

The Romantic Lake Barrine.

By VANCE PALMER

Lake Barrine is one of the wonders of the North. I had seen photographs of it years ago; but photography can only make a poor attempt to reproduce the natural beauty of a landscape. And I had imagined a tame stretch of water surrounded by reeds and ragged scrub. What a surprise to find a deep and brimming tarn, held in the crater of an extinct volcano as in a cup, and girdled by the most luxuriant jungle it has been my good fortune to see! Whatever romantic glamour surrounds the word "lake" in poetry belongs to Barrine.

The best approach to it is up the Range Road from Cairns. After rolling for miles through the rich cane fields of the Mulgrave River, you come to a toll-gate at the bottom of the ranges. A wonder in itself, this one-way road, climbing 2400ft. in the course of a dozen miles or so ! It is open day and night, changing every two hours from up-traffic to down, and it is organized so thoroughly that there is no danger of collision. A telephone message from the toll-gate at the top gives the number of the last car, and when it has arrived at the lower gate the signal is given: "All clear!"

A Climbing, Winding Road.

Two hours are then allowed for up traffic: one hour with open gate and another for the last car to make the ascent. You shoot through the gate and begin to climb. Yet the grades are so beautifully easy, the turns so frequent, that it is not until the Mulgrave River comes into view below that you realise how steadily you have been rising. The landscape opens out into a broad vista of triangular mountains, fold upon fold, covered with dense timber.

Penetrating them, like a pea-green river, are the cane farms of the Mulgrave and its tributaries, unbroken in their flow and widening as they reach the coast. Still the road climbs, twisting like a snake. So regular are the bends that you rarely see more than twenty yards ahead, and the driver can never lift his eyes. It is a dizzy journey, in spite of release from the fear of a car coming in the opposite direction.

Belts of overhanging scrub, gangs of navvies working at wash-outs caused by the monsoonal rains, the continual sound of running water from tiny gorges and cataracts! And always far below that amazing stretch of timbered range and valley in the quivering sunlight! The air becomes more nimble and bracing as the humid flats of the coast are left behind. Soon the upper toll-gate is reached and the Atherton plateau stretches out, cleared and green, with the henna soil showing through in the banks of small, rippling creeks and occasional whitened boles giving hints of the vanished scrub.

The kind of country, surely, that would bring a dancing light to a dairy farmer's eye! Fat cattle browse belly deep among the paspalum and Natal grass, and here and there are fields of ripening maize, with comfortable homesteads surrounded by Inky-dark trees. Yet it is a relief to turn from the road after a few miles and enter another world. Here the jungle has been, preserved; a surprising gleam of water shows through the trees; the chug of a motor-boat is heard. You come on a stretch of green, sloping lawn and a red-roofed building with sheds and swimming platforms reaching out over a still lake. After that climb up to the plateau it is astonishing, almost breath-taking..

The Crater Lake.

Lake Barrine, like Eacham, its neighbour, has been formed by the filling up of an extinct crater, and neither drought nor rainy season affects its level very much. There is a slight overflow after the wet months, though no perceptible creek runs out from it, and it gets rid of its surplus through soakage in one low-lying corner. In itself it looks self-contained and complete, the romantic lake of legend. Once it was thought to be bottomless, but that illusion has been laid; its greatest depth is about 350 feet. It was also believed by the blacks to be haunted :

"Fire jump up longa that one."

Until recent years they would scrupulously avoid the neighbourhood of Barrine, so it was surprising to find Paddy, an ancient and amiable member of some dispersed tribe, talking about the lake with the enthusiasm of a devotee, and threading a path along its banks to show us a couple of particularly fine specimens of kauri pine.

Boating on the lake is an exhilarating experience. One floats over the silent water to enter some quiet bay where a spreading fig thrusts out its arms to make a grotto. The surrounding jungle is full of birds. One whipbird calls to another across an arm of water; Torres pigeons coo in the shade; even the mountain thrush is here, dropping his liquid notes. In the middle of the lake sea-birds, blown up from the coast, make a low flight over the water. There are no natural fish in the lake, but perch have been introduced, and are beginning to thrive, probably other fish will be introduced later, for there is abundance of natural food.

On shore a path runs round the lake through virgin jungle that seems never to have known axe or fire. All the timbers of the tropic north are represented here in natural perfection - walnut, kauri pine, maple, ash, red cedar-and hosts of others whose names are only known to specialists. Through the dense jungle the water gleams occasionally like light. The voices of a party out fishing on the lake echo from one shore to another. It is a small lake, after all, hardly 300 acres in extent, yet that is part of its charm. The eye can take it in and comprehend it.

A Scenic Heritage.

Luckily the area immediately around it has been proclaimed a national reserve, and has

been placed under the control of a trust, Luckily, too, it has secured for its caretaker a man who is enthusiastic about his job and has both practical and scientific knowledge. Mr. Currie would like the area around the lake to be larger, so that it would form a sanctuary for rare species of plant and animal life. Everywhere in Australia, but particularly in the North, destroying forces are at work. Furred things are shot for pleasure, valuable timbers hacked down and burnt, leaving (very often) wild tobacco and lantana to spiring up in their place. A heritage is being sacrificed in pursuit of easy money. Only a few enthusiasts, quickened by the scientific or aesthetic spirit, stand in the way of the axe and gun. Mr. Currie is one of them.

"You cannot replace this tropical jungle. Once It's down, it's gone forever."

We go back to the red-roofed resthouse to find a young American scientist sitting with Leach's bird book in front of him, gazing out over the placid waters of the lake. He has been looking for some time for a cassowary. He has seen one In captivity, but wants a glimpse of it in its native state. It is an opportunity for Paddy, Mr. Currie's right-hand man. He cannot only show the American a live cassowary, but also its nest. They go away together in high spirits.

One leaves Lake Barrine feeling that it is in good hands. It is pleasant to think that the interests of beauty and science go together.

The Brisbane Courier Saturday 14 May 1932