

Tasmania: the testicle of Australia

Tim Bowden

Tasmania is the testicle of Australia—suffusing the Mainland with strength and vigour. What a pity there is only one of them.

Now I have to plead guilty to originating this necessarily sexist analogy—although it was once wrongly attributed to Christopher Koch by the *Bulletin* when I used it launching the paperback edition of *The Doubleman* during the late 1980s in Sydney. He generously wrote to the now sadly defunct ‘Bully’ putting them right. I suppose it might be possible to extend this imagery with the Flinders and King Islands forming a kind of terrestrial *vas deferens*, but the sad reality is that in testicular terms, we Tasmanians are geographically detached from ‘the mainland’, hanging there alone, last stop before Antarctica.

Of course, this is a cause of pride for Tasmanians, who when asked where they come from while abroad, almost invariably say ‘Tasmania’ before any mention of that larger island further north. Their fury at graphic designers depicting a castrated Australia for visual convenience remains fierce and undiminished.

But let me hasten to add that the shape of Tasmania is not necessarily male-oriented; far from it. The State Library of Tasmania held a fascinating exhibition in 2002 entitled ‘The Shape of Tasmania’, with artefacts ranging from the beatific to the banal—and indeed the bawdy, of which more in a moment. Tasmania’s heart-like shape has been a favourite of jewellers, and designers of cards, particularly around Valentine’s Day. Specially designed cookie cutters have produced biscuits in the island’s distinctive shape. There was even a giant chocolate freckle on display, covered in hundreds and thousands, dubbed a ‘freckle-isle’. And several fur merkins for women, tastefully crafted from kangaroo skin to cover what Bazza McKenzie (and others) have referred to obliquely as ‘the map of Tasmania’. The merkins on display in the august confines of the State Library of Tasmania were the work of the versatile architect and interior designer Bevan Rees, who, in 1985, produced several of these pubic wigs as trophies for a Royal Tennis Tournament in Hobart. I suppose in this case he could have been described as an exterior designer.

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At least I have been able to redress, to a small extent, the sexual imbalance of the title of my talk.

The perception of Tasmania as exotic has long been a preoccupation of outsiders. Euphoniously too close for its own good to Rumania or even Transylvania, its convict past coupled with its dramatic topography of mountains and rainforests have encouraged authors like Marcus Clarke to weave dark tails of atrocity and cannibalism, based it must be said on some indisputable facts. The escaped convict Alexander Pearce may have been the first European to walk from Tasmania's wild west coast to the east in 1822, but that geographical achievement was marred by the brutal reality of how he sustained himself on his pioneering journey by eating his five companions—well, bits of them anyway.

In later years, Tasmanians were quick to claim two famous and indeed exotic film stars as their own. The swashbuckling Errol Flynn was certainly born in Hobart (in 1909), where his father, Theodore Flynn, became the Foundation Professor of Biology at the University of Tasmania. His son wasn't there very long. The legendary seducer was expelled from just about every school in Hobart, before taking off to New Guinea in his late teens, and on to Hollywood. But patriotic and proud Tasmanians were perhaps a little too eager to claim the sultry actress Merle Oberon as well. The story was that Merle was the illegitimate daughter of Lottie Chintock, the Eurasian descendant of Chinese goldminers in Tasmania's north-east. This has been an enduring myth. Scads of Tasmanians said they had known those who had been to school with her. It is curious, to say the least, that despite Tasmania's excellent and thorough records of births and deaths, there was no birth certificate for Merle or mention of her mother, Lottie. However, a birth certificate did turn up for Merle in India—the story is too detailed to go into here. This legitimises the most probable reason for Merle Oberon claiming Tasmanian origins. In 1929, when the attractive Eurasian actress, then known as 'Queenie' Thompson, was in London with her mother, she caught the eye of the film director Alexander Korda, who persuaded her to change her name to Merle Oberon and cast her as Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*—the first of many successful screen roles. Actresses of mixed race were not acceptable in those days, so it seems that Korda himself, or one of his publicists, invented the story of her Tasmanian origins. The very name seemed exotic enough.

Merle went along with this all her life, and improbably, in 1978, the year before she died, visited Hobart with her fourth husband for a fairly disastrous visit. Asked about where she had lived as a girl growing up in Hobart, she gestured vaguely at a large Georgian sandstone mansion high on a hill, which happened to be Government House. On her way to a civic reception in her honour, the taxi driver said how wonderful it must be to be back in her homeland after so many years. Merle quipped that it was a pity she hadn't actually been born there! When reporters' questions at the reception became a bit more pointed, she became distressed and collapsed. Yet older Tasmanians to this very day are still loath to give her up.

Mainland and even overseas writers are drawn to what Tim Herbert once described 'the heart-shaped island with a brutal history' that 'has become everybody's favourite narrative site'. First-time novelist Chloe Hooper chose Tasmania and Port Arthur for her psychological thriller, *A Child's Book of True Crime*. Britain's poet laureate Andrew Motion set his fictional biography, *Wainwright the Poisoner*, you know where and the list goes on. Tasmania was the location for the quest for Eden in Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*, not to mention Tom Gilling's curious fantasy about a Hobart woman giving birth to a seal, *The Sooterkin*. The splendidly named British writer Nicholas Shakespeare has also written a book titled *In Tasmania*, but at least he was searching for his own family origins on the island, and does have the decency to live there for at least part of each year. James McQueen, Robert Drewe and Brian Castro have all drawn literary inspiration from the island. Tasmania's own Richard Flanagan wishes non-Tasmanian authors would seek their muse elsewhere and laments the catastrophe of Tasmania 'becoming fashionable'. At the 2002 Sydney Writer's Festival, he alleged that 'Tasmania has become a quarry for cheap exotica, written by outsiders'.

However, the home-grown—and not all expatriate—Taswegians have written evocatively about everyone's favourite geographical merkin. Carmel Bird, Amanda Lohrey, Dennis Altman, Cassandra Pybus, Christopher Koch and Peter Conrad among others—presumably with Richard Flanagan's blessing as home-grown muses. I am not a novelist, and have lived away from Tasmania for nearly 50 years. But I am continually drawn back to the island, and wrote a travel book in 2005, *The Devil in Tim—Penelope's Travels in*

Tasmania, that drew inevitably on my upbringing and early life on the island. My two brothers and sister live in Tasmania and even in my dotage I get speaking gigs there despite my expatriate status. My Tasmanian passport has not been revoked, I'm glad to say. I am a frequent visitor.

Every time I fly over Bass Strait and see the north-east coast of Tasmania unfurl beneath the wings, I still feel a frisson of excitement. That feeling of coming home is still present even after nearly half a century of living away. Christopher Koch, who writes about the Tasmanian landscape more evocatively than any writer, in my view, shares this feeling, and began his 1987 essay 'Returning to Hobart Town' thus:

The first sight of the island from the plane causes a leap of the heart, like the sudden appearance of a loved face. All returning Tasmanians experience this. Tugging at its moorings under the giant clouds of the Roaring Forties, Tasmania is different: we are no longer in Australia. All colours have the glassy intensity of a cold climate: the greens greener, the dark blue of the numberless hills and mountains appearing almost black, from the air.

Growing up in Hobart in the 1940s and early '50s was more like living in a large country town—without wishing to be unkind to the state capital. Although the Bowdens lived only three miles from the GPO, the bush fell untouched down the slopes of Mt Nelson to the bottom of our suburban block in Sandy Bay. On the south-western side, Mr Livingston's cows grazed on near-vertical paddocks cleared on the slopes that are now festooned with expensive houses with unrivalled views of the Derwent estuary.

As a boy, I earned some pocket money helping Mr Livingstone deliver his milk, carried in big churns on his cart pulled by a large draught horse. As Mr Livingstone, an amiable, tubby, bald little man, and I dipped milk with a pint measure into the waiting pots and pans outside the suburban front doors, the horse would move along the route without being told, stopping from time to time to keep pace with us. I've yet to see a modern delivery truck that could do that all by itself.

With my chums, we roamed in the bush without supervision, on occasions enlivening our games of cowboys and Indians by potting each other with our Daisy air guns—eyesight gravely at risk from the lead pellets—and made makeshift canoes or rafts to venture precariously out on the waters of a small dam higher up our valley. It was deep enough to drown us but our mothers remained in blissful ignorance of these adventures. A deep consciousness and appreciation of the Tasmanian bush began there, and was entrenched when my parents—rather nobly, I think—took me through the Lake St Claire–Cradle Mountain Reserve at the tender age of 10. I suppose I must have been a pain in the bum for the other members of the party, but the influence of that walk was great. Bushwalking was considered an eccentric pastime in those days, and not many did it. It was disconcerting to meet anyone else on the track—particularly (horrors) if they had the effrontery to share the primitive shelter huts with you overnight.

My bushcraft and sense of navigation remained rudimentary to say the least. At the age of 19, with two companions of the same age, we managed to lose ourselves in horizontal scrub in the Arve Valley, in the headwaters of the Huon River, and after three days scrambling through the maze of this awful stuff in the cold rain and without food, we were lucky to get out of it.

Hobart was and is a dramatic city, with Mt Wellington towering over the buildings clinging to its lower flanks, sometimes snow-capped (there have been white Christmases at times) and, at over 4000 feet in the old scale, a force to be reckoned with. Hobartians talk about the weather a lot, because there is so much of it, a great deal of it generated by the mountain. To the Bowden family, Mt Wellington was a friendly weather guide. On westerly days when brilliant sunshine alternated with short, sharp showers of rain, if the mountain disappeared you knew it would rain in the city within five or 10 minutes. Our house in Sandy Bay faced north, and the mountain was a constant presence, regarded more with affection than apprehension—a more reliable weather indicator than our much-tapped barometer. Mt Wellington was the biggest, but not our only, mountain. Hobart was surrounded by smaller peaks: Mt Nelson, Mt Stuart, Mt Direction, the humped Mt Dromedary and one suggestive feature to the south of Mt Wellington known as the Sleeping Beauty, and very well endowed she was too.

Like Christopher Koch, who lived closer to Mt Wellington than I did, I exulted in the natural beauty of Hobart, unlike the writer and academic Peter Conrad, whose upbringing in the city's northern suburbs, close to the sulphurous and highly polluting Electrolytic Zinc Works that discharged Christ-knows-what into the Derwent River in those unregulated and less environmentally conscious days. Conrad hated Mt Wellington and said so in his memoir, *Down Home*.

My childhood was overshadowed by a brutal, bad-tempered eminence: a mountain. It looms suddenly above the city and grimaces from a height of four thousand feet; it squeezes the settlement, denying it toehold...My parents would sometimes anxiously peer through the window before venturing out, 'to see what the mountain was doing'. It dictated our blustery, lachrymose weather, and in turn determined our moods...Across the river, behind our house, is its lower echoing colleague Mt Direction, the hump of another talismanic beast whose body has subsided beneath the earth. I grew up between those animals of obtuse rock, always expecting them to pounce.

Those who love mountains find Tasmania an exciting place. Conrad, however, was not one of them. 'Every horizon in Tasmania is crinkled,' he wrote with evident distaste, 'a blockade of dolerite; and the irregular crust begets morose clouds which look like angry thoughts.' And there is more, much more in similar vein. Even at the age of five, taken to a gymkhana by his parents at the agricultural showground quite near their house, he recalls being suddenly overwhelmed by the sheer misery of his physical surroundings, and bursting into floods of tears, to the puzzlement of his parents who were treating him to a day out.

Conrad left Hobart as soon as he could, and now lives in Oxford. He has returned to Tasmania for brief visits, one of which spawned *Down Home*.

Now Peter Conrad has written evocatively, albeit with an edge, about his Tasmanian upbringing but I don't think his other writings have drawn much on his island experiences. I can speak more confidently of my own work. After a memoir, *Spooling*

Through, and a recent travel book, *The Devil in Tim—Penelope’s Travels in Tasmania*, I firmly believe that though you can take the boy out of the island, you can’t take the island out of the boy.

My interests in oral history, on which most of my work is based, began in Tasmania recording huon pine getters, west coast miners and pioneering canoeists like my cousin John Hawkins (just about everyone in Tasmania is related), the first to traverse the Franklin River, and that singular adventurer Olegas Truchanas, conqueror of the mighty Gordon River, [whom] I recorded on a clockwork-operated tape recorder in 1960. I remain fascinated by Tasmania and write about it whenever I can. Its fierce rivalries continue to amaze, making the Irish Troubles (now all but fixed) seem like a peripheral skirmish. The North–South divide remains a passionate cause, with the South having the state capital, the biggest harbour (but not the most used), the university (well most of it) and the Parliament. The North argues that although the Mersey River at Devonport may be considered a creek by comparison with the Derwent, the roll-on-roll-off ferry and container revolution has all but rendered the Port of Hobart, the reason for Tasmania’s settlement in 1804, all but irrelevant. Besides, they say, more people live in the North than the South, which is true. A rabidly pro-North friend, Robin Wyly, once told me that shortly after the 1967 bushfires which ravaged the South, he saw a hand-lettered sign in a Launceston shop window saying: ‘WANTED: 167 GOOD MEN AND TRUE TO MARCH ON THE SOUTH WHILE THEY’RE STILL WEAK.’

I still take more interest in Tasmanian politics than [that of] my now home state of New South Wales, and despair at the brutish short-term vandalism of right-wing Labor governments over the years to rape and plunder the island’s finite timber resources and old-growth forests, with the pulp mill the latest and most vile manifestation of this unsustainable lust for the quick buck. This, to me, and many others too, defies logic and strategic planning, which should be ensuring Tasmania’s long-term future as a smart, clean and green drawcard for national and international tourism.

I’m out of time, but to paraphrase Ratty in *Wind and the Willows*, ‘there’s nothing, oh nothing so much fun as simply merkin about’ in the glorious island of Tasmania. And I do

that as often as I can.