

# South-west Tasmania **The last**

**Dark storm clouds rolled in above them as they climbed into the heart of Australia's most spectacular scenery.**

**Too soon, cascades would be rushing from every cleft in the huge rock faces. And everywhere was the beautiful, sweet smell of the Tasmanian mountains.**

By Robert Rankin

A hand reached over the rock below me, groping for a hold.

A moment later John's heavily clad frame appeared over the ledge with a heave powerful enough to threaten my own precarious foothold.

Together we balanced on the square-foot surface of the highest point in Tasmania: Mount Ossa, 5,305 feet above sea level.

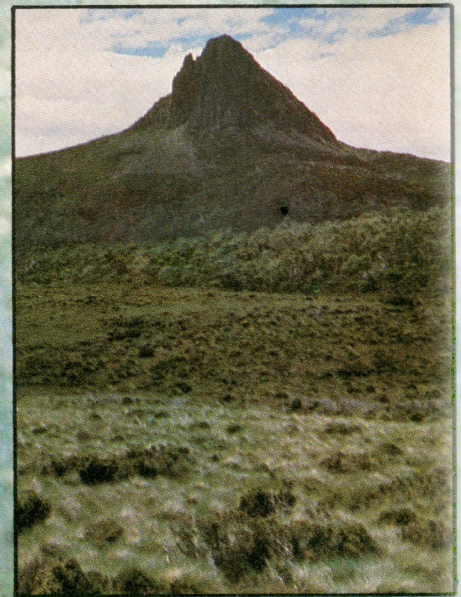
In every direction we looked the mountains seemed to strive towards us. We set our faces into the incessant west wind and gazed out over the distant dark brown dolerite cliffs, the green patches of

alpine moss and the vivid whiteness of the summer snow.

It was hard to believe in the outside world, hard to believe that other people existed or that beyond the horizon there was anything more than mountains and damp wilderness.

A line of yellow and orange dots down on the ridge we had just ascended put an end to our reveries. We were not alone. Half a dozen climbers were winding their way up the spur.

John and I shouted to them across the chasm and suddenly the valley was filled with voices, ringing with echoes enough





# wilderness

for a hundred conversations — a deserted mountain range apparently bustling with people.

Soon the climbers were clustered around us near the summit. Someone pulled a flask of rum from a parka pocket and passed it round. It was difficult to speak or hear above the wind. The few remarks I caught centred on the weather, the view, the mountain and other high places.

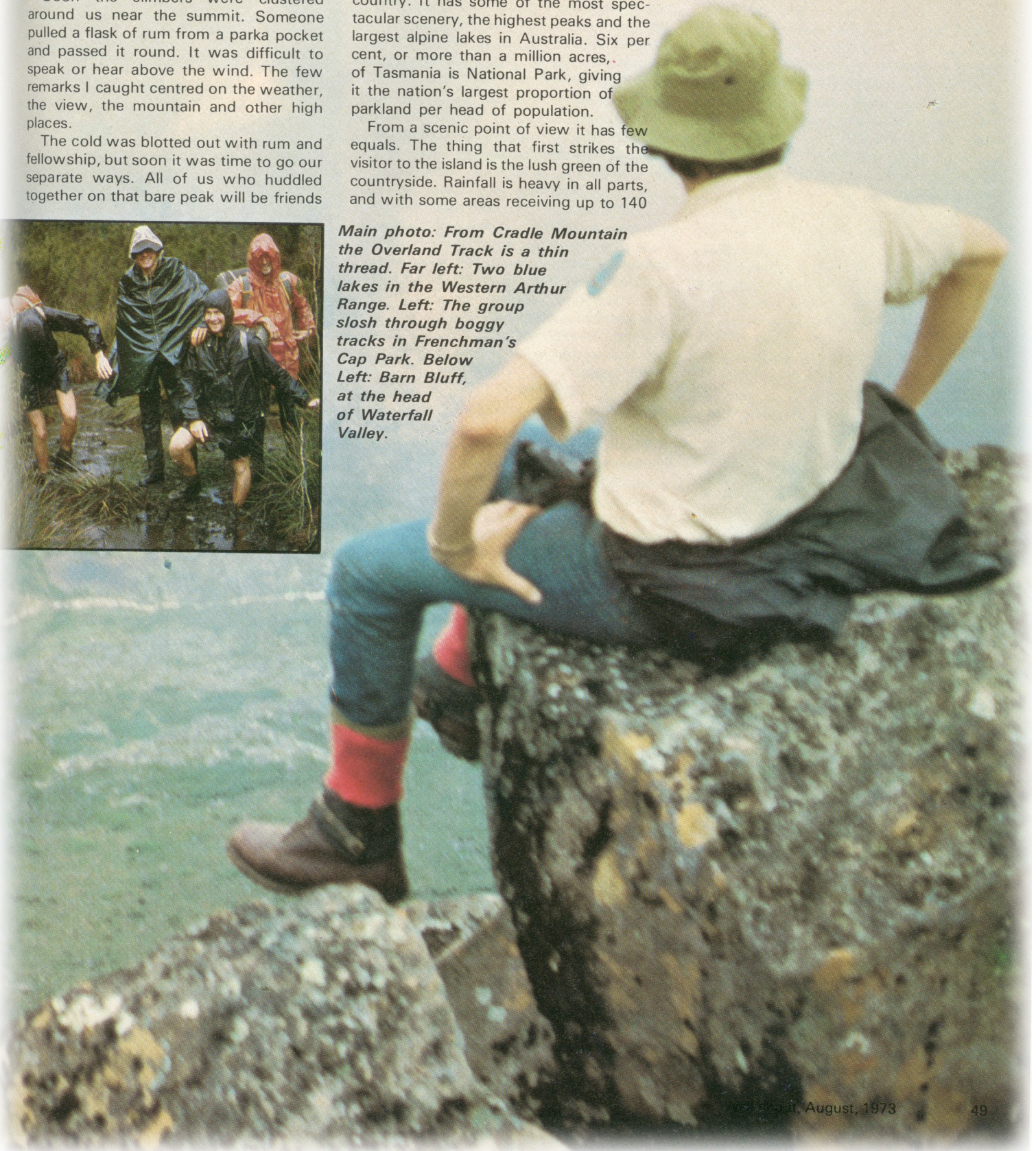
The cold was blotted out with rum and fellowship, but soon it was time to go our separate ways. All of us who huddled together on that bare peak will be friends

for life — even if we never meet again.

The island State of Tasmania provides the best bushwalking facilities in the country. It has some of the most spectacular scenery, the highest peaks and the largest alpine lakes in Australia. Six per cent, or more than a million acres, of Tasmania is National Park, giving it the nation's largest proportion of parkland per head of population.

From a scenic point of view it has few equals. The thing that first strikes the visitor to the island is the lush green of the countryside. Rainfall is heavy in all parts, and with some areas receiving up to 140

*Main photo: From Cradle Mountain the Overland Track is a thin thread. Far left: Two blue lakes in the Western Arthur Range. Left: The group slosh through boggy tracks in Frenchman's Cap Park. Below Left: Barn Bluff, at the head of Waterfall Valley.*





inches a year one is very lucky to catch a week of completely fine weather. But then, up in Tasmania's mountains, there is even something beautiful about the rain.

Probably the most popular spot for bushwalkers is the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, situated almost in the centre of the island. The park stretches for fifty miles in a north-south direction and is about 12 miles wide.

Its main attraction is the Overland Track which joins Waldheim, near Cradle Mountain in the north, to Cynthia Bay on Lake St Clair in the south. The track forces a way through some of the most spectacular country in the State. It takes the average walker about five days to make the journey, but ten days can be spent easily in the park, as there are numerous side tracks leading to many out of the way places.

Huts provide shelter for the traveller at night. These are usually found in protected places close to a good water supply, are usually built of wood and have a good, smokeless fireplace and bunks for at least eight people. A large pile of dry firewood is always to be found in the huts — it is bushwalking ethics to collect firewood before leaving a hut so that if it rains or snows in the meantime the next walkers to use the hut will be able to warm themselves around a roaring fire.

From the Chalet at Waldheim the track leads across soggy plains in the direction of Cradle Mountain, as yet invisible because of the huge bulk of Marion's Lookout directly ahead. Just before ascending the Lookout the track winds past beautiful Crater Lake, nestling in the surrounding cliffs. But by this time every bushwalker's eyes are on the skyline ahead, because everyone has heard about the tremendous view from the Lookout to the surrounding peaks.

With heart pounding, lungs nearly bursting under the effort of climbing with a heavy pack, one plods the last few feet to the top and looks over. There, not more than two miles away across the gorge stands Tasmania's most beautiful peak, Cradle Mountain. When I first saw it, even in my wildest imagination I could not see what relation it bore to a cradle. This mystified me for three more days, until I had climbed Mount Pelion West on the southern side of the mountain and looked back. There was the cradle! Even a sculptor could not have moulded a more perfect form.

Waterfall Valley Hut is not far away, nestling in a small valley. It has eight bunks, water just outside the door, and a magnificent view straight up the valley to mighty Barn Bluff at the head.

Another two days walk takes one past Lake Windermere, across Pine Forest Moor and Frog Flats — one of the lowest places on the walk at 2,300 feet — and

then up to Pelion Gap, flanked by Mount Pelion East and Mount Ossa itself.

Once Ossa has been climbed one might think that every other peak would be an anticlimax. Not so. Only seven miles to the south lies a chaos of peaks and ravines so immense that it seems a shame Ossa is higher.

The area is Pine Valley, surrounded by that incredible chain of peaks, the DuCane Range. Most of the range is hidden from the hut and I was disappointed when I first arrived there. But this impression changed drastically the next day when I climbed the last few feet to the summit of The Acropolis and peered out across to Mount Geryon.

If the Cradle Mountain is Tasmania's most beautiful mountain, then surely this must be its most spectacular. Its vertical east wall falls directly into the valley, and its columnar dolerite gives it a fluted appearance. The entire mountain consists of two great blocks of rock with a cleft between them. In this cleft is a tall spire of rock, The Foresight, which has been — excuse the pun — a point of interest with rockclimbers for many years.

The first day I saw the valley the cloud was low, occasionally grazing the tops of the mountains. I remember feeling as if I was inside the world's largest box, the walls formed by Geryon and The Acropolis and the lid by the dark layer of cloud above, seemingly close enough to touch.

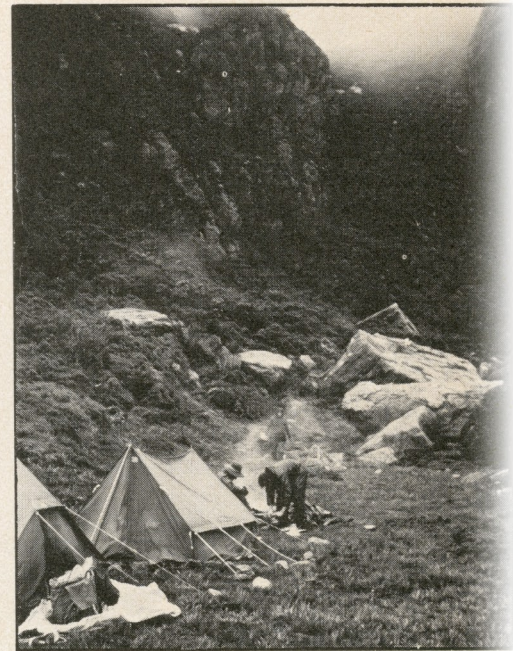
From these peaks the walker also gets his first glimpse of Lake St Clair, which lies beneath the bulk of Mount Olympus. It marks the southern end of the park, and with that the end of the adventure. It's only two days to Cynthia Bay and signing out in the logbook at the Ranger's Hut.

There we met other groups of walkers preparing to start on the Overland Track from the southern end. We were inundated with questions about it. But one could spend hours describing to people its awe and wonderment, and still not say anything. They know they'll have to go in and see it for themselves.

Walking in Tasmania is great fun, but that does not mean it is not a serious business. Many lives have been lost due to ignorance of the area, weakness of the party or lack of precautions against bad weather. Even in summer the snowstorms can be quite severe, and brilliant sun one day can turn into the most atrocious weather the next.

Tasmania boasts many other mountainous regions: Ben Lomond, a popular winter ski resort in the north; Mount Field near Hobart; in the west there is the rugged and fascinating Frenchman's Cap, which juts abruptly to 4,700 feet from button grass plains; and beautiful Mount Anne, with the high Eliza Plateau, notorious for summer snowfalls. But perhaps the most talked about and mysterious area in the island is that rugged corner, known to all who are

*Below: The camp at Lake Cygnus, in the Western Arthur Range, combines wilderness grandeur with the vivid hues of tents and the welcome, tangy smoke of a fire. Right: Crossing a river on a "flying fox."*



familiar with it as the South-West.

Lake Pedder is probably this area's most popular topic of conversation. I was fortunate to see it only a few months before it was flooded, and I was much impressed with its feeling of isolation and vastness.

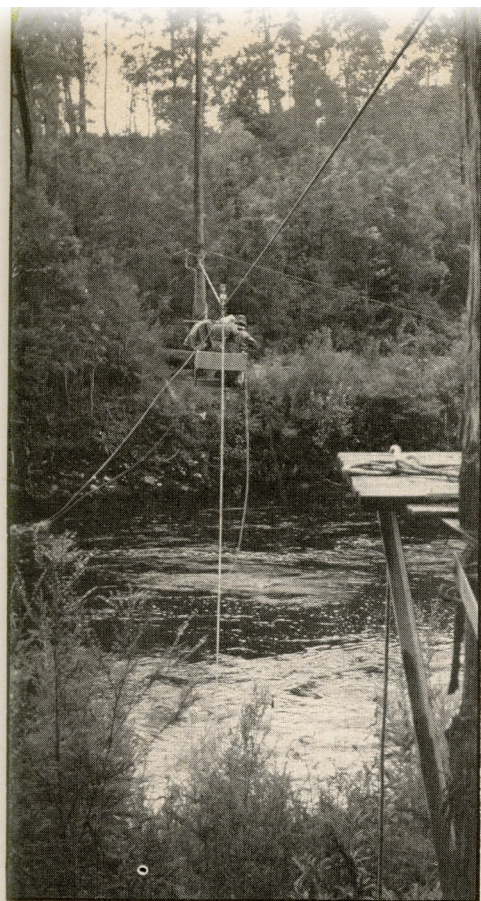
I saw it again earlier this year. I should say I saw "Greater" Lake Pedder, for the old one is 30 feet below a vast expanse of water. With the help of Lake Gordon it will soon be generating almost as much electricity as the whole Snowy Mountains Scheme. The Hydro Electric Commission has received a lot of criticism for flooding the lake, but now that it has been flooded we can only look forward with optimism to the prospects of the new lake.

The arrival of the Hydro Electric Commission ended the isolation of the South-West. Once it was only accessible by foot from Maydena or Geeveston, or from the landing strips at Lake Pedder and Port Davey. But now tourist-packed cars can be taken deep into the hidden sanctuaries of Tasmania's "empty quarter."

January found our group from the University of Queensland high up among the craggy peaks of the Western Arthur Range. Two nights previously we had driven from Hobart along the winding road to Maydena, the last town before the start of the 53-mile-long Gordon River Road. Scott's Peak construction site is at the end of the road and is the northern gateway to the south-west.

An easy five-mile walk across the plains brought us to Junction Hut on the banks of a Huon River tributary. Typical South-West country surrounds the hut. To the





south the long, jagged profile of the Western Arthur Range stretches to the horizon, to be lost in the blur of the shimmering haze over the Arthur Plains.

The hut faces east and the rising sun shines straight down the flat fields towards it. It was hard to sleep late. In the heat of the sun, it seemed impossible that this place could ever be cold. Even the sparkling quartzite peaks of the Arthur Range, which we intended to climb, looked warm and hospitable. None of us would have imagined that in the three short hours we took to climb the western end of the range the weather conditions would be completely reversed.

Bent double against a battering south wind we topped the crest, to be met by a wall of sleet driven horizontally into our faces. Even with woollen pullovers, thick underwear and a complete outfit of airtight nylon, the cold seeped through to chill us.

Driving mists made navigation hard. A peak loomed up in front of us, but how far away it was no one could guess. The mist made distances deceptive. It looked at least a mile away, but we were on top of it in five minutes.

Then, as if the mountain was a stage and we the audience, the mist lifted momentarily to give us a commanding view of our entire surroundings. We were perched on the overhanging summit of Mount Hesperus. Below us were the Arthur Plains and the hut. To the south glacial lakes, and eastward one peak after another.

Then we heard a shout, and over the rise came a man in bright red over-trousers. He was quickly joined by his

three companions striding at full pace towards us. Moments later we were busily making introductions. They were from Melbourne and we from Brisbane. Did we intend camping at Lake Cygnus that night? There was another group from Sydney only an hour behind. The shores of the lake would be crowded that night.

When we arrived a drizzle was setting in and a cold wind was blowing across the lake. The cloud cover was down to 2,000 feet. Over a steaming, smoky fire our dehydrated stew bubbled unenthusiastically. Hurriedly it was shared around and people with cold feet, frozen hands and red noses scuffled back to the comparative warmth of the tents to eat the crisp lumps of meat which tasted of charcoal and burnt tongues.

Next morning it was impossible to see more than a few yards beyond the tent flap. The air was still, the lake silent. It was midday before the cloud lifted. In the meantime we sank back into our sleeping bags and blissful sleep. There would be no climbing today.

Once we made the decision to sit out the bad weather we had to solve the problem of what to do with our time. It was far too cold and wet to be outside the tent, and even when inside we could not escape the cold. The only alternative was to return to our sleeping bags, read a book or to go to sleep. It was a strange way to live an adventure. Patience was the key — impatience achieved nothing. There was always the hope that the next day would be fine.

But it wasn't. However, it did look better than the previous day. Around 10 o'clock the mist lifted a little and we hurriedly dismantled tents and packed rucksacks. Peter Blaney took on the job of route finding, and we followed him along the northern shores of the lake, then up through a high saddle to the main ridge.

The cloud was off the peaks by now, and in the crystal-crisp mountain air our view seemed to extend further than the limits of the horizon. Now we really knew why we were here. Civilisation and progress meant nothing; man might as well not exist any more.

But even here, time did exist. We were working, unfortunately, to a timetable. Lake Oberon was our goal, to be reached by late afternoon.

Again the campsite was crowded. The Melbourne group, having set off ahead of us, had arrived the previous day and settled into the most sheltered spot. We chose the next best. The Sydney bush-walkers arrived later. They had to contend with the open shores of the lake and wet, spongy ground.

Late that evening the weather closed in again. Temperatures were the lowest we had yet experienced. It was impossible to stay outside the tent for longer than two or three minutes at a time without our hands freezing. That night was even

colder, and we knew what was happening when we heard a continuous shattering, like broken glass, as sleet hit the tent roof. Ice was piling up outside, and further up in the hills snow was beginning to fall.

The next morning we took stock of our situation. One of the tents was now completely useless, it was leaking like a sieve. Our sleeping bags were damp, as was most of our other gear. The four days of bad weather were beginning to take their toll.

In such harsh weather it would have been foolish to push on. We wandered over to the Melbourne camp to see what their feelings were. Being in a more sheltered spot their tents seemed to be holding out all right. They would press on today. But over in the Sydney camp the situation was desperate. One of their tents had blown down in the night and two sleeping bags had been thoroughly soaked through. They would have to spend the next night two to a bag.

Towards evening the wind reached such a force that it seemed the tents must be ripped to shreds at any instant. That night as we tried to sleep we clutched onto the tent poles for psychological comfort.

We woke to the sound of drizzling rain. The mist was down to ground level. Somewhere out there were our Sydney friends. The flooded creek gurgled past, gushing across the beach to meet the swell of the waves on the lake. A shout drifted across that eerie void; it was Ruth Stephenson calling out to see what the other party's plans were. They were obvious: There was only one plan possible; we must start the walk out.

An hour later, the eight of us began the long haul up to Mount Orion. We planned to descend by Moraine E. (The ridges of the Western Arthur Range have not yet been given names but are referred to as Moraine A,B etc.) Then we would take the route onto the Arthur Plains far below.

On the tops, everywhere, snowdrifts glistened in the pale sun. For a moment we stood on the very edge of the watershed and looked back into the driving mist and rain. Then we turned away and began the long plod down.

Two days later we trudged into the construction site at Scott's Peak. Everywhere was the bustle of business: workmen shuffling out of the canteen, generators droning continuously in the background, and giant transports thundering down the highway to its end at the dam wall.

Our car was nearby and Hobart two hours away.

We were leaving this forgotten place, this piece of land untouched by man, and I can't help feeling that somehow, in that short span of time we were there, our views on many things were broadened, and our minds in every way refreshed.