

SAMPLE
TEXT

'A VIVID AND TERRIFYING GLIMPSE OF NOT JUST OUR FUTURE BUT
ALSO OUR PRESENT. EVERY AUSTRALIAN SHOULD READ THIS BOOK.'

—SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM

CURROWAN

THE STORY OF A FIRE AND A COMMUNITY
DURING AUSTRALIA'S WORST SUMMER

BRONWYN ADCOCK

Prologue

THE EVE OF ALL OUR TOMORROWS

IT'S 3.00 AM ON THE LAST DAY OF 2019, AND I GO FROM asleep to suddenly awake, heart racing.

I've been waking this way ever since the Currowan fire began. Often nothing in particular rouses me, only a feeling of vigilance: *I'm ready*. Other times it is the sudden recollection of something I lost in the fire that jolts me awake – a vivid image roaring into my consciousness, accompanied by a set of stories.

Oh no, the photo album, the one with apricot-coloured flowers on the cover with the pictures from that first share house at uni.

My god, Grandpa's cane chair; and there he is, sitting in it on his verandah catching the last rays of sun on his face, smiling at six-year-old me.

But most of the time, what wakes me is fear of what this still-burning fire will do next.

I know this is the reason I am awake now. The day is forecast to hold dangerous fire weather, conditions that will almost certainly incite the Currowan fire – anything could happen.

In the dark I reach for my phone. This constant checking for fire updates: another new routine. I look first at the Fires Near Me app, and what I see is so shocking I think I must be dreaming.

I weave my way through the unfamiliar contours of the house we're temporarily living in, bumping against the cardboard boxes stacked in small towers, which are filled with the things I did grab when we evacuated. I haven't unpacked them yet because I'm not confident we won't need to go again. In the kitchen I turn on every light and look at my phone again.

It's not the Currowan fire on the move but another one, about 150 kilometres south. I checked the status of this fire before I went to sleep and it was burning in remote mountain ranges well west of any populated areas – my younger brother lives in the vicinity and we'd been speaking on the phone about how it could mean trouble for him in the coming days. But now the app is showing it's already escaped, with two enormous fingers of red reaching towards the villages of Cobargo and Quaama – one almost on top of the farmland where my brother and his family live. *Are they still asleep? Do they even know?* I text him and he responds within minutes: they're already in the car with kids and animals, racing towards a coastal headland.

Back in early December, not long after this all started, I found out about a webpage where you can click on a link that lets you hear the radio communications of the Rural Fire Service volunteers out in the field. So now I open my laptop and set myself up at the kitchen bench, spending the hours to dawn staring out the window at the slow, gentle lightening of the night sky, accompanied by a soundtrack of unfolding horror.

As usual, there's not enough resources. I listen to the desperate pleas of firefighters, calling for help they know isn't coming. 'There's no bloody trucks, so we're bugged,' says one. Another is calling for an ambulance because he's pulling children from a burning house and their little bare feet are scorching on the ground. I hear a firefighter, panic just suppressed in his tight, strained voice, saying he can't protect the homes in his hamlet anymore and that he's retreating to the fire shed to try to save the lives of anyone who makes it there with him.

I'm hunting for scraps of useful information to pass on, something I've already spent countless hours doing over the past month. So when I hear a firefighter say he thinks the blaze is heading toward the headland where my brother and his family are – and there are no fire trucks on site – I know what to do. I google *what is the safest way to shelter from fire in a car* and call my brother. Over time I've become much better at the task of imparting information to someone in imminent danger, and so with a tone of casual enquiry – as though asking if he has milk in the fridge – I relay what I've heard and ask if he has a woollen blanket in the car, just in case.

I step outside to stand on the front lawn, nausea rising. The sun is up now, belting down heat from a cloudless blue sky. I'm in the little coastal village of Bawley Point, our cottage just a few doors up from the beach, and I watch as a stream of holiday-makers amble past me towards the sand, towels on shoulders, small fluffy dogs trotting alongside – people who've somehow made it through the constant road closures, undeterred that we are surrounded by fire. I'm aware that I could be coming across as unhinged – still in pyjamas, staring into space – but I don't care. I'm living so deeply

inside this relentless, never-ending fire story that it's like a pane of glass is separating me from anyone not trapped by it too.

It's still before breakfast when I get a call telling me that fresh smoke has been spotted coming from our property. Before the fire, my family and I lived in a forested, semi-rural area about ten kilometres northwest of Bawley Point. While fire went through our place weeks ago, the Currowan fire has a way of lingering, even as it continues a steady march across the landscape. Fires are behaving in such extreme and unusual ways this season, I worry we could suffer the same fate as the North Coast village of Wyaliba. It got hit by fire twice: first in October, then a second, worse bite in November that took out nearly half the homes.

I need to go and investigate, but can't decide what to do with my two children, aged five and eleven. To take them into the bush, towards smoke, on a day of extreme fire danger seems risky; but so too does leaving them home alone, with the possibility we could be separated if something happens. I've seen roadblocks go up quickly over the last month and know they are strictly enforced – one man I know was arrested and charged for trying to get through one.

Resolving that we'll stay together, I head west with them. As we enter the dirt road that leads into our property, I grip the steering wheel and focus. Once this was a sedate drive through a forest of spotted gums, grey and pink trunks holding up bouquets of green, a darting wallaby or a lazy diamond python the only hazards; but now it's a sparse, blackened wasteland, full of peril. Many trees have already fallen, others dissolved into ash on the forest floor, but there are some that look only tenuously upright, and I drive with one eye to what's above, accelerating past any that tilt.

I pass a hand-painted sign one of my neighbours has attached to a blackened trunk: *Sightseers not welcome*. I'm glad for the sign. It's a bonus that it's polite. Other places have ones that say *You loot, we shoot*.

On our property I soon find the source of smoke. The trunk of an enormous gum, so large four adults would have struggled to hug her girth, has snapped in half – it must have been smouldering inside for the past month – and now flames are leaping out of the fallen trunk, sending a dramatic display of plumes up into the sky. It's in a patch that was once rainforest – but the delicate ferns, spiky cycads and ancient bangalow palms that once dropped their fronds to the ground like a skirt are all gone. While I can see why the smoke is worrying the neighbours, who are still in their home further up the hill, I know it will be short-lived: there is nothing here left to burn.

As we walk back to the car, past the twisted metal of sheds, bicycle frames and a melted swing set, I smell something terrible. I send the kids on ahead and follow the odour to the chicken pen, where I discover the first wallaby I've seen in a month. Blowflies swarm its emaciated corpse.

I can't believe this creature's misfortune. All month I've been diligently leaving out water and food supplied by a local wildlife carer at a feeding station just 50 metres away, but instead of finding this, the wallaby has pushed its way in here and become trapped. I wonder if I should bury it, but then remember we don't have a shovel anymore.

A wave of despondency threatens but doesn't get a chance to settle, because the weather is turning. The forecast nor'wester has

kicked in, bringing with it squalls of blackened leaves. I start half-running towards the car and yelling at the kids to get in. As we drive away, the temperature gauge on the dashboard reads 42 degrees.

The highway is abnormally deserted. When I round a bend, I see two police cars parked in the middle of the highway and officers putting up barricades for a roadblock. 'Where's the fire?' I ask, anxious to know what's going on, but all they'll tell me is the highway is closed.

When I get back to Bawley Point, the power to the entire village is out. There's also no running water because the pumps run off electricity. I get on my phone to find out what's happening, but I've got no reception and nothing will load. A light haze of smoke is wafting through the air.

I take the kids – no indecision about that now – and drive a few streets to a friend's place, where a small group of people are standing outside talking. The word is that the Currowan fire is now running to our south. A woman I know pulls in. She's just come from her job in the large town of Batemans Bay, 30 kilometres south. She tells us she had to evacuate because the fire was coming in. I'm so shocked, I'm almost disbelieving: 'A fire in town?' I make her tell me again. This time she pulls up her sleeve to show me a small red mark on her arm where she was hit by an ember outside Bunnings.

The following hours I spend alternating between sitting on my friend's back step, watching our kids and others from the neighbourhood turn cartwheels and bounce on the trampoline in a yard bordered by already burnt bush – gulping in lungfuls of sepia-coloured haze as they play – and walking out to the headland

to try to find mobile-phone reception. Along the smooth, warm rocks of the point, there are lots of us holding out phones at odd angles, climbing onto boulders, rushing to cluster on a spot when someone yells, 'I've got range!' Cars are pulling up, some already packed – tourists wanting to escape this holiday from hell.

Snippets of information filter through. By lunchtime, we know the Currowan fire is also running to our north. My friend gets a text from someone in the little hamlet of Conjola Park: *There's fire in my yard*. When Facebook momentarily loads I read that fire is in the playground of the little primary school my nieces attend in the town of Milton. As the day goes on, the stories about Conjola get worse; I hear forty houses are gone, then I hear half the village. I hope it's not true.

We are safe enough here, we think, but there's nowhere else to go anyway: we are locked in. The Currowan fire is to our south, west and north, the Tasman Sea the only clear front.

For locals, these places to our north, like Conjola, are part of our broader community – our children go to the same schools, people work together, friends and family are scattered between. Nearly everyone has a mental roll call of those they're worried about. I've been trying to ring my parents all afternoon, and when I finally get through late in the day they tell me they watched from their house as a fireball swept through farmland at a place called Little Forest. They assure me they're safe, but still I hector them: *Are you packed? Is the car pointed in the right direction? You must be ready to move quickly if you need to.*

That night, New Year's Eve, no one has the heart for celebration. But we need to eat and want company, so in the evening I gather

with friends over candle and torch light for a communal meal, made from the rapidly perishing food we've all pulled from our fridges. As the clock draws closer to midnight, the volunteers from our local Rural Fire Service brigade who headed north into the melee that afternoon have still not returned. Several of us have loved ones on board, but no one speaks their fears.

Waking on the first day of 2020, it feels as though there's been more than a simple turning of a calendar year; I have entered an entirely new world.

On New Year's Day, the power is still out, telecommunications sporadic, and word is spreading that the entire South Coast is running low on fuel. Hearing that any purchases are now cash only, I take the money the kids' grandparents gave them for Christmas from their envelopes and drive to the petrol station on the highway. The queue of cars stretches out of the servo and so far down the highway I can't even see the end; I give up, figuring I'll ration my usage instead. When I return to the village I run into our local RFS captain. As I recount what I've just seen, he panics they'll sell out of diesel, leaving nothing for their fire trucks, and is gone before I finish my story.

When phones do work, they bring hard tidings. The names of locals who lost their homes yesterday are passed on in hushed voices, almost unspeakable news. I hear that one person has died, possibly more; small communities being the way they are, it is likely to be someone I know.

By the second day of the year, looking at my near-empty pantry, I start to think seriously about how I am going to source food. Those who've already tried say there is no point trying to drive

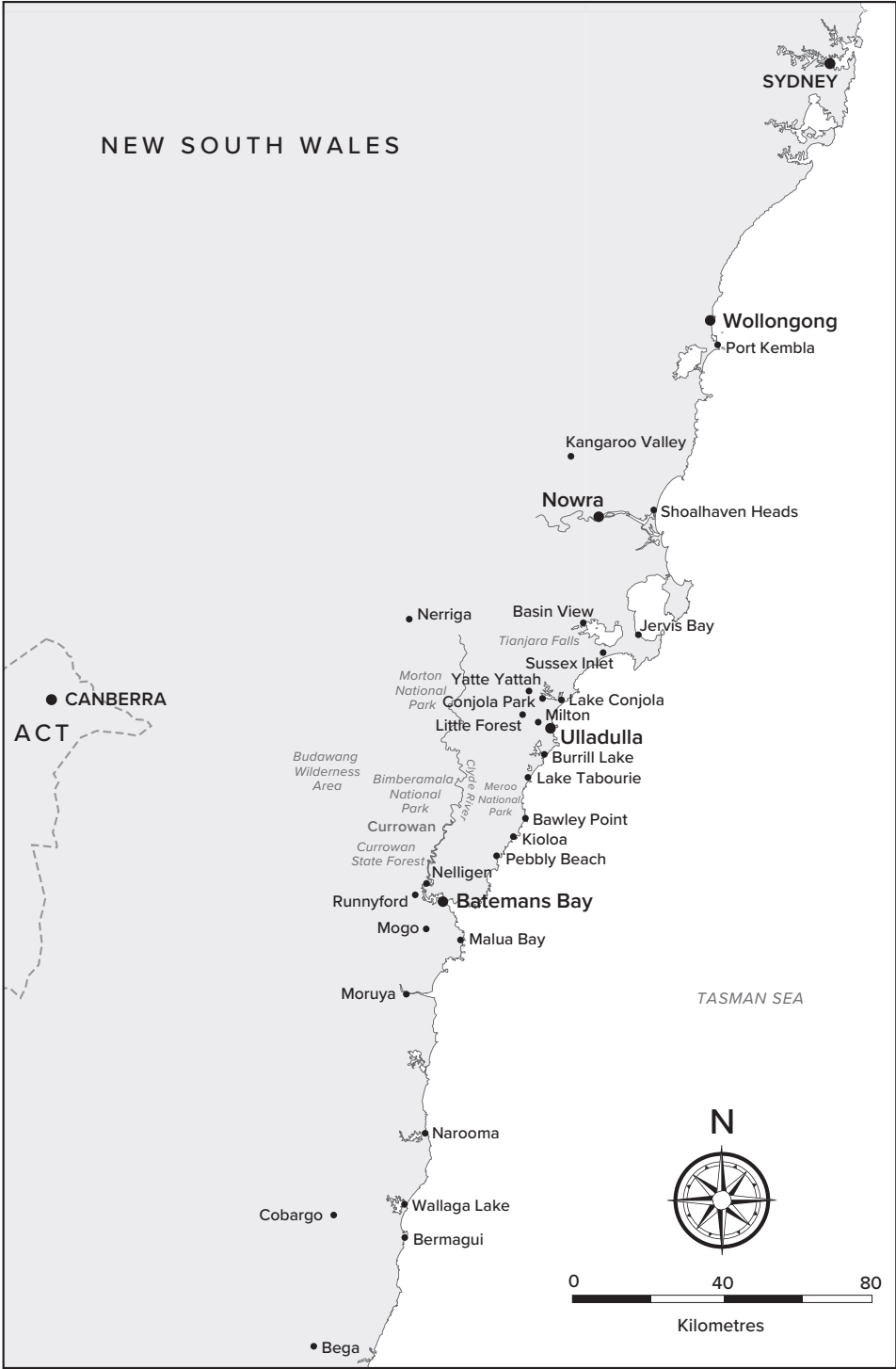
up the highway to the nearest large town of Ulladulla, because the road is in a permanent state of gridlock. Tens of thousands of tourists are trying to flee the South Coast – authorities have issued an evacuation order – but all roads are still blocked by fire and fallen trees and no one can get out.

A friend hatches a plan to use his boat to travel by sea to Ulladulla – he’s never taken it that far in the open ocean before, but reckons he’ll be right – but we aren’t even sure if anything will be left at the supermarket. Reports are that panic buying has broken out, people filling trolleys mountain high, and shelves aren’t being replenished because delivery trucks can’t get through.

In the midst of this comes the warning that *another* dangerous fire day is imminent – it’s time to brace again.

PART ONE

A SEASON OF FIRE



Chapter 1

THE GATHERING STORM

THE YEAR 2018 STARTS WITH A HEATWAVE, COMING down upon southeastern Australia. On the first Sunday, just after three in the afternoon, the temperature in the western Sydney suburb of Penrith slides up another notch, hitting 47.3 degrees Celsius – making it officially the hottest place on Earth. Temperature readings are taken in the shade, though, and across the city at the Sydney Cricket Ground, where the final Ashes test is being slogged out, a heat-stress tracker on the sideline measures what anyone out in the sun is experiencing: it peaks at 57.6 degrees. Incredibly, just one player, the English captain, finishes the day in hospital. At an international tennis tournament at Sydney Olympic Park, the heat shuts down three courtside cameras. Further south in Victoria, it bubbles and melts bitumen on the Hume Highway, slowing holiday traffic to a crawl.

This blistering start proves just a prelude. Above-average temperatures continue throughout summer and into autumn.

Another heatwave, this time stretching across the entire country, strikes for ten days in early April. Dozens of towns in New South Wales experience consecutive days above 35 degrees; the ninth day is the hottest Australian April day on record. The Bureau of Meteorology describes what's going on as 'abnormal'.

The heat is not the only extreme weather event underway. The amount of rain falling across eastern Australia started diminishing from late 2016, and by 2018 decent rainfall is almost a complete stranger to the land. New South Wales has its driest autumn in more than a century. By winter, 100 per cent of the state is drought-declared.

This is supposed to be the year Greg Mullins finally starts relaxing. It is his first full year of retirement after a thirty-nine-year career with Fire and Rescue NSW. He'd served the last fourteen as commissioner, in charge of one of the largest urban fire and rescue services in the world – the only man who stayed longer in this position died at his desk. But Mullins is watching the landscape whither under the extreme heat and drought, unable to escape a growing sense of unease that the conditions are being set for a catastrophic fire event.

Mullins knows as well as anyone that Australia has always been bushfire-prone. Growing up in the bushy outer suburbs of Sydney with a father who was a volunteer firefighter, he was schooled in the realities of helping his mum and siblings protect the family home when fires were nearby and Dad was out on the truck. He fought his first fire at age twelve, and countless more over the course of his professional life. But he fears that what's coming next is right off the scale of anything this country has ever seen.

For the past decade, he's been observing significant changes to the rhythms of fire that Australia has always known. No longer just a feature of summer, bushfires are appearing in other seasons, the big ones coming closer together, their behaviour more extreme. Mullins, like most professionals in the emergency services field around the globe, sees these shifts as harbingers. He knows the science says human-created climate change is making the planet hotter and drier, which in turn will make bushfires worse.

The warnings have been coming in for more than a decade, becoming stronger with time. In 2005, Australia's national science agency, the CSIRO, said southeastern Australia would face an increased fire risk in the future. By 2008, a report commissioned for the Australian government put a date on it: 'Fire seasons will start earlier, end slightly later and generally be more intense. This effect increases over time, but should be directly observable by 2020.' The following year, a government-funded research organisation warned 'our current knowledge and practices on bushfire management' would not be adequate in this new era of climate change-fuelled bushfires. In 2017, a major study examined historical records of 'fire weather' in Australia going back sixty-seven years. Using the Forest Fire Danger Index – the combining of meteorological data such as heat, wind and humidity, along with dryness, to come up with the degree of fire danger on any given day – it revealed Australia was already experiencing more days of dangerous fire weather, with increases in the frequency and magnitude of the extremes.

By 2018, Australia has been warming at an accelerating rate since the 1950s, with each decade hotter than the one before, and cool season rainfall has been diminishing in southeastern Australia

for twenty years: key ingredients for this more dangerous bushfire era to eventuate.

But it isn't simply fear of a bad fire season that is keeping Mullins from enjoying his retirement. His years on the inside, working closely with successive governments, have convinced him that those in power have failed to confront what is happening. As a result, we are not prepared for this new epoch.

Mullins largely blames the so-called 'climate wars' for Australia's state of unpreparedness. A decade of lost time, where a persistent campaign was waged by vested interests in the fossil fuel industry, supported by politicians from prime ministers down and segments of the media, fanning scepticism about the existence of climate change. It was so successful that instead of being a question of science and how we prepare, it became a heavily politicised controversy.

Because it was so political, Mullins says – and he is not the only senior Australian public servant to make such a claim – it became a taboo subject, and 'if you're not allowed to talk about something, you can't leverage it'. Over his career the pressure he faced was both implicit and overt. Once, he says, he was privately reprimanded by his minister for linking climate change and fires in a media interview. He learned to self-censor, for example making sure to omit the phrase 'climate change' when putting in a budget submission to upgrade his bushfire tanker fleet – even though this was his rationale for the upgrade.

Mullins starts calling some of his former emergency services colleagues, and learns that he isn't the only one who is worried.

BY 2018, IT HAD BEEN JUST OVER TEN YEARS SINCE I LEFT Sydney and moved to the New South Wales South Coast. It was a homecoming of sorts. I'd grown up in the area, but hightailed it out as soon as I finished high school; first to university, then to work in the city and overseas.

The region known as the South Coast starts around 100 kilometres south of Sydney and runs down alongside the Tasman Sea. Most of the population live in a collection of villages and towns that cling as close to the coastline as physically possible; it's an ocean-facing culture, a place with a preponderance of surfers, fish-and-chip shops and sea shell-themed holiday houses.

Sitting to the west of it all, running parallel to the coastal belt, is a long band of green. This area starts with farmland, before merging into a vast hinterland of forests and rivers – a playground for dirt-bikers, hunters and bushwalkers. Further west still lies a spur off the Great Dividing Range, with intricately webbed gorges, sculpted rockfaces and flat-topped escarpments – so wild and remote there'd still be places a foot has never fallen.

Living on a property on the edge of the forest hinterland, near where it starts to give way to coastal terrain, I had a foot in both camps. When I built here, with my husband, Chris, I knew it came with the risk of bushfire. We factored this into everything we did, such as using steel instead of wood to construct the house, installing robust fire hoses on either end and investing in a 100,000-litre concrete water tank, to make sure we always had enough water. We kept a huge area around the house clear of trees, what's called an *asset-protection zone*, and every year spent countless hours beating back the endlessly encroaching bush.

When the season was right, we did small hazard-reduction burns on our land.

For years, we discussed whether a fire might hit to the point of tedium – a conversation so frequent it became habit, more than a sense of imminent threat.

But that year, I started to notice a string of curious, unsettling things about the land. Like how even on the odd occasion it rained, a shovel in the ground the next day would still come out dry; and how while we once had legions of leeches, marching relentlessly out of the damp rainforest gullies hunting for a bare ankle to latch onto, now I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen one. I knew the state was in drought, but it was still disconcerting when I went into the local farm produce store one day and saw the owner with a furrowed brow, scribbling with a pencil in a notebook, drawing up a list of local farmers so he could ration out the dwindling supply of hay for hungry animals.

But the loudest herald of all came in the form of a ferocious winter fire that roared into farm country 20 kilometres north of where I lived.

It happened early one brisk winter morning – the time of year you could look outside and still expect to see a frost. Dave Howes had not long left for his job as a logger in the state forests and his wife, Debbie, was at home on the family farm, delaying leaving the warmth of her bed, when she received a panicked call from a friend: 'Do you want me to come and get the horses?'

An out-of-control bushfire was roaring out of Mount Kingiman – a mountain range west of Ulladulla – and heading towards dozens of rural properties. By the time Dave and his adult

sons, Steven and Lachlan, got home, the fire front was still a good ten kilometres away but, fuelled by an icy wind, it was already spitting embers into their paddocks. Spot fires were exploding in the dry grass.

Howsie, as Dave is known to his friends, knew better than anyone that the land was in a perilous state. In his forty-seven years he's probably spent more days inside a South Coast eucalypt forest than out. He began working as a tree feller when he was seventeen, following in the footsteps of his father, and the back country has always been a part of his own family life with Debbie and the boys too; mounted wild boar heads take pride of place in the lounge room. He couldn't remember a time the forests were so dry and thick with scrubby understorey, but still, he never expected this.

The Howes swung into action, the boys chasing down spot fires in their utes, Debbie hosing down the house and the stables. The wind was so ferocious it knocked down a powerline over the road and started another fire run. When the front finally hit them, midafternoon, it looked like a fireball. 'It was night time before we could get hold of it,' Dave says. They saved the house and animals, but lost half their farm – sheds, fencing, cattleyards and paddocks.

A man of few words, Dave just shakes his head, incredulous, when he recalls the strangeness of that day. 'We were fighting the fire in jumpers,' he says. 'The wind was that cold.'

The Kingiman fire was my first real brush with bushfire on the South Coast. It didn't threaten my place, but I did have to drive through smoke and the overhead buzz of helicopters to my

parents' empty house – they were away in their caravan somewhere in Queensland, in oblivious grey-nomad bliss – to let myself in and make a phone call, asking for a decision that in thirty years of living there, on an old dairy farm, had never been required before: 'Don't panic, but I need you to tell me right now exactly what valuables you want me to take.'

It was hard not to feel rattled. Other fires were breaking out further down the far South Coast that week, and the RFS issued the earliest total fire ban on record for New South Wales. So it was with some misgivings that at week's end I went ahead with a long-planned trip to the Snowy Mountains.

The night I left the ski fields to come home, I drove out through an intense snowstorm that followed me all the way to the top of Brown Mountain – the last ridge before the Monaro High Country falls away to the far South Coast. As I crested the mountain and started the descent, the swirl of snow suddenly disappeared, and I could see what looked like orange lights lining the landscape down towards the coast. It took me a moment to realise I was looking at fire. *This is crazy*, I thought.

While I was viewing these events of 2018 as isolated, odd incidents, Greg Mullins was following the reports of the South Coast fires from his home in Sydney and seeing them as part of a larger pattern. There had been another two serious fires that autumn. One was in the town of Tathra, where seventy-nine homes were destroyed in a single afternoon during a period of some of the highest Forest Fire Danger Indices ever recorded. The other was a major blaze in Holsworthy, in southwestern Sydney, that threatened thousands of homes, a military base and a

nuclear reactor, taking 100 trucks and fifteen aircraft to control. It was a fire that Mullins fought, having joined his local RFS as a volunteer in his retirement.

What more evidence do we need? he thought.

JANUARY 2019 DELIVERED AUSTRALIA'S HOTTEST MONTH EVER recorded. Largely thanks to a wild storm season in northern Australia that sent a burst of heavy rainfall south back in spring, the country avoided major bushfires. 'We dodged a bullet,' says Mullins. But he was certain there was no way we would get so lucky again. The brief rain spell had made no impact on the drought in New South Wales, which was now entering its third year.

Mullins again started calling around former colleagues, this time with a plan and a simple pitch: 'The whole premise is we tell the truth, and we need to tell the truth, because this is really, really bad. I'm frightened.'

In April 2019, with Mullins at the helm, a group calling themselves Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA) launched to the public, warning that Australia was unprepared for worsening extreme weather. There were twenty-three members, all former leaders of firefighting, emergency services and land management agencies from across every state and territory. It was a grouping unprecedented in Australia, the first time former public servants, the most senior in their field, had galvanised so publicly. Each would have known of the potential consequences; falling out of favour with government is a good way to risk opportunities like consultancy work. But Mullins says they took little convincing,

and he only had a couple of knockbacks. Now he hoped the group's 600 years of collective experience would make them impossible to ignore. *Good luck debating me about bushfires*, was his attitude.

In a blitz of media appearances, targeted to pressure the government, ELCA members warned that Australia was set up to fight the fires of the past, not the present. They said our approach of relying on shared resources – sending volunteers and fire trucks between states and using planes leased from the northern hemisphere – was no longer adequate in an era where fire seasons were happening simultaneously in different locations. They warned that the burden placed on volunteers, the bulk of Australia's firefighting force, would be too great in light of what was coming.

Mullins called for extra investment in aerial firefighting assets – something he viewed as one of the most serious gaps in our capabilities. He knew that, behind the scenes, the National Aerial Firefighting Centre, the body that coordinates Australia's aerial firefighting resources, was already lobbying the federal government for extra money, but a business case they put forward back in early 2018 was still languishing, unaddressed, in Canberra.

While Mullins won't name names, he maintains his group had the support of some current emergency services leaders, who felt unable to speak out publicly. ELCA asked for a meeting with Prime Minister Scott Morrison, saying that as they were 'unconstrained by their former employers', they could speak more frankly about the 'rapidly escalating' risks.

It wasn't just Mullins' group sounding a warning about the approaching fire season. In August, the official 'Australian Seasonal

Bushfire Outlook' was released. A tool to help fire authorities make strategic decisions about the coming season, it stated that the heavily populated eastern seaboard faced above-normal potential for bushfire. Over a period of eight months, the Bureau of Meteorology delivered more than 100 briefings to the Commonwealth, state and territory governments about the elevated risks.

The weather outlook could hardly have been worse. As well as several years of extreme heat and drought, layered atop decades-long warming and drying trends, another two-pronged force was coming into play. Australia is always prone to year-to-year weather variability, due to cycles that arrive and drive extreme weather – El Niño and La Niña are the best known examples. In the second half of 2019, a cycle called a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) event occurred; it cooled sea-surface temperatures in the eastern Indian Ocean, and this reduced the rainfall over Australia. At the same time, a rare sudden warming event over Antarctica prompted the Southern Annular Mode (SAM) to dip into the negative, reducing cloud cover over eastern Australia and drawing in hot and dry air. Together, the positive IOD and negative SAM events supercharged the existing heat and drought.

For a land waiting to burn, there couldn't have been a more perfect storm.

AS 2019 DREW TO A CLOSE, I COULD SEE THE LAND AROUND ME crisp-drying. I'd been following Mullins' warnings in the media, and we were continuing to chip away at our fire preparations – gratefully taking on loan a friend's goat to eat down the long, dry

grass around the house – but the prospect of a fire coming to my home still seemed largely theoretical.

Elsewhere on the coast, though, people with far more experience of fire than me were seeing a clearer picture of the dangers that lay ahead.

About 40 kilometres south, Ian Barnes was looking around his community and fearing that ‘because they have never experienced big fires, they don’t know the threat they are sitting on’.

Barnes is a volunteer with the RFS. He’s captain of the brigade in Malua Bay, one of several coastal hamlets squeezed between the coast and the bush, just south of Batemans Bay. As is common on the South Coast, the older area is oceanside, but in recent years a sprawl of new residential housing developments has pushed west – with deep gullies of bush running like ribbons through the estates and backyards edging the trees. For the retirees, sea- and tree-changers, and Canberrans wanting a holiday home, it’s the perfect combination – you can see a lyrebird out your window and still be in the ocean in minutes. But Barnes views it purely through his firefighter’s lens: it’s ‘urban interface’, a transition zone between wildness and human activity, full of risk.

Before he retired a decade ago, Barnes worked for four decades as a professional forester. Sometimes, when he was tramping the coastal forests, he’d spot what he says the ‘old-timers’ called a Commonwealth Bank tree: a large eucalypt plumbed with hollows, a proliferation of limbs growing low on the trunk – branches everywhere, like the bank. A tree only develops this form if it has open space, and to Barnes, every rare sighting was a reminder of how we’ve changed the land since 1788. ‘To my mind,

especially along the coastal areas where Aboriginal people were mostly settled and there was a lot more ignition taking place, the forests were more of an open grassy woodland.'

Barnes believes the Australian landscape needs controlled burns, both to keep it healthy and to make it less prone to destructive wildfire. 'Fire is the default, and you must have a good reason not to have it,' he says – especially if you're going to build homes close by. One of the reasons he retired early from his job working for State Forests – as it was called before it became Forestry Corporation, a leaner organisation, more focused on the business of logging than forest stewardship – was frustration that he couldn't complete enough hazard reduction, because government cost-cutting meant his staff numbers kept falling.

It's a common complaint from Australians who live close to the land – that we don't do enough hazard reduction. Blame is attributed to a range of targets – from 'greenies' to faceless bureaucrats and their red tape. Scientists have pointed to the fact that as the climate warms, the window for safe burning is shrinking. Barnes thinks there's some truth in all these explanations, but essentially it comes down to an inherent laziness in our attitude to managing the land. 'It is too easy not to do it,' he says.

As the summer of 2019 approached, with forests to the west of Malua Bay thick with bone-dry understorey, he knew this was no longer an option – no one in their right mind would light up now. Barnes weighed up his options. With a slight build, spectacles and an encyclopaedic knowledge of local ecology and fire history, Barnes comes across as more like an academic than a firefighter – but he's fought and managed plenty of serious fires in

his time, and he soon came up with a plan to prepare his brigade for the dangerous summer.

He devised a workshop, titled 'Fire from the west – our biggest threat'. It was based on the hypothetical scenario of a fire developing in the remote forests west of town and racing into the urban area. It was not pure conjecture; bushfires of decades past have burned through areas that now contain housing.

Over a weekend in October, at the home of the Malua Bay RFS – a pale green three-bay shed that sits on a hill above the village – Barnes delivered the first part to his brigade members. He saw this part of the workshop as mental preparation: getting them to think about what it would look like, what they would do, if the unthinkable happened.

In November he started the second part, taking his team out of town and into the forests to familiarise themselves with the fire trails and to start mapping the locations of static water supplies such as dams and swimming pools.

But Barnes and his team never completed the workshop, because the South Coast was out of time.

THE GRIPPING, DEEPLY MOVING ACCOUNT OF A TERRIFYING FIRE – AMONG THE MOST FEROCIOUS AUSTRALIA HAS EVER SEEN

The Currowan fire – ignited by a lightning strike in a remote forest and growing to engulf the New South Wales South Coast – was one of the most terrifying episodes of Australia's Black Summer. It burnt for seventy-four days, consuming nearly 5000 square kilometres of land, destroying well over 500 homes and leaving many people shattered.

Bronwyn Adcock fled the inferno with her children. Her husband, fighting at the front, rang with a plea for help before his phone went dead, leaving her to fear: *will he make it out alive?*

In *Currowan*, Bronwyn tells her story and those of many others – what they saw, thought and felt as they battled a blaze of never-before-seen intensity. In the aftermath, there were questions: why were resources so few that many faced the flames alone? Why was there back-burning on a day of extreme fire danger? *Why weren't we better prepared?*

Currowan is a portrait of tragedy, survival and the power of community. Set against the backdrop of a nation in the grip of an intensifying crisis, this immersive account of a region facing disaster is a powerful glimpse into a new, more dangerous world – and how we build resilience.

'VIVID, VISCERAL, ADRENALINE-FILLED, TRUE: THIS IS OUR MIND-BLOWING NEW REALITY.' —**JONICA NEWBY**

'THIS STORY MATTERS: NOT JUST AS A MEMOIR OF LOSS AND DESTRUCTION BUT AS A WARNING FOR NEXT TIME.' —**SCOTT LUDLAM**



Bronwyn Adcock is an award-winning Australian journalist. She has worked as a radio current affairs reporter for the ABC, a video journalist for SBS's *Dateline* and a writer for *The Monthly*.

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