RUNNING THE WESTERN ARTHURS

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I LEFT THE CAR at the start of the Huon Track just as the last showers began to ease. It had been a fine and sunny day in Hobart and even though it is only a short distance from the town, the South West wilderness seems to have a weather all its own, and in particular, if there are any signs of foul weather in the region, it is the Western Arthur Range which assumes the role of its custodian.

Australia has many mountainous regions — from the soaring snow-covered summits of the Australian Alps to the rugged topography of the South West. I like them all, but it is Tasmania's South West that has the deepest attraction.

Through a veil of sleep I dragged myself into consciousness with the piercing shriek of the alarm. It was 4am. Unzipping the tent flap I cast a quick look skyward. It was overcast but it did not look like rain. Camping here below the range at Junction Creek I could not see how extensive the weather was so I decided to at least commence the day's planned run.

At 6.30am I zipped the tent flap closed and left the security of the campsite. Ahead of me lay a very long day during which my one aim would be to safely travel this complex maze of ridges, moors, lakes and peaks of that superbly spectacular Arthur Range — an area so totally striking in its alpine character it is difficult to believe it is part of the Australian landscape.

I quickly covered the few kilometres to the base of the ridge known as Moraine A and began the climb onto the range. High above me the edge of the plateau marking the top drifted silently in and out of the mist. On the range at last, I picked up the pace across the low-angled moors of brightly-coloured cushion plants. It was still early, about nine-thirty, as I reached the col above Lake Oberon. The view from here must be Australia's best landscape.

I had only come a short way and there was still ample time to turn back. Should I continue or return along the path I had been following for the past three and a half hours? To go on would mean total commitment to the traverse since after climbing Mount Pegasus and Mount Capricorn I would be in the middle of the range. The weather seemed to be holding. I gambled and carried on.

But someway down the descent of Mount Capricorn the wind changed direction and the first squalls began. I quickly donned my wind-proof parka and prepared to confront whatever the south-west could throw at me. The wind was intense and the rain blew in horizontally across the ridge top.

I pushed on through the growing gloom not knowing what to expect and midday I was at the Beggary Bumps. Aptly named, the Bumps are a series of steep rocky outcrops which traditionally require some time and some pack-hauling to negotiate. Without a pack, however, I barely noticed the Bumps

existed. Except for the steep drop below the track in several places there was little to be concerned about and I spent no more than ten minutes negotiating the full series. I marvelled at the ease. Past the Beggary Bumps, I began the long climb to Mount Taurus and on to Haven Lake. Then to Lake Sirona, finally arriving at Mount Scorpio mid-afternoon.

Scrambling over the rocky mist-enshrouded summit block, I descended the short distance to the top of Moraine K — the gateway to the Arthur Plains far below. Under the prevailing conditions I could hardly contain my joy at reaching this place for I knew with every step down the wind speed would drop and the air temperature would rise.

In no time at all I was jogging easily across the flats towards the Arthur Plains Track. As I slowly returned the eleven kilometres to my tent in the late afternoon, the clouds over the range slowly became darker. I arrived at the tent just before six. It had been an intense and exciting day but as I settled down to cook the evening meal, I could for now only think of the simple things — food and sleep. I would reflect on the adventure at a later time. On the roof of the tent, the pattering rain gradually increased and through the static of my small radio Hobart predicted rain and gale force winds for the night. Today had not really been the best day to make the traverse but then, by all accounts, tomorrow seemed like it might be even worse.

All night the rain pelted down and massive wind gusts roared through the tree tops. I was safe here but the roar of water from the creek told me that Junction Creek was flooding. I would have to use the cable crossing to escape the area. It was a two hour walk back to the carpark and I knew I had also to cross several other streams. All I can say is that departing the South West that next day was an adventure in itself, but I won't go into that here, for that is another matter.

Any story of the Western Arthurs centres on the weather, and if I have talked too much of wind and rain, of swirling mists and freezing temperatures, do not blame me. It is not my fault that these linger prominently in my mind. It is the fault of Tasmania — and in particular, that of the empty quarter known simply as the South West.