s Baby Powder over the whole thing and hid ‘Jesus’ in the roof, hanging him over an access hole in the ceiling, directly above the stage.

When the prayer meeting was in full flight my mate sneaked into the lobby of the hall, flicked off all the light switches except the row above the stage, I immediately let go of a piece of rope

from outside and the Saviour dropped through the hole in the ceiling in a cloud of white powder. The windows were too high off the ground for me to see what happened inside but there was a chorus of screams, both female and male, and we ran for our lives.

A few Sundays later I was at church in Cooma when Father Ryan collared me and said he heard that I’d ‘done dat terrible teng at Berry-dale’ and told me to make sure I went to confession that week. But his heart didn’t seem to be in it. When my mother asked me what he had been talking to me about I lied and said he had asked if I wanted to become an altar boy, which gave me yet another sin for the list on Thursday. I probably forgot to confess to either—there would have been more important ones further up the list.

Perhaps the evaporation of Coolamatong a few years later was divine retribution.

Coolamatong has a very special place in Monaro trout fishing lore. Younger anglers seeing it nowadays mightn’t believe this, but in years gone by it was a wonderful lake to fish in, with big rainbows that could get up to around 5 lbs. The Monaro Acclimatisation Society occasionally used to hold fishing days and competitions there and I remember that many of best local fly fishermen fished it fairly regularly. It was quite shallow and exposed, and only about half a mile across.

During the 1980s it just dried up and disappeared altogether. Much of the Monaro fishery has since followed suit and I wonder if we’ll ever see it come back again.

Rainfall varies greatly across the Monaro but figures from the Bureau of Meteorology for the past 10 years at the Cooma Visitors’ Centre Cooma weather station show just how dry it has been.

The average total annual rainfall since records started being kept at this station in 1973 is 537 mm per year, and yes, that includes snow. (To put this in perspective, Sydney's average rainfall is just over 1,200 mm per year.)

Year Total rain

1995	562 mm
1996	436 mm
1997	476 mm
1998	562 mm
1999	519 mm
2000	563 mm
2001	604 mm
2002	383 mm
2003	440 mm
2004	507 mm

You can see that the annual total reached the average in just four of the ten years. Of course this doesn't tell the whole story. Temperatures, winds and other factors affect evaporation rates, and records have only been kept at this station for 30 years, so the long term average is not necessarily a good indication of what is 'normal'. But perhaps the recent dry trend is closer to 'normal' than we'd like to think.

Anyway, something has made most of the small, shallow Monaro lakes dry up. I wonder what it would take for them to return, and even whether that is possible at all, considering the effects of global warming. I imagine it might take at least 30 years of above average rainfalls, or some other munificent blessing from above.

Given what we've all been up to lately, I'd say there's bugger all chance of that.

Kind Regards,
Harry

[End]

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