Tasmanian Overland

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(*Plates* 41–44)

As Earth's wild places contract, so have lands once reviled become our new adventure playgrounds. Such has been the experience of Tasmania, which first intruded upon the European consciousness with Abel Tasman's discovery in 1642 – 128 years before Captain Cook's Australian landfall. Christened by Tasman Van Diemen's Land, its geography remained a mystery until Flinders' circumnavigation in 1799 which established it as an island rather than an appendage of the mainland. Four years later the first settlers arrived and starved. For the next 50 years of the 19th century, Van Diemen's Land became notorious as the principal penal settlement for Britain's transported convicts. In convict lore this was the Fatal Shore, the land of white slavery, and 'to plough Van Diemen's Land' argot for a convict's life of retribution. When transportation was finally abolished in 1853 and the name Tasmania substituted for Van Diemen's Land, the systemized brutality which had characterized the white man's life-style had been transmitted into a campaign of genocide against the Aborigines. Within 45 years of British settlement, the dreamtime had turned nightmare and primitive man had been exterminated from the land he had inhabited for millennia.

For many years, little was written or read of Tasmania's 19th-century history; but as time shades and perceptions change, the convict stain has been expunged and to modern visitors the reputation of Victorian Tasmania would be incomprehensible. In the island continent of Australia, the flattest and driest on earth, whose predominant physical characteristic is inconspicuousness, this offshore isle with abundant rainfall, forests and mountains is almost unique in its display of genuinely dramatic scenery. Western Tasmania's Wilderness National Park – one of the globe's last temperate rain forests – has taken its place in a World Heritage List that includes Mount Everest and the Grand Canyon. The Macquarie Estuary, confluence of Australia's wildest and grandest rivers, the Franklin and Gordon – once a dreadful penal settlement reserved for the hardest recidivists – has become a rallying point for conservation international. Tasmania is pre-eminently Australia's holiday state, occupying top position in the Great Outdoor Experience of bush walking, climbing, caving, rafting and kayaking. A place intended for the damned has been transformed by the wand of wilderness.

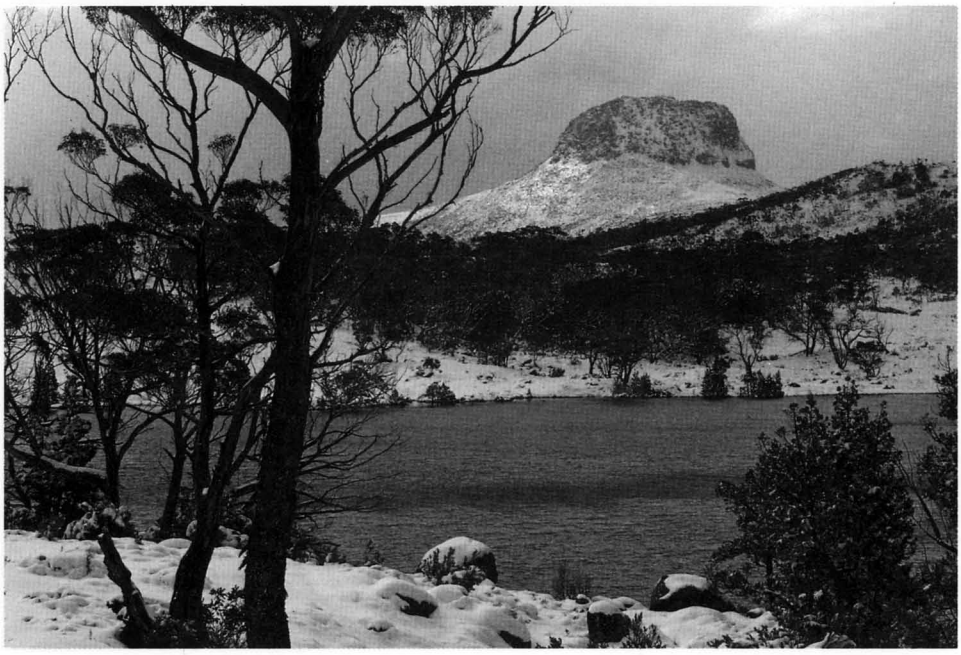
But if Tasmania has been rehabilitated, its true character remains enigmatic. Travel cliché compares it with Scotland or 'England Down Under'. Trollope described it as 'more English than is England herself' and Betjeman as 'the heart-shaped island of content'. These cosy analogies are misleading.

Tasmania's flora and fauna are quintessentially Australasian. Its land forms and scenery have no European equivalents and defy the tired game of topography snap. Its dank jungles of primeval fern tree and archaic palm are vegetal relics of the primordial super-continent of Gondwanaland, now dispersed through the southern hemisphere by continental drift. Its discomforting bush – spiny, prickly and spiky – achieves the ultimate in impenetrability in the form of a vigorous creeper whose scientific name *anodopetalum biglandulosum* is as convoluted as the shapes it assumes. This is the infamous 'horizontal bush' growing as a matted mesh suspended several metres above the ground. Tasmania remains a land where nature is hostile and where, in the unfamiliarity of its dark silent forests, the ghosts of old Van Diemen's Land – convicts, cannibals, bush-rangers and aboriginal spooks – still dwell.

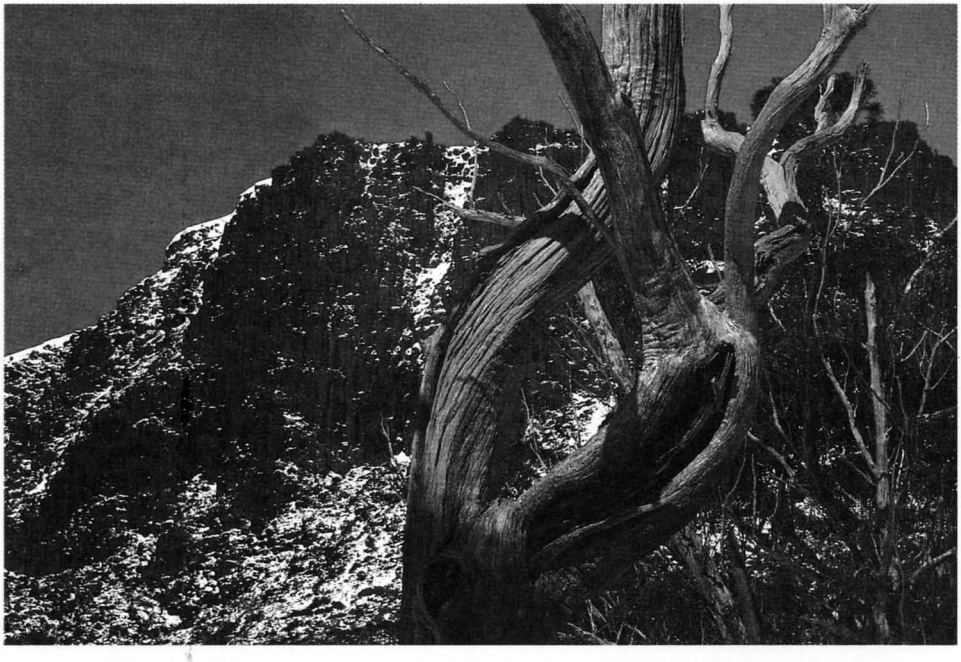
What's in a latitude? For Tasmania, just about everything. Our northern hemisphere's equivalent might be Spain's verdant Atlantic coast. But Tasmania, lying at a similar latitude between 40°S and 44°S, is slap-bang in the path of the Roaring Forties, low pressure systems that move inexorably west to east throughout the year, and the waves of the Southern Ocean that have had half the circumference of the world to gather the climactic strength which explodes on Tasmania's wild west coast. Tasmania's 'temperate maritime' climate is a misnomer for 200 inches of rain, sleet and snow dumped annually on its western heights; high winds and snow-storms that blow out of Antarctica at any time of year, and a summer that can either desiccate by drought or incinerate by bush-fire.

In October 1988, my wife Georgina and I stopped over in Tasmania on a round-the-world tour. What to see of this intemperate Nether England which a lifetime of sabbaticals would not exhaust in a mere 10 days? Australia rejoices in travel hype. In addition to routine kangaroos and bandicoots, wallabies and wombats, Trapdoor and Redback spiders, Tasmania has platypus and echidna, Tiger snakes, Tasmanian devils and Tasmanian Wolves – the virtually extinct thylacine. For new boys, disconcerting tales of the Tasmanian bush are stock-in-trade, but before leaving England I had quizzed mountain guru Rupert Hoare on baggables. His assorted list included Mount Anne, Frenchman's Cap, Federation Peak and the remote ranges of the SW. These offer rare prizes, but ventures to such parts must be measured in weeks even with aerial drops. On reflection, I reckoned that Tasmania's most famous bush-whack, the Overland Track traversing the Cradle Mountain National Park, was about our mark.

The Cradle Mountain National Park, conceived in the late 19th century, became a reality through the enthusiasm of an Austrian *émigré*, Gustav Weindorfer. A Scenic Area was created in 1922 and the present boundaries of the 1300 square kilometre Park drawn in 1947. The Park's landscape was sculptured 20,000 years ago by an ice-cap 65km in diameter, crowning mountain ranges that were then part of the mainland. The park takes in most of the island's highest peaks, including seven that exceed 1500m and Mount Ossa, the highest at 1617m. Mountain tarns, glacial lakes and moraines; gorges, ravines and waterfalls; arêtes, cirques and head-walls are all remnants of Tasmania's ice age. But the Park's most striking feature is its rock architecture of igneous red dolerite. Plugs and pinnacles, columnar and hexagonal pillars,



41. Barn Bluff from Lake Windermere. (John Harding) (p 77)



42. The Tasmanian Olympus. (John Harding) (p 77)

fluted cliffs and porcupine ridges offer some of Australia's best rock-climbing and most spectacular scenery.

The Overland Track traces a fragile thread through the heart of the Park, linking rain-forest and swamp to hummocky sedgelands, button-grass moors of soggy peat to an alpine tundra of rare cushion plants. Above this floral wonderland lies the climbers' world of rock, snow and ice. The Track was completed in 1935 and opened two years later to unguided parties. A guiding tradition survives to this day, and tour operators vie to take you through the heart of Tasmania in summer at £450 a throw. We were to discover for ourselves why winter tours are less popular. The 85km Track is usually walked north to south from Cradle Valley to Cynthia Bay at the southern end of Lake St Clair. Thanks to a line of huts which are maintained by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and sited within an easy day of each other, the traverse should be completed comfortably within a week.

I had originally banked on a party of six but, as it turned out, only two of us boarded the Tasbus that left Hobart for Queenstown on 19 October 1988 at 8.30am. We had spent the previous two days sightseeing a snow-topped Mount Wellington, trekking out to Cape Hauy's spectacular sea stacks on the Tasman Peninsula; buying food, maps and guidebooks and ingratiating ourselves with local bush-whackers. At Derwent Bridge, our roadhead, it was cold and spitting with rain. Through scudding clouds and lowering skies, snow-covered hills occasionally emerged. The scene was thoroughly un-Australian, yet we were heartened by the sight of two young trampers who had disembarked with us and were, we assumed, also bound for the Overland Track. We exchanged greetings. They prophesied a 'monster low' and moved off down the road in the opposite direction; we never saw them again. At the Ranger's Office at Cynthia Bay we signed in, paid a $10 Park fee and crouched under a verandah to escape the rain. Our last hot meal for days was spoilt by hassling, hungry crows and yellow wattle birds grotesque with their pendulous jowls. Elbowing through a mob of domesticated wallabies, we took the plunge into the rain-forest at exactly 2.45pm to begin the Overland Track.

For its first 15km, the Track hugs the contours of the western shore of Lake St Clair. This, the deepest lake in the Australian continent, occupies a trough scoured out by what was once Tasmania's greatest glacier. The forest merges into the very waters of the lake and the track, running just above it, tunnels through an opaque and overwhelming vegetable mass. Gigantic eucalypts such as Stringy Bark (*eucalyptus obliqua*) and Alpine Ash (*E delagentensis*) vie with the Antarctic Beech or Myrtle whose uppermost branches, 80m above, form a canopy that creates eternal twilight. In clearings grow Sassafras, Leatherwood and Tasmanian Laurel and below them ferns, archaic palms and scrub. On the ground itself, the carcasses of rotting boles are hosts to a riot of multi-hued mosses, fungi, lichen and other parasitic growths.

On that gloomy wintry afternoon our destination was the Echo Point hut, three hours away according to the guidebook but four for us. They say that Tasmania has 200 different bird species but, apart from brief sightings of wombat and wallaby sidling silent through the bush, we neither heard nor saw a living thing. Incessant rain left us sopping wet because of, or in spite of, Goretex

suits. Happily, each hut in the park is improbably equipped with coal bunkers. Echo Point is supplied by boat; others by helicopter. The standard issue pot-bellied stoves take some figuring when fuel is wet, but by our third attempt we had created a cosy fug.

Our Sportplan, such as existed, was to bag the odd peak en track with Olympus and Ossa as a pair, with Cradle Mountain the final flourish. But if Olympus and Ossa, why not Pelion? The Park obliges with not one but two Pelions – East and West – and its other mountains represent a thesaurus of classical nomenclature. Opposite Echo Point rose Mount Ida; behind Mount Ida, the mountains of Jupiter; at the head of the lake, beyond Narcissus Bay and dotted about the Du Cane range were the Parthenon, Acropolis, Geryon, Hyperion and Eros. Why this profusion of classical allusion in a land where the myths of its original peoples have been comprehensively destroyed? The apostle of Tasmanian classical romanticism was a 19th-century scholar, Surveyor-General George Frankland, who initiated a vogue that later cartographers have unswervingly imitated.

Olympus (1447m) was high on our list for, as Tasmanian mountains go, it appeared relatively accessible. I even had a preview of what it looked like from Piguenit's classic 'Mount Olympus', painted from Lake St Clair in 1875. Piguenit, the first Australian-born professional painter of standing, knew this hard country as a surveyor with the Tasmanian Survey Department. The burgeoning glacis of his dank Olympus emerges from the lake covered by forests skirts to culminate in a triumphant crown of mist-shrouded dolerite pillars. The mountain was first climbed by Frankland in 1835, but our Park guidebook made no mention of any route up it.

After a night of torrential rain, morning brought clear skies and sunshine to transform the gloom of the previous day. The waters of the lake now sparkled and the hilltops glinted white with new snow. Back in Hobart, Gloria Barnes, queen of local bush-whackers, had conspiratorially advised us to leave the Track and strike inland some 30 minutes beyond the hut at an 'obvious' stream. Our 1:100,000 Tasmap indicated that the source of this stream was Lake Oenone, named after the nymph whose gift of prophecy would have helped on this occasion, for the map gave nothing away in identifying our stream from countless others which cascaded into the lake. 40 minutes out we struck off west at right angles and climbed steeply through groves of enormous Antarctic Myrtles. Initially, the eye of faith might have discerned a path but this quickly vanished and our guide became the torrent that cascaded down a series of rock steps which we climbed with the aid of lianas and fixed roots.

In the upper forest we made first contact with the 'bovver boy' of the bush, *richea pandanifolia* or pandanni. This triffid-like grass tree is a cross between a giant groundsel and a superannuated palm. Richea grows up to 12m high, retaining a straggly ruff of old leaves up the length of its trunk as insulation against the cold. Its smaller relative *scoparia*, growing at body height, is a vegetable pincushion. Both types sprout serrated fronds that can gash your hand at a touch: by the time we had reached the snow line at 1050m both mine were lacerated. As the forest thinned out, we began to see something of Tasmania for the first time. The eye strayed from the deep pool of Lake St Clair



43. View NW of Tasmanian Olympus. (John Harding) (p 77)



44. Cradle Mountain. (John Harding) (p 77)

– now 400m below at the bottom of the dense forest through which we had struggled – to Mount Ida. Yesterday, this sharp pyramid had dominated Lake St Clair's eastern shore to provide us with a marker; but from this height it was dwarfed by a succession of purple tiers rising above and beyond to the snow-capped Mountains of Jupiter. High-stepping through the snow's breakable crust – first calf-deep, then knee-deep and ultimately thigh-deep – which overlaid button-grass, scrub and boulders, we eventually got level with the source of our stream, Lake Oenone, suspended in a hollow between the shoulders of Mount Olympus, its waters uncompromisingly black.

The route now led round and into a broad summit couloir choked with titanic blocks of red dolerite. Exactly five hours after starting from Echo Point, the couloir debouched us on to the flattened summit of the Seven Apostles of Olympus. It was 1pm and the secret heartland of Tasmania was spread before us. To the north and east, beyond the dark blue troughs marking forested wilderness, an immense white tableland stretched out to every horizon. Its bleak uniformity was broken only by a succession of black rock outcrops, pillared turrets and, away in the north-west, the unmistakable scarp of Frenchman's Cap protruding like the thumb's top digit. The sun was shining but without warmth, and a snow-chilled wind hastened our descent. Reversing our tracks through the snow, we were back at the idyllic Echo Point hut within nine hours of setting out. That evening, as we were relaxing by the lakeside, a lone walker hurried past in the dusk. His name was Didier Monselesan, his nationality Swiss and he was bound for the Narcissus hut. Over the next six days, Didier was to become a part of our life.

The storm that night presaged the end of good weather. Grudgingly, we left the romantic Echo Point hut with the aim of reaching Pine Valley in the Du Cane range that same day. Our route lay via Narcissus hut and Cephissus Creek. Arcadian names, but yesterday's elation was quickly leached away in the rain. One bird at least was active – the currawong, whose raucous cry is the harbinger of bad weather. The Track tunnelled remorselessly through dripping ferns under enormous trees whose roots criss-crossed the path and whose upper branches were invisible in the cloud. Without a maintained path, the Overland Track in winter would be a trial by mire and water. First you tend to patronize the Track's boardwalks (constructions of mind-boggling labour), but before long you wonder how you could possibly manage without them: Harrison's Crossing, the causeway across the Narcissus Creek delta, alone avoided 400m of swimming.

The Narcissus hut was empty but, according to the hut book, a large school party had left a few hours ahead of us for Pine Valley. Narcissus Creek, some two hours north of the hut, was just about fordable, thigh-deep; but Cephissus Creek, the next obstacle, was fast filling up the valley floor. After wading waist-high for 50m we shied at the main stream which had grown into a metre-high bore that powered over 80m of boardwalk like a miniature Niagara. You don't hang around in these parts to dry off, for the bush is alive with leeches always alert for a meal on the hoof. Retreating to the main track we eventually reached Windy Ridge hut that evening, cold and wet, eight hours after leaving Echo Point. Much later, we learned that the schoolgirls did make it to Pine

Valley but were there cut off for days and eventually helicoptered out. It was good to see Didier busy with the pot-bellied stove but the real proprietors of the hut were an uncurious pair, employed on hut maintenance, who had taken over most of its occupiable area and whiled away the night smoking pot. Alone in this strange company and alien land, Didier was experiencing a crisis of confidence: to continue or turn back? His equipment – standard Oz impermeable parka, combi suitcase/sac and second-hand boots – was against him, but he was young, Swiss-Army trained and carried a larder of food. We needed each other and agreed to join forces.

The carrot offered by the next day's 15km Windy Ridge to Pelion huts stage was Tasmania's highest peak, Mount Ossa (1617m), by way of a three-hour detour from a pass, the Pelion Gap (1130m). In theory, no problem. But as we climbed higher the weather deteriorated. Some 4½ hours out we broke cover from another Jabberwocky forest to emerge on to a bleak open moorland where snow overlaid a glutinous bog ribboned with deep trenches that disguised fast-flowing becks. As we struggled upwards towards the pass, unsighted by stinging snow, Georgina slipped and fell waist-deep into a torrent. I lunged just before the water ripped her legs from under her and landed her on a bank of muddied snow. The scene was set for a hypothermia epic but, as we approached the Pelion Gap through a fire-scarred forest of skeletal pines, the weather momentarily relented and the veil of cloud was rent to reveal storm-banners streaming from the snow-wreathed ridges of a now unattainable Ossa. Once across the gap and down into the windless forest, the crisis was past, and so we stumbled on to the Pelion hut to be greeted by snow-encrusted wallabies outside and Didier within tending his pot-bellied stove. That night we blockaded the door against a pack of possums.

Yesterday's march was eight hours' worth. Today's, 23 October, was much the same length and mixture. It rained or sleeted in the forest and snowed or hailed on the moor. We were soaked within 30 minutes of leaving the hut and for the rest of the day waded through the stream that had now become the track itself. Pelion West (1554m), an 18km 830m day rating 10 hours in good conditions, had once seemed within our grasp. Now a mere diversion to see the Hardnett waterfalls was beyond us. At the Windermere hut a genuine guide, John Boden of Tasmanian Highland Tours, short-shorted over longjohns, was in residence with his Roman client Sylvia. Once past the formalities of ritual Pom bashing, John admitted to an earlier manifestation. He too had been a Pom – a schoolmaster converted to the Lucky Country and now running a nice line in mountain travel. As our relationship blossomed, so were we indoctrinated into higher bush lore – using tea-tree leaves as billy scourers and plastic bags as antidotes to bush foot. That night the cold was such that Boden relit the stove at 4am and again an hour later. Next morning, through eyelids glued together with coal-dust, we looked out on a landscape transformed by a blizzard which had plastered everything in a metre of new snow. In this alpine scene Didier was at last beginning to feel at home.

Not one stage of the Overland Track rates as anything but a walk. But over the past six days the constant attrition of rain, sleet and snow and endless wading through creeks, streams, bog and mire had left us with bush feet

lacerated at heel and toe. Georgina had a strained muscle and septic toe; all three of us had colds and 'smoky eye' from the coal-dust. Much later than intended, John and Sylvia set forth for the Cirque hut via Lake Will. We stayed firmly put, making the only serious excursions of the day to the patent composting lavatory sited the statutory 150m from the hut, past a miserable mob of marsupials seeking shelter from the snow. This shrine to Oz hygiene had one drawback. Notices inside the throne room warned that one puff of a fag would detonate the works and make mockery of minimal-impact bush-walking. Lunch was the gastronomic event of the entire tour, with Didier's fondue hewn from the nugget of cheese he had humped around these past six days.

Each of us now pledged to bring down the curtain on the Overland Track. Cirque hut was only six kilometres away and Cradle Valley, journey's end, 17km. At 7.50am we locked the door of the Windermere hut and marched out, straight into a blanket of sleet blowing steadily in from the west. The track was obliterated by knee-deep snow and the marker poles were barely visible. The map indicated that somewhere ahead there was a ridge but, at this of all times, the marker poles ran out on us. After meandering around for 2½ hours, I reckoned that we had made only a quarter of our distance and were getting nowhere, so sounded a retreat to the hut. We were wet, cold and dispirited, but the prospect of another night at Windermere steeled common resolve and, second time out, on fixed compass bearings, we hit off the key to the passage – a shallow col that marked the transition from forest to moorland. In weather reminiscent of a bad day in the Western Highlands, we ploughed on across the moor with spirits rising. Just above a confluence of streams, where scrubby undergrowth overlaid a morass of slush and knee-deep water, we reached the Cirque hut. Later, we were mollified to learn that the day's weather had also doubled the guidebook time for John and Sylvia.

A lone Brit, Richard Bryan, was lying comatose in his sleeping-bag next to the stove. Thus had he stayed for the past two days, despairing of the weather, his Overland Track abandoned. Next day, 28 October, the four of us left for Cradle Valley or bust. As we climbed through the thinning eucalypt forest out of Waterfall Valley towards Cradle Cirque, a miracle occurred. The clouds rolled back, the great dolerite plug of Barn Bluff revealed itself, and, for the first time in a week, the sun appeared. Two hours on, at Kitchen hut, we rounded on Cradle Mountain (1545m), Australia's most photographed peak. The red dolerite was warm to the touch and rough to the hold and the scramble to the summit achieved in an hour. On that marvellous morning, with the northern sun on our backs and the south side of the mountain still plastered in snow, the complete traverse of Cradle Mountain's two-kilometre ridge – an Austrian first in 1914 – would have been a worthy objective. As it was, we were well satisfied just to have reached the top. Cradle Mountain was first climbed by the surveyor Henry Hellyer in 1831 and from its summit Gustav Weindorfer, the park's spiritual founder, declared '. . . this must be a national park for all time. It is magnificent.' Now at last, looking back across the ground which had been our penance for the past week, we could share something of that enthusiasm. Beyond the moorlands streaked with snow where streams and

waterfalls now flashed silver, the snow-capped ranges of Pelion and Ossa were luminescent in the sun.

Yet, even as we started our descent, the weather reverted to type with an armada of clouds, pitching and dipping, racing in from the west. On the steep track down to Lake Dove, prodigious gusts of wind hurled us to the ground and spectacularly reversed the flight of waterfalls, blown upwards in billowing fountains of spray. Dove Lake, blue and welcoming on first sight, had turned grey with white-topped waves. Barely had we reached Cradle Lodge when the storm which had already blighted the west coast broke about us. There was no room at the Lodge but a man with a knowing look, sporting a snakeskin-banded felt hat with kangaroo device, offered us a lift to Devonport in a government truck. A few miles short of that town he exchanged this vehicle for one of his own marque bearing the device 'Proud to be Tasmanian' and, at the Formby Hotel, relieved each of us of $25 by way of surcharge. This brush with a genuine Van Diemonian left as sharp a taste as had the Overland Track. Although we had seen tantalizingly little of this unusual country, it had stirred our imagination and its wildness will always challenge the instinct to explore.