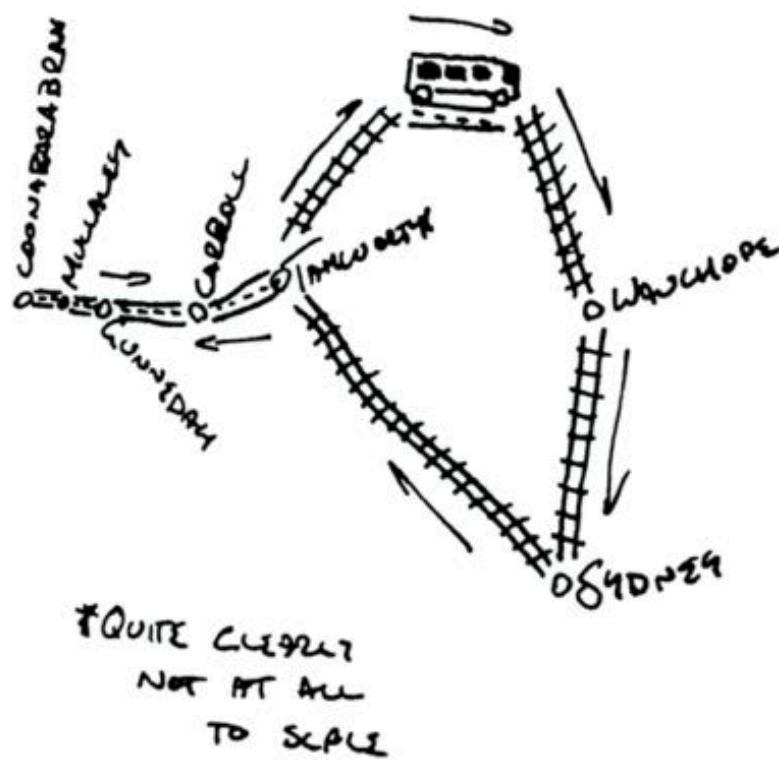






John Oxley, 1825



# O

## (Basis)

It's at a train station, watching an empty track in moderate silence, that prompts one to wonder which sum of life events has brought them to that instant. It is not a depressing moment. In truth, it feels a mildly absurd and introspective one. To look up from your feet is to see the death of a town; told by its fading bollards and rusted-out second track. It is to question its original and strikingly temporary reason for existence, implicitly to question anyone's own. Sometimes to look up can just be to escape into a second of fading simplicity.

# I

## (Tamworth)

There's not much worth noting in Tamworth. A sly smell of unimportance washes its dirtied chest hairs across the nose as carriage doors slide open. Surveying the station upon arrival serves the purpose of planning a brisk exit. Once the entrances and bathrooms have been located, the maze-work required to reach the track dissipates when headed in the other direction.

Though lacking inherent focal points, there's an odd beauty to the town. A road lined with homologous motel rooms, flat and awkwardly extended. A shopping centre full of the soon-dying and near-dead. Smokestacks that jut firmly in the background of every photo frame that the observer's eyes can construct. The picture ultimately backgrounded by a hill-set crossed by gullies.



Homologous motel rooms, flat and awkwardly extended



On a lengthy motel verandah, sat astride a wrought iron chair I watched the underwhelming night-scape. At dusk hour, above the road, things appear before the observer much like they might in a bad dream. Not bad in the sense of a nightmare. More a forgettable and empty dream, where objects are blurred as they would be in front of a camera with clingfilm on the lens. The dreams that are forgotten as morning wakes in a bed miles away from them again. I was taken by an idea I'd read in a \$2 visitor map, to trace John Oxley's steps further out of town. His map of the interior, tea-stained into my mind.



Sat astride a wrought iron chair

## II

### (Carroll)

Set on wandering, I had found myself in a borrowed family car slamming break pedals to inspect a hamlet. I'd nearly driven through Carroll in a matter of seconds. Everything felt equally out of place there. It feels like what would occur if you were to give a group of new humans all the tools from the past century to begin a town, but then the vast majority gave up halfway through and left. One house, entirely coated in blue paint with a cactus out front, stood staring over the Oxley Highway. Almost directly into the eyes of a cottage of 1910s country styling, not a touch of modern machinery in its yard. Between, a front yard with a greenhouse and a littering of sun-faded plastics: once green, purple and the primary colours. Further up the main



A house entirely coated in blue paint with a cactus out front

street highway was a single petrol pump under a tin roof. I door-tinkled on the service station bell. The lady behind the counter didn't look up.

“What can I get’cha?” I didn’t respond for a moment. I wasn’t sure. Pointing to a stack of newspapers, — out of date by three days but delicately placed by the entrance — I asked if she had any newer news.

“They don’t do newspapers Sundays.” She was blunt. Not to mention wrong. At least her answer was confident. I went to begin suggesting the mastheads I was after, the ones special to the weekend, but decided against it.

“Do they do one yesterday?” I asked.

“I’m sure they do, love. But we don’t have ‘em.” It was slightly a more satisfactory answer. ‘They’ hadn’t given up on weekends entirely. I settled the petrol with a \$20 note and a forced smile. Outside, a car with a trailer was running, keys in the ignition whilst the driver paid inside. Front doors were swinging across the road and a horse stood by an open gate, dutifully within its perimeter.

Clearly, they were over the days of bush-rangers, an out-of-town passerby couldn’t scare them into locking their belongings anymore. I pictured Captain Thunderbolt, Fred Ward, roaming through: the dust paths between the houses, a 19th century Namoi River and across New England. He laid out his bedroll behind Split Rock and made love with an understandably confusing amalgamation of gentlemanly conduct and civil disruption; highway robbing those who passed it by. Before driving I’d read a biographical journal of sorts, internet sites, and a few historic articles on Thunderbolt and his gangs. Some outlining crimes, but most bordered on accounts of general mischief. There was stolen money and horse races. Sometimes there’d be a combination of the two, the winnings of a well-made gamble returned to the victim whom they’d robbed for the money to wager with. Newspapers told of shootings, and the story of a pub robbery, the takings of which went towards the shouted drinks of patrons in another pub not 30 kilometres down the track. Ward’s gangs almost

operating as unconventional, financial institutions, bent on redistributing people's shillings.

In Carroll's own inn — an inn which leaves no observable trace into the 21st century — a similar event had occurred. Upon completing the inn robbery, Thunderbolt and his partners stayed drinking and dancing until police arrived many hours later. In the process of their escape, they'd left their packhorses behind laden with the loot they'd originally visited for. I — were I to be a 200-year-old bushman — would've thought it more sensible to reverse the order of events. Perhaps they 'bailed them up' as they knew no other way to introduce themselves. I was wary that it's easy to excuse such distant crimes as they came across as jovial larrikins determined to disrupt social mores rather than apathetic thugs.

A life in Carroll didn't look particularly boring, just too easy. Predictable. I figured, since the Captain and his crew, they'd started running out of ways to complicate things there. Leaving the place entirely and uncomfortably steadfast in stillness. With the image of Thunderbolt atop a horse disappearing over a fence line, I opened the car desperately fighting the urge to return toward the lady at the counter as a beguiling bushranger and announce: 'I will trouble you all, ladies and gentlemen, to bail you up.' My steed groaned to start and pulled back to the highway, I felt a scoundrel no less, but quashed by scruples.



evening. They both entered the verandah simultaneously, when Thunderbolt slipped his hand under his macintosh and drew out a revolver, saying, as he presented it, 'I will trouble you all, ladies and gentlemen, to bail up.' As we were in a perfectly defenceless state, we surrendered at their command. The traveller who came first now appeared in his true colours, drawing his revolver with the others, and exhibiting a quantity of them in his belt. They were all armed to the teeth. When they saw that we did not resist they told the females to fear nothing, that they would injure no one; all they wanted was our money. Two of them guarded us while Thunderbolt went through the house, and brought out the cook and a little boy from the kitchen. When they were satisfied they had every person on the premises they ranged the men in a row, when the captain commenced the work of rifling the pockets. From Mr. Griffin they took £2 5s. From Mr. G. De Vere they took a watch and chain and about £6; they subsequently returned the watch and chain and £1 10s. to De Vere. From John Fitzgerald they took 2, one of which they returned. The work of rifling being done, they ordered all hands to drink, for which they paid cash; they then requested Mr. De Vere to play the violin, which he did, and one of them, a tall Scotchman, danced a few reels in style, after which he requested a young lady to dance a schottische with him, which he also danced admirably. We were now allowed the run of the bar and the verandah, but they would not suffer any of us to go through the house. A horse team came up about dusk, which they stopped, drawing the dray in front of the house. They continued to enjoy themselves, 'shouting' for all hands repeatedly, and paying cash for what they had. I think they

"Thunderbolt slipped his hand under his macintosh and drew a revolver, saying, as he presented it, 'I will trouble you all, ladies and gentlemen, to bail you up.'...They then requested Mr. De Vere to play the violin and one of them, a tall Scotchman, danced a few reels in style...They continued to enjoy themselves, 'shouting' for all hands repeatedly, and paying each for what they had." - *The Tamworth Examiner* (23rd of December, 1865)

### III

#### (Gunnedah, Mullaley, Coonabarabran)

Gunnedah had a hill, not tall nor looming, but high enough allowing one to see the roofs of silos from atop it. Pensioner's lookout was the largest attraction — if not officially, at least by my measure — in the town. It had been home to a shantytown of humpies and lean-tos for its water tank during the depression. None of it still stood, but the view was expansive. I took a photograph. It lacked eventual purpose, but it took notice of things I hadn't yet. Like, the blue of the mountains that bordered the background.



Mountains that bordered the background

A child stood beside me. His ageing at the point where many new words can be learned with ease. That point where they love to apply the new words at all times. A constant stream of pointing and talking.

“Cow. Cow! Cow. That cow is black!...Mummy look at the truck, it's a big truck.” Respectably pertinent observations. I hadn't noticed the cows that were stood in a distant paddock. He was laughing, “Brian, Daisy, Davey. That one is a cow too. Daisy the cow.” I thought the boy's attention was with mine back at the paddock. Instead I

saw his head laid back into his mother's neck crook waving his hands towards the clouds and smiling. Brian did seem like a funny name for a cloud.

The towns beyond Gunnedah were funny in themselves. Offering fatigued businesses, statue dinosaurs, and 'crystal kingdoms'. Walking through their streets feels as though you've been let in on some poor joke. A cruel and stale piece of satire that was accepted as fact once everyone started forgetting to laugh. The roads between Gunnedah and Coonabarabran were sidelined by expansive paddocks. The occasional observatory and inflatable planets were the vague manifestations of astro-tourism. Collecting a copy of the *Coonabarabran Times* offered little of what I thought I'd find in 'the Astronomy Capital' of Australia's newspaper. A pleasant article did point, however, to a new street library. One of those glass screen boxes stuffed with an array of disused titles. The self help and romance books that people throw away once they've found new morning routines to form and things to say when their partners can't get it up anymore. I hoped if nothing else Coonabarabran could entertain the buses and trains from Tamworth to Wauchope.

I retraced my road. Only once stopping for a glass of water at a pub with a training, German barmaid.

"A lönig distance fröm Düsseldorf," she told me. I wondered just what sequence of events led her to the Mullaley Roadhouse. The owner mowed his island lawn out the front, not yet swallowed by the dust.



The owner mowed his island lawn out the front.

## IV

### (Wauchope)

Bussed, trained and disembarked, strolling around Wauchope, I was greeted by an exuberant breeze; coursing over streets that hadn't smiled in a while. They lay empty and cracked. The police were cramped together in a supermarket aisle, discernible only by their sweat-crusted, blue shirts. Their cruiser the only resting packhorse in the carpark. Quieted strays, torn pictures of long-sold tractors on a noticeboard, and chip packets trembled lining the main street. A closed-up chicken shop lay the sheet backdrop to three taxi drivers leaning on a cab up the end of the street, the highway to their right. They all had exactly four buttons undone on their uniform. It appeared as company policy. No-one was really scrambling to make a buck. They didn't ask if I needed a ride. They barely even looked up from their cigarette packs to watch me stroll past. Struggling to get my kicks in the streets, I decided to head to the station and loiter three hours before my train was due.

A vacant carpark separated the station from a quiet street of houses with their eyes closed; the blinds of faded floral patterns drawn together. The station was: one platform, a light, a holding line of track — at that moment home to twenty or so empty coal cars — and the main line. Its purpose, at one point, was to export timber to Sydney. Grafton's *Daily Examiner* reported in 1947 that some half a million feet of timber a week was to be sent to Sydney along the tracks every week. That was written just between: "Pope's Ankle Twisted", "Forty-Hour Week Bill Introduced", a profile on the Viceroy of India, cricket scores and, perhaps most intriguingly:

#### **"Flame Throwers To Be Tried Against Flying Fox Pest."**

The article told that Agriculture minister had considered an appropriated use of the war weapon the practical solution to the *Hunter Valley Fruit Grower's* issue.

Troublesome native bats' appetite. The committee had at first asked for aerial raids of poison gas bombs to be used against flying fox colonies but that was deemed far too impractical by the minister. At first flame throwing might seem foolish, however, considering the minister's, Edgar Graham, tertiary education took place in a butchery, his apathetic enthusiasm toward the plan could be attributed to a desire to remove the warm and arduous steps between the butcher and plate. It often appears as though Australian spirit is constructed with a vast degree of stubbornness and disregard for nature's general hostility toward large-scale cultivation. A stubbornness, within which, Hunter Valley's flying foxes become entangled. For the foxes, retreating to their Blackbutt forests likely would have forced them onto the same platform as I stood, rendered little pest tramps with swags and billies for the journey to the city. They'd be waiting for their homes to roll by, 500,000 feet at a time.



Little pest tramps with swags and billies

I imagine a singed bat would own large and open eyes with the lids fried off. Probably much resembling those of the only other man sat on my platform. He too owned eyes that were wide across all dimensions, almost circular, that sat within concentric rings of folded skin, rippling out towards his cheeks, ears and eyebrows. He sat still in tweed trousers and a tucked in shirt, yellowed by whatever had been

done to stain it. He had curious feet in the way that his heels faced each other, the outer ankles closer to the concrete platform than his biggest toes. I took up the bench next to him and copied his posture. Elbows hunched forward on knees, I lay my chin on interlocked fingers. We both looked across the tracks, past the other dilapidated platform to two once-identical buildings. One newly renovated and painted, the other still wearing the clothes it was originally gifted. Mutilated by boredom, burns, and country style, the latter's brick fence still surrounded it. I leaned over to the man and asked:

"Next train's the one to Sydney, right?"

"Yeah." We both stared back to the houses and tried not to think of architectural mirrors. Or at least I tried not to, I can't account for what was on his mind.

"You goin' into Sydney?" He checked.

"Yeah." The breeze and conscious decision to never allow myself a pair of



Architectural mirrors

tweed trousers lasted with me to my seat on the train. Not that he seemed a particularly unpleasant fate, just far too undiagnosable. I couldn't glean what it was



driving him. A man without motivations is a most frightening man in any circumstance. My needless fretting was disturbed.

“Any orders for hot lunches? Any orders for hot lunches? You guys, any orders for hot lunches?” The automated door slid and silenced the carriage again, caging us up. Like a camp of dejected flying foxes, we all leered out the perspex partition to the empty country in silence again.

# V

## (Central Station)

We were allowed off at Gloucester for a smoke and a stroll while the train was ahead of schedule. The platform held a faint sigh. A sigh that, no doubt, had seen off many loads of customers to the city. I'd listened to a few conversations outside and headed back in at the whistle. With empty-handed curiosity, I watched the man opposite me in the carriage; unpacking and combing his belongings with an unnecessary amount of particularity. Out on the platform, a group of pensioners were still engaged in frowning discourse regarding a grandchild who 'only comes around to visit when he wants to mow my lawn for 10 dollars.' A leaning man in a jacket was still dangling a cigarette between his fingertips and the police were looking for an autistic stow-away. Just how he'd got aboard, the — apparently incompetent — attendants behind me weren't sure.

Hours in, the groans of just-engaged gears had melded with a slow creak of bending track, and the platform became plains that held my fascination. Any one field devoid of real distinction from the next, save a lone tree or wind pump. Training



One field devoid of any real distinction from the next

through picturesque nothings, one learns just how slow the time can pass. But, there's enough beauty to fill a day out rattling windows, riding the rustled packhorse, fox-ears pricked. My eyes were only ever away from the vistas to frequent the dining carriage. Small cans of \$8 beer. The stretch of track after Maitland *requires* the casual rail patron to render themselves mildly drunken. Sober, the nasally screeches of misbehaved



Riding the rustled horse. Fox ears pricked

children and twice-divorced, thrice-engaged parents can overload the senses for the final two hours. But drinking to the static whilst watching a nervous man compulsively unpack and repack the contents of his bag can make it all absurdly delectable.

Central station makes brief a pleasant time. Reverberating footsteps rule over the tiles. Inside, I wondered if anyone stopped to name a cloud that day, standing over a silo on a hill. The hurried brows of a stagnant crowd gazed back at me and laughed. Blurred and pointless photographs lay within my phone and camera. I now worry to take them out lest they beg I revisit them. Photographs are like that, petulant children tugging at your shirtsleeves requesting that you slip back to the moment they were taken.

## THUNDERBOLT AGAIN.

We are sorry to have to report another depredation by the scoundrel Thunderbolt and his mate.

