

A brush with the bush

Elizabeth Fortescue

It was January 2011, and renowned Sydney artist Tom Carment was walking the six-day Cradle Mountain Overland Track in Tasmania with his partner Jan Idle and their three children, aged 12-18. As they trod quietly through the bush, the kids started "quizzing" Carment and Idle with a curiosity they had never before shown.

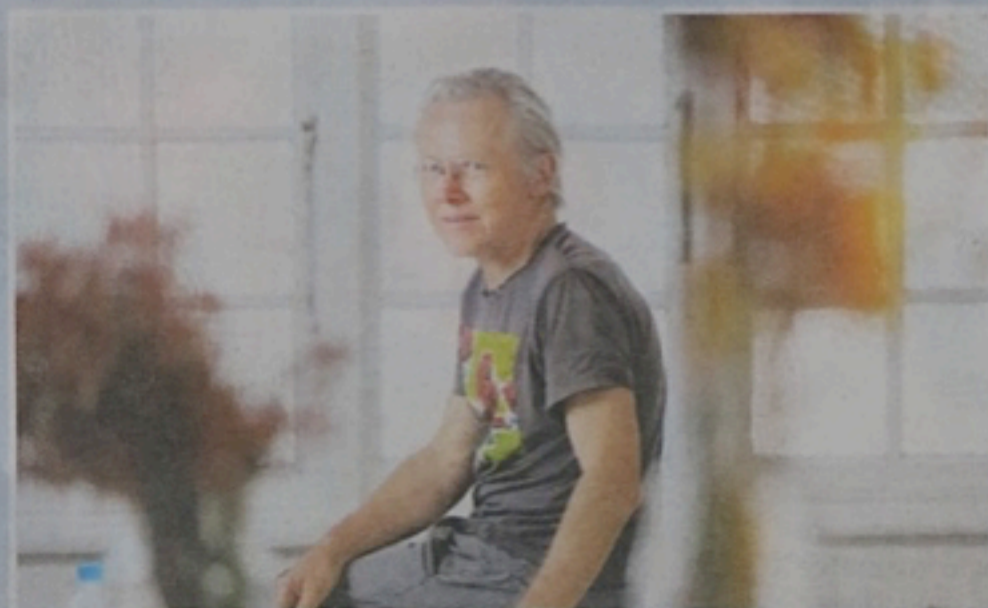
"They asked Jan and I about our lives — 'what were you doing when you were 16', that sort of thing," Carment says.

"That was really nice."

Bushwalkers' conversations often seem to meander naturally down winding paths, not unlike the ones being hiked.

"When you go on a walk, you have conversations you wouldn't have in the rushed schedule of everyday life," Carment says.

It's worth listening to Carment on the subject of family style bushwalking. He and Idle have taken their kids bushwalking since the children were old enough to sit in a back carrier.



Tom Carment at his Darlinghurst home. Picture: Bob Barker

They would seek out spots such as Flint and Steel Beach near the mouth of the Hawkesbury River or Burning Palms south of Sydney.

Another family favourite was the Glow Worm Tunnel at Newnes, a magical experience for the children.

"It's like the stars at night,"

Carment says.

It was Idle who suggested the Cradle Mountain's Overland Track, a much more taxing walk than any the family attempted.

They dealt with some

memorable adventures on that walk, including the day Carment found a leech in his mouth.

Back home in Darlinghurst, Carment relayed the stories to his friend and fellow walker, Michael Wee, a landscape photographer extraordinaire.

"A few weeks later, (Wee) came back and said, 'I've got a really good idea: why don't we do this book together?'," Carment says.

The result is *Seven Walks, Cape Leeuwin To Bundeena* (Roc/Hin, \$69.99), which has just been published. It's a poetic combination of the talents of both contributors — Carment's beautiful watercolour drawings, all of them done on the spot, and Wee's breathtaking photographs. Carment also wrote the book, revealing snippets of history and making homespun observations about human nature as enacted by his companions along the way.

Aside from the Overland Track, the walks in the book take in the Blue Gum Forest in the Grose Valley, from Otford to Bundeena south of Sydney, three days through alpine country in the Snowy Mountains, from Cape Leeuwin to Cape Naturaliste in WA, the Heysen Trail in SA and the Wilsons Promontory walk in Victoria. Carment and Wee did three of the walks together and four of them separately.

The Overland Track features first in the book. As the family walked in single file, daughter Matilda sang songs from *The Sound Of Music* — "a good choice for a family in the mountains", Carment writes.

"By the fifth day, the steadily increasing rain had soaked us all ... My boots became flaccid and I slipped and fell sideways onto small bushes. I struggled to rise with my pack, like an upturned turtle. Matilda kept singing."

Carment began bushwalking in his teens when he and his mate Robert Gray — who would become a famous poet — regularly rambled through the Royal National Park, in Sydney's south.

Carment takes paper and watercolours wherever he goes, in the city or the bush, so he can do a 20-minute rendition of anything that takes his fancy.

As well as appearing in the book, some of these drawings were selected by curator Anne Ryan for the Dobell Australian Drawing Biennial which is on until January 26 at the Art Gallery of NSW.

Ryan says Carment's drawings are marked by their intimate scale and sense of immediacy.

"He likes to be inconspicuous (when he's drawing)," she says.

"He's had a coin chucked at him more than once."

It's been a big year for Carment. He won the NSW Parliamentary Plein Air Painting Prize with a painting of an old building in William St, Sydney.

His painting of a Darlinghurst lane was a finalist in the Wynne Prize for landscape at the AGNSW. His solo exhibition at King Street Gallery on William is on now. And, of course, the book is out. It's been good, but hectic, Carment says. It might be time to hit the track.



Cradle Mountain photographed by Michael Wee and Tom Carment's watercolour of the same area (inset).



Broadwalk through the mountains