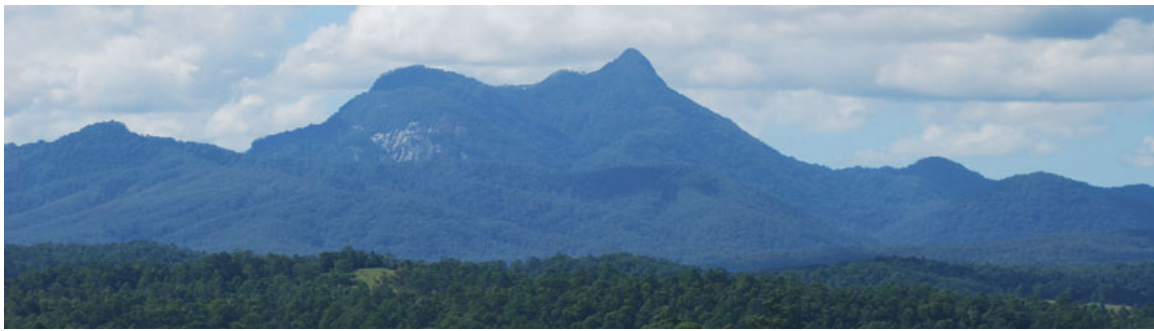


HELEN GOLEBY

A WARNING TO ALL

Loading my car with a hearty lunch, a drink flask and nibblies, I set off in the early morning, bound for my personal sanctuary.

The traffic was steady as I journeyed south and I made good time, turning off the highway towards Murwillumbah, where I made a brief stop. I was excited to be in my favourite haunt again so resumed my journey as speedily as possible. Soon my beloved Mt Warning, “the Cloud Catcher”, loomed magnificently before me.



Driving across the sleepy Tweed River I looked down at the relic of the old timber bridge that used to span this waterway. My sons had loved the sound of the rattly bridge, so I'd cross, do two u turns and cross again before journeying on our way. The wide grins on their young faces would have been a source of amusement to an onlooker.

With this wonderful memory in my mind I drove the rest of the way through the valley and up the road towards the base of the mountain. Peace immediately assailed my senses as I stepped out of the car, drinking in the special rainforest perfume as birdsong, the chirrup of a multitude of insects and the rustling and scratching of ground creatures greeted me. This was my haven.

I paused to remember the many times I'd brought my two sons up here for a walk. The ten year old hadn't minded but the six year old had complained bitterly and vowed NEVER to come near Mt Warning again. I still smile at the memory of the day he introduced me to his girlfriend and proudly announced that they'd just returned from climbing Mt Warning!

Eager to start the climb I loaded my backpack and began the trek. As I climbed I remembered why this mountain is so special for me. It is my place of peace, where I can relax and be me, for me. It is a place where I have time to think, to be introspective, to solve problems and to think of the future. It is a place where I can meditate.

As I climbed, the terrain changed from subtropical and temperate rainforest to wet sclerophyll forest and heath shrubland. The sun peeped through the bushes and the drone of insects lulled me into an even deeper sense of peace. The tiny waterfalls trickled over the rocks, carrying leaves with busy insects swarming over them, boats destined for new land.

I passed my favourite bench that looked down into a gully of deep green ferns watered by a silvery stream dancing over the rocks. How often I had sat there, at one with the earth and with myself. I promised myself that I'd rest there on the way back for there was a long trek ahead.

Up, up and onwards I climbed, stopping only to have a drink and tie the shoelaces on my soggy, muddy shoes. Exchanging a companionable smile, I stood aside as the track narrowed and speedier trekkers wished to pass me.

The climb to the summit was always a challenge and this time was no different as I searched for footholds in the rocks, clutching on to the chain and making sure I didn't strangle myself with my backpack at the same time. Panting, I paused and looked behind me at the most magnificent vista imaginable. Tiny farmlets nestled in the valley, the mountains stretched beyond and the breeze fanned my hot cheeks.

I looked up and saw that I was almost at the top so scrambled resolutely on. A last swing of the foot onto a secure rock and I was able to let the chain go and walk the track to the enclosed expanse at the top. *Mt Warning! How I love you!* I thought to myself as I walked slowly around the top, enjoying the different 360-degree views from every vantage point. To the East lay the ocean, to the North the Gold Coast, to the South Byron Bay, to the West the continuation of the ancient caldera.

Taking the time to munch my sandwich I wandered up to a sign which reads "Wollumbin", 'fighting chief of the mountains.' The Bundjalung tribe believed that lightning and thunder observed on the mountain were warring warriors and that landslides were wounds obtained in battle.

So this is the chief warrior mountain, I mused. I wonder if members of Bundjalung tribe appreciate 60,000 people a year climbing their sacred site? I'd scaled it ten times, although I'd never got up here to see the sunrise.

A half-hour longer and I'd drunk my fill of the mountain until next time. It is always easier to walk downhill and I made good time, ready for my promised rest. I looked forward to cleansing my mind and soul, resting my weary limbs and drinking in the ambience.

On my beloved bench I leant my head back and closed my eyes in delight. The warmth of the afternoon as the sun filtered through the trees, the creatures rustled in the undergrowth and the birds twittering softly in the trees lulled me into a reverie.

A shadow loomed over me and I could see a silhouette surrounded by an aureole of sunlight. I squinted and gradually the silhouette became the shape of a man. Wary, I shrank against my bench and investigated. His feet were bare and a cloth covered his body from his waist. Puckered skin and strange marks covered his chest, arms and parts of his face not concealed by a thick black beard. Beneath his bushy eyebrows his fierce brown eyes gazed down at me. He held a spear pointed directly at me.

"Who are you?" I ventured bravely.

"I am the spirit of Wollumbin," he responded in a guttural voice. "You trespass."

"No, I am not trespassing. Anyone is allowed to climb Mt Warning."

"You are not a Bundjalung. You are not a chosen one."

I shrugged. "Why not? Tell me."

"Wollumbin is a sacred place. It is the first place in this land to see the sun every morning."

I interrupted. "Yes, that's why so many people climb Mt Warning before dawn."

"Wollumbin! Not Mt Warning! Wollumbin!" He frowned, before continuing.

"Wollumbin is of great significance to our people, as the sun is a source of energy and life. This makes our mountain a place life flows from. This life

flow we see reflected in the water, in the mountains and in the land.” His voice sounded ethereal and I was mesmerised.

“In everything here we see the power and strength of spirit. It tells us about our part in it. The water that flows from this mountain also represents this life force and that power for our people.” He paused.

“Tell me more,” I pleaded.

“To us, the traditional descendants of this land, Wollumbin is a place of law, initiation and spiritual learning. That is why only certain chosen people are allowed to climb the mountain.”

I had the grace to feel contrite. “I understand,” I said slowly. “But what about all the people who climb this sacred site?”

He smiled, mollified by my readiness to accept its significance as he disappeared into the lengthening shadows. “You tell them. My job is done.”

I shook my head in bewilderment as I slowly opened my eyes.