

## Lions Den

A little ways off the main road we sure enough came to a pub called the Lion's Den. With lots of time to kill before dark, we pulled up. It was a rickety, ancient affair, utterly alone, except for a small house associated with it, and with stools for five or six patrons at one time. The front end of the building was held up with rough-cut poles stripped of their bark. We went in, parked on two of the stools, and obtained two beers from the proprietor.

There was only one other customer in the place. He had a little blue speckled bitch with pointed ears lying at his feet. To make conversation, I eventually asked, "What kind of dog is that?" He replied, "Queensland blue heeler, that's wot! The aynly true Astrylyun breed. Wonderful dogs. Very good at working cattle. Nevah bahk when they're working." A pause, then: "If they bahked, y'see, the bloody cows'd think they were dingos and turn 'round to chase the dingo."

He paused there, watched my face for the effect of these revelations, and quaffed his beer. He exchanged a few words with the proprietor, who turned out to be Mr. Bert Cummins, and with Mr. Cummins' wife, who had entered the bar briefly from the house. Seeing that I was not involved in any other conversation, he warmed again to his subject:

"They bred the dingo blood into these dogs, y'know [nodding]. That's how they got the bahk out of them. The dingo, y'see, he never bahks. He's soilent."

I thought about this for a bit, and considered asking about the apparent discrepancy in his story; but the absence of expression in his stare caused me to decide against it. Instead: "Looks as though she just had pups."

"Yeaaa. Eleven of 'em."

"What did you do with them?"

"Killed 'em."

As I continued thinking about that conversation, off and on across the next 40 years, it eventually occurred to me that the owner of that Queensland Blue Heeler may have been trying to tell me that the tendency to bark *when chasing or driving prey animals* might be what was bred out of part-dingo dogs, and that this was possible because dingos perhaps don't bark when chasing prey animals – including cattle. I wish I had had enough sense to question him so I could have gotten it straight. I needed to give him far more credit than I thought he deserved. Maybe I'll have another chance some day, although, sadly, almost certainly not with that particular old fellow. Maybe dingos don't bark when they are pursuing prey because it's better not to attract other dingos.

As often happens, the brief and faint set of tire tracks we decided to examine after finishing our beer ended ignominiously in the rain forest between the pub and the coast. When we returned from the rain forest later that night after our biological work, we stopped again at the Lion's Den. Concerning that second visit I wrote the following: "There were five young fellows at this pub from out in the absolute sticks, and every one of them a damn fine bloke: intelligent, clean-looking, happy, and friendly. They teased us about chasing insects, tried to keep us longer, and apparently were genuinely sorry to see us go. As we were leaving, the entire lot of them stepped outside with beers in their hands, lifting them to call to us repeatedly, 'See yer, maytes!'"

It happened to us over and over, as we traveled throughout Australia. There were two blokes in Darwin living on a rusted-out barge hung up on a muddy beach, almost too drunk to draw themselves up the side of the barge, but nevertheless insisting that we come up for a cup of coffee. There was the girl in the Palm Cafe at Mossman, already mentioned, with her freckles, flaxen hair and eyebrows, inquisitive eyes, and a friendly smile. There was Old Arthur Fielding in his corrugated iron shack north of the Daintree River, proud of the pair of Golden Honey Eaters by his little hut, with their remarkable nest that mysteriously kept itself turning toward the sun; John Harris, former cattle station owner, and his wife at the Palmer River

Cafe; Jessie Lee James, head drover of the Edwards River Mission in northeastern Queensland; Wombat Pilcher and his friend with the bad arm in the darkness of Musgrave Station after midnight; the friendly Opitz brothers; the three caustically taciturn water buffalo hunters at Cooinda; Terry Robinson's little pub at the East Alligator River near the border of Arnhem Land; the incredibly tolerant and helpful Aboriginal women who came out in the wee hours of the morning to help us dig out burrowing crickets from their damp clay outdoor dance floor; and Bluey Morgan and Wally Umbulgarri in Wyndham on the edge of the Kimberley Mountains in northwestern Australia. Such wonderful people -- their conversations, glances, smiles, advice, and the assistance offered to us over and over -- caused me to write the following verse, which I sometimes sing to a variant of the tune to *The House of the Rising Sun*.

### The Lion's Den

There's a pub that's down below Cooktown  
They call the Lion's Den  
And if I could get there you can bet  
I'd be there drinkin' again.

So stir yer arse and fill me glass  
With cold Australian beer  
And raise yer hand in old Queensland  
For the good mates far and near.

Just let me rise and fight bush flies  
God's truth, I'd be content  
Just swapping jokes with guileless blokes  
On the Old Red Continent.

There's a lass back there with ginger hair  
Who flashed her smile at me  
She was freckled brown from her bosoms down  
To where I swear I could not see.

So stir yer arse and fill me glass  
With cold Australian beer  
And raise yer hand in old Queensland  
For the good mates far and near.

There's a pub that's down below Cooktown  
They call the Lion's Den  
And if I could get there, you can bet  
I'd be there drinkin' again, Lord  
I'd be there drinkin' again.

## The Lion's Den

There's a pub that's down be - low Cook - town they call the Li - on's Den,  
 and if I could get there you can bet I'd be There drin-kin  
 a - gain I'd be there drin-kin a - gain

### Keith Ey and Bert Cummins in the Lion's Den

When we stopped at the Lion's Den on our return trip up the road from the Whyalla Plains south of Cooktown, we struck up an acquaintance with Keith Ey. He told us he ran sheep at Coonawarra in South Australia. His wife was out in the camper as he drank beer with us, probably because of women not ordinarily being welcome in even the outback pubs. Keith said that he'd been to the Lion's Den three times before, seven, five, and two years ago. We told him we would look him up in South Australia the next summer. He seemed delighted and astonished. Sure enough, we did a little sidestep and stopped at Keith's house when we passed through South Australia the next summer and spoke briefly with his wife. The distance from Cooktown to Keith's place was about the same as driving from Philadelphia to Tulsa, Oklahoma, but we were almost always taking routes that supported our research. Unfortunately, Keith was said to be bowling in a nearby town, and although we went there to stop and say hello, we couldn't find the bowling tournament. It occurred to us that maybe Keith didn't find it either.

In Coonawarra, Dan noticed some graffiti on the wall of the town toilet that kept us laughing for a good many miles. The message alongside the stool was in two parts. The top line said simply, "Buzz wuz here." Below it had been penciled, "And so was me 'airy tool!"

Because Keith Ey had been to the Lion's Den before, he felt constrained to tell us about Bert Cummins' history while he was there, including the fact that Bert had once been a ship's captain. Bert modestly waved at the many photographs of his ships around the walls and said that his last voyage had been with the Scripps Oceanographic Institute's expedition to the Great Barrier Reef. A little surprised, I asked him if he knew Professor Carl Hubbs, a marine biologist of late from my own institution, the Museum of Zoology at the University of Michigan, and he allowed that he did. Back in Ann Arbor, a year later, Carl Hubbs told me that he remembered Bert Cummins, but he described him as a clerk. I began to wonder if I should believe either of them. Ey also made a wisecrack about an entire shipload of livestock that Bert had lost somewhere off the coast of northern Australia, a deed that apparently had figured in the termination of his career as ship's officer, and which Bert himself did not appear inclined to discuss.

Bert Cummins kept telling Dan and me that he was sorry we hadn't been there earlier when they had "the tricks" going. Later, Ey tried to get him started on them for our benefit, but he said mysteriously, "No. There has to be a sixpence." Unwittingly I paid for a beer with coins including a sixpence, and that set him off. He gave me a file to mark the sixpence, then, assured that I could recognize it, he put it quickly into his pocket and pulled out a box tied crosswise with rubber bands. Inside was another box tied similarly, and inside that a piece of cloth tied similarly. Untying the boxes one by one, then unfolding the cloth, he