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National Parks are rape. The European concept of 'wilderness' is a phallus violating the purity of aboriginal culture. True wilderness ceased after the Europeans arrived.

An indigenous Australian was speaking on Radio National's 'Earthwatch'. I didn't understand. I recalled my trip to the South West on my visit in 1993, when I had learned that the button-grass plains are the result of tens of thousands of years of the Tasmanian aboriginals' forest management skills, designed to increase the numbers of grazing animals for hunting. Were the button-grass plains 'wilderness'? Or were the forests pre-button-grass true 'wilderness'? I later read that the Australian Heritage Commission defines wilderness as 'large areas in which ecological processes continue with minimal change caused by modern development.' So that answers that. Whatever indigenous people did was not 'modern development'. But now that modern development is here, surely we need the concept of wilderness to define that which needs protecting, precisely to prevent it from being violated.

That broadcast was in 1996. I was living on the NSW Central Coast, spending Christmas in Tasmania in order amongst other things to climb Cradle Mountain and to see the mysterious Tarkine that I'd heard was worth a visit. Trouble was I couldn't find 'Tarkine' on any of my maps – not surprisingly, as I later found out that the Tasmanian Government had deliberately had the name erased because they had their own ideas about logging the huge area before the public knew too much about it. The Tarkine is an area of nearly half a million hectares, containing one of the world's largest temperate rainforests, wild sea shores, rolling rivers, button-grass plains and mountains. It is a vast wild land through which the aboriginal Tarkiner clan once roamed. And through which the Tasmanian Government in 2009 are proposing to build a \$23 million 'Tourist Road' that conveniently accesses those rich timber resources.

But back to 1996; I had just climbed Cradle Mountain to my immense satisfaction and had drunk in the dramatic views from the summit, the Overland Trail a thread of cotton directly below my feet leading to the next stop on the Overland, Barn Bluff, its sheer bulk assuring me it would be my destination one day. But not this trip; my next destination was this fabulous, nameless place, the Tarkine.

The road after the picture-book village of Wilmot was wonderfully and variously green, the brilliant green of farmland alternating with the multi-hued darker greens of forest. And that nostalgic smell of farmed Tasmania, the like of which can also be found in a glass

of good sauvignon blanc: vanilla, grass, with a tinge of smoke. But I was disturbed that the roadside was littered with dead animals; I hadn't seen such slaughter on mainland roads. Are Tasmanian animals slower off the mark? Are there just more of them? Or are they depressed and suicidal at what is being done to their habitat?

Suddenly a sign denoting the Smithton Gun Club leered at me. Huge semis, hearses bearing the corpses of giant trees from the killing fields in the bush, roared through Smithton on their way to the mills in Burnie. The motel car park was filled with 4-wheel drives and utilities bearing forestry or mineral survey logos. In the time it took to track down some take-away for dinner, a big guy in a cowboy hat and a red shirt, sloped at the wheel of a red, hot-rodded Torana, circled the town centre three times, exhausts blattering.

Next morning, I sat in the car studying newly acquired Forestry Tasmania maps. Still no place marked 'Tarkine'. Disappointed, I made other plans: go via Edith Creek, do some forest walks, then on to Rocky Cape.

I was being watched. I looked up to see a young woman staring at me through the car window. She tapped on the window and said something, but the cowboy with colour-coordinated neck, shirt and car loudly blattered past, drowning her out. I opened the door.

She was roughly dressed, her face a pleasant outdoors face. 'Where's the Tarkeye?'

'I don't know. I want to go there myself but it's not on my maps, so I'm going through Edith Creek then on to Rocky Cape. Want a lift somewhere?'

She shook her head and left.

The Tarkine Tigers had just been in the news. They were protesters camped at logging coupes with chameleon skill, to emerge dramatically and with maximum inconvenience for forestry workers. I guessed this girl was trying to locate some of that action.

I drove to Kannunah Bridge, Edith Creek, where I found that the road forked. The left branch went to my intended forest drive and on to Rocky Cape. Just then, a police car roared past and down the right branch. In the next couple of minutes, several feral-looking bombs, a WIN News TV van and a paddy wagon also turned right.

Ha! So the Tarkine, and the action, were down that right branch of the fork.

Should I, a Greenie at heart, turn right to lend my support, to lie down in front of the killing machines, be arrested and thus spend the rest of my holiday in Risdon prison, as had Bob Brown and many others during the Franklin protest? Or should I, as coward and self-indulgent tourist, turn left?

I took the left fork.

Forestry Tasmania provides guides to some very nice, photogenic places, like Lake Chisholm and Milkshake Hills, with well-kept paths and picnic facilities. I knew I was being conned. All these conveniences are provided by Forestry Tasmania so that the gullible can

admire the very same trees that will – some time, but assuredly – be loaded onto the hearses hurtling towards Burnie. It's like going on a camera safari to photograph the elephant before joining the next safari to shoot it.

These thoughts spurred me to hurry to the morally unambiguous Rocky Cape National Park. Here are coastal hills, mostly bare except for low shrubs of blandfordia and wildflowers. The colours were brilliant in the sunlight: white quartz trail, multi-speckled flowers, blue sky, orange rock, green-blue sea. It was a truly beautiful panorama that strangely but wonderfully reminded me of Hong Kong's hinterland.

A little way up the cliff at Burgess Cove are the caves and middens. Aborigines lived here for over 5,000 years. They filled one large cave with shells and other less tangible evidence of their residence. They left little room physically or spiritually for egregious Caucasians to enter. I did feel something pretty close to guilt, certainly of invasion, as I stood gapping in the cave that had been home and shelter to indigenous Tasmanians for millennia.

Suddenly the sun disappeared under a huge black bank of cloud. By the time I reached the car park, the wind was howling, the rain spraying heavily, and it was cold. The Great Spirit, with whom I had had a passing acquaintance in that sweat lodge in Alberta, must have been displeased at the intrusion of one who had chosen the way of the cowardly tourist a few hours earlier.

That night I learned what was going on down that right branch of the Kannunah Bridge fork. WIN News reported that it was the official opening of a direct road link from Smithton to Zeehan through what my Forestry map ironically called the 'Arthur-Pieman Protected Area' and what is today known as part of the elusive Tarkine..

The news captured an exultant Premier Groom crowing that he had named his Government's contribution to the protection of the Arthur-Pieman area 'The West Coast Explorer': 'This is one battle that the anti-progress Greens have lost. Maybe they won the Franklin and the Lemonthyme, but we won this one! There's always an irresponsible minority that wants only to obstruct.'

The locals joyfully took the hint. WIN's camera zoomed in on groups of locals setting upon the nearest untidy, hairy-looking person with boot and fist. The commentator told us one hundred arrests were made. All were of the assaulted, none of the assaulting.

So that was why the Great Spirit was enraged. She wasn't enraged at me with my European concepts of wilderness, but at those without any concept of wilderness at all. She would, I am sure, prefer Her territory to be redefined by Europeans and left alone than be raped with that obscene thrust, 'The West Coast Explorer'.

As a student, I attended a slide show given by Lloyd Jones, a pilot and photographer who regularly flew walkers into the South West. The highlight of his show was the stunning white beach at Lake Pedder. I was bowled over by Jones's Kodachromes. I vowed I too would visit there, perhaps even tackle the three day walk in from Maydena. I never got around to it before I left for England and when I returned it was too late. The head of the Hydro Electric Commission, Sir Allan Knight, had beaten me to it.

Knight had decided that if the outlet Gordon River was dammed the huge storage thus created would be perfect for a large power station. Labor Premier, Eric Reece, was all for it. Parliament approved the construction of a dam that would increase the area of the lake from two to ninety square miles. Environmentalists all over the world were outraged, including Oscar's fellow-student Jessie Luckman, who was a devoted bushwalker and a prominent activist against the flooding.

A public seminar on the Pedder flooding was held in the Hobart Town Hall in November, 1971. The meeting passed several resolutions that were ill-received by politicians of all sides who were present. Labor MHA, Neal Batt, spoke apologetically from a politician's point of view. 'You must understand the limitations imposed on government,' he pleaded, water-skin, as the Cantonese call such wet and slippery nothingness. Despite a petition of 10,000 signatures, 97 per cent of respondents voting against the flooding of Pedder in a poll conducted by Hobart's *The Saturday Evening Mercury*, and high level international condemnation, Reece and the HEC went ahead.

The Lake Pedder Action Committee challenged the flooding on the legal ground that Pedder was inside a National Park, but the case could not go forward without the approval of the Attorney-General, Merv Everett, who had been junior counsel to Reg Wright in the Orr case. Cabinet refused to allow Everett to authorise a court challenge, whereupon he resigned as Attorney-General and Reece appointed himself in his stead. Both Labor and Liberal Parties supported the bill authorizing the flooding; it was rushed through both lower and upper houses with minimum debate and without a proper scientific assessment of the proposal or of more environmentally friendly alternatives to it. Gough Whitlam himself apparently didn't want to dirty his hands with a tiff with the States so early in his Prime Ministerial career, but the Federal Labor Party defied him and held an inquiry into alternatives to flooding Pedder – and found that there were some. Reece dismissed the inquiry: 'I'll tolerate no interference from Canberra or elsewhere ... that's the end of it.'¹ Even some State politicians were sharply at odds with Reece over the matter, but the more the objections there were to the flooding of Pedder, the more determined Reece and Knight were to show who was boss in Tasmania. Even, if it meant murder – or at the very least being an accessory thereto.

¹ Buckman, G. *Tasmania's Wilderness Battles: A History*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2008, p. 31

Brenda Hean, the widowed wife of dentist Angus Hean, was one of the five members of the Lake Pedder Action Committee mounting the legal action to stop the flooding. Their last hope was to seek Federal support to stop the dam on the grounds of national interest; she argued that destroying Lake Pedder was equivalent to blowing up Ayres Rock in order to mine it. On September 8, 1972, the Committee engaged professional pilot Max Price to fly Hean to Canberra to lobby politicians and while there to skywrite 'Save Lake Pedder' above Parliament House. The vintage Tiger Moth aircraft vanished without a trace. The plane was last seen flying up the East Coast. When it failed to land for scheduled refueling on Flinders Island, an air and sea search was mounted. When one pilot reported seeing wreckage off the coast and requested permission to land and investigate by boat, his request was denied. Premier Reece dismissed calls for any sort of public inquiry.²

By the time of the flooding of Pedder, Oscar was dead – otherwise he surely would have let me know about Pedder and the mystery of Brenda Hean, whose husband was at one time the family dentist. Canadian papers had only mentioned that a Lake Pedder, in remote Tasmania, had been flooded. It was only in 2007 that I heard about the Hean case; Tasmanian film producer Scott Millwood was offering a \$100,000 reward for further information on it. He said: 'I think there is a sense of violence about environmental conflicts in Tasmania – it was there during Lake Pedder, there in the battle for the Franklin River and again against the pulp mill. That is why it is really important to get to the bottom of what happened to Brenda Hean and Max Price because until we break the cycle we are destined to repeat it.'³ The film *Whatever Happened to Brenda Hean?* and the book of the same name, both by Millwood, appeared in October 2008.

However, 35 years after the event, Millwood didn't quite get to the bottom of what had happened. It seems certain that someone had tampered with the plane, probably by putting sugar in the petrol, but whether this was under Reece's instructions, or the assassins were second guessing Reece's wishes, *à la* Thomas à Beckett, is not known. What is certain is that Reece had disallowed a proper investigation; and that police had been instructed to whitewash any evidence they found that might have suggested foul play.

Out of the whirling outrage that followed the Government's handling of Lake Pedder, Richard Jones, one of the Action Committee, formed the United Tasmania Group, an organization that, unlike the major parties, did not see 'politicians as rulers and the rest of us as ruled.'⁴ The UTG was later to become the Greens political party. The Pedder case had defined environmental issues as the major battleground for future political battles.

² The details in this section are taken from: Millwood, S. *Whatever Happened to Brenda Hean?* Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008.

³ *The Sunday Tasmania*, September 9, 2007.

⁴ Quoted in Norman, James. *Bob Brown: Gentle Revolutionary*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2004, p. 62

Artist Max Angus, who drew inspiration from the Pedder landscape for more than 40 years, commented on the Pedder disaster: 'People now say, "Well, it wouldn't happen today" . . . you have to think about the climate of thought that attended the South West and the Hydro-Electric Commission. The Hydro-Electric Commission was the great white knight of Tasmania.'⁵

But it did happen again, not four years later.

In 1972, a young doctor arrived in Launceston to establish a medical practice. He was shocked at the way the government had reacted to public opinion over the flooding of Lake Pedder. He paid for advertisements in Tasmanian papers with the headline: 'Tasmania – World Epitome of Man's Destructiveness'. The advertisement referred to Truganini's death in 1876 as 'the only successful annihilation of any whole human race in history', to the Government bounty that annihilated the thylacines, and to the destruction of Lake Pedder. The doctor's name was Bob Brown.

In 1976, when rafting the Franklin River in the middle of apparently inaccessible wilderness, Brown saw a railway track, barges, drills and helicopters. He heard explosions. Work on damming the pristine Franklin had begun before it had been approved by Parliament. The Tasmanian Wilderness Society (TWS) was born, their immediate aim to muster public opinion against this illegal assault on wilderness.

This campaign was much more sophisticated than the Pedder campaign. An image of Rock Island Bend in the lower Franklin, shot by wilderness photographer Peter Dombrovskis, imprinted on the consciousness of all Australia the struggle to save the Franklin. Premier Robin Gray's dismissal of the Franklin as 'nothing but a leech-ridden ditch' was exposed for the nasty travesty that it was.

The fight to save the Franklin divided Tasmanians even more than had Pedder. Reece's own party rushed a bill on retirement age through Parliament in 1975 with Reece as the target – with much bitterness, he was forced to resign. He was replaced by Bill Neilson who had no stomach for the fight. He was succeeded by Doug Lowe, who offered a compromise dam, the Gordon-above-Olga, but that pleased nobody, his own party least of all; they replaced him with pro-dam Harry Holgate. A vote of no confidence led to an election, which the Liberals won. The new Premier was the abrasive pro-dam Robin Gray. His Federal Liberal counterpart, Malcolm Fraser, had given the whole South West area of Tasmania World Heritage status, but incomprehensibly and to his cost, he did not move to stop further

⁵ <http://abc.net.au/science/kelvin/files/s18.htm>

work on the dam, which he could have done as it was within the Heritage area. Labor leader Bob Hawke pounced, making the Franklin dam an election issue in the 1983 Federal election. Hawke won; he ordered that work on the dam was to stop. Premier Gray immediately challenged the legality of Hawke's order but his challenge was lost in the High Court four months later.

The Franklin ran free.