

CHAPTER 1

MALLAPUNYAH TODAY

Mallapunyah Springs is a Northern Territory cattle station owned by the Darcy Brothers and was pioneered by their parents, George and Elizabeth Darcy, who had a horse drawn wagon, and carted goods from Borroloola to the Barkly Tablelands in the 1920s. The property is about 4,170 square kilometres; and is bordered by Balbirini, McArthur River, Kiana, Walhallow, Cresswell and some Crown Land. It lies partly in the Gulf of Carpentaria region, and partly on the Barkly Tablelands. The Tablelands Highway traverses the property from south to north, and it is about 360 kilometres from the Barkly Homestead and 160 kilometres from Borroloola, the closest town. The next largest centre (where there is a doctor, hospital, supermarket etc.) is Tennant Creek, 570 kilometres away, but connected by a very good bitumen road (completed in 1971) and also by mail plane, every Friday. The property is a squat upside down T shape, with the homestead at the extreme northern end. Most of the best cattle country is in the centre of the block, where the land has been subdivided into 20 paddocks for ease of cattle husbandry - Archie Yard Paddock, Darkie Plain, Bauhinia, Top Springs, Kilgour, Old Horse Paddock, Intercom Paddock - and more. There are several thousand head of branded cattle, and several hundred horses, working and breeding. The 'developments on the station have been moderate but continuous since the station began. Early improvements consisted mainly of providing dams and yards with bores being added from the 1960s. Internal fencing was mainly built in the late 1970s and 1980s. Improvements have been made as income was available rather than incurring debt. The station is now one of the best managed and developed in the Gulf Fall region.' This is quoted from the Resource Appraisal of Mallapunyah prepared for the Conservation Commission, February 1986.

As one drives from the Tablelands Highway into Mallapunyah Springs one drives through a paddock, past the airstrip, then winds through sandstone hills for the last couple of kilometres, gently downhill into a green, green valley. Visitors often comment on this but of course we don't tell them the year long greenery is that prickly, almost inedible spinifex - the Darcys just smile inscrutably. As one rounds the last bend before the homestead, the hills open out leaving the 'Big Hill' to the east, and 'Baldy' to the south, and there is visible a patch of real green, an oasis, a landmark which seen from the air is like a lighthouse on a moonless night. It is the Mallapunyah garden encircling the main springs, in a ten acre patch of wilderness and prolific cultivation. Everything seems to grow there naturally: huge paperbarks, pandanus, thick green grass, and exotically, about a thousand banana trees, a hundred huge mangoes, tropical fruit trees of all kinds. Vegetables grow during the cooler months. This is supplemented by gardens around the various houses where flowering vines and shrubs, pot plants and flower beds provide sweet perfumes and blossoms all year round. Lawns, trees and palms provide greenery and shade. Where else in Australia does the tropical climate overlap with cooler, drier winters to allow some of the best citrus in the world to be produced and incredible roses - and, in the wet season, huge sweet juicy mangoes, pineapples and pawpaws in profusion. It is the combination of the climate, rich alluvial soil, and the abundant spring water that produces these gardens, not to mention the hard work done, firstly by Elizabeth Darcy, mother of the present station owners, who established the garden in the 1920s and 30s, and since then by other members of the family up to the present day.