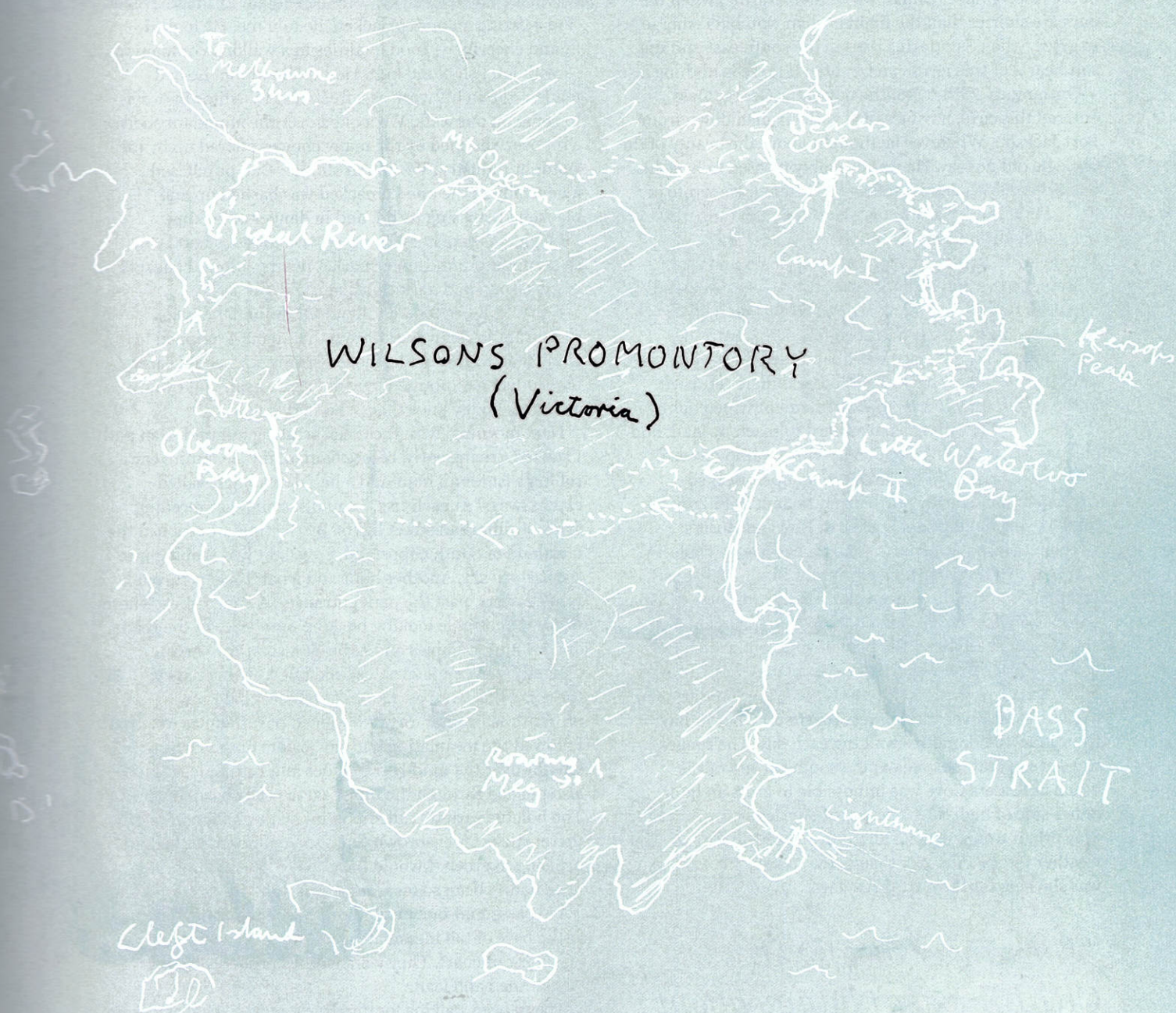


A WALK IN THE PARK

Embarking on a three-day hike with a new friend,
author and artist TOM CARMENT details his *exploration*
of Victoria's Wilsons Promontory.



A darning needle and some strong twine, a coil of nylon rope to make a washing line, a wind guard for my stove: these were things that I forgot to take to Sealers Cove. I'd grabbed the wrong sleeping bag from the camping shelf too, the thin one. But as I lay there, on firm sand, just above the reach of high tide, I stopped worrying — it didn't matter. Between fast-moving inky clouds, a half moon lit up the sides of my tent. I could hear the waves as they fell on the beach and washed through the granite boulders of the shoreline.

The Kurnai and Boonerwung clans, whose presence on Wilsons Promontory has been dated back 6500 years, call this place Yiruk or Wamoon. I had read in the Melbourne Museum that, according to the seven seasons of the Aboriginal calendar, we were in Waring, when the days are shorter than the nights, when wombats emerge to graze, when Sagittarius rises in the south east and the soft hearts of tree ferns can be eaten if there is nothing else.

On January 25th, 1798, the navigator George Bass entered this cove, having sailed with six men down from Port Jackson. Whatever he thought about the beauty of the place he did not say. He was probably pleased to have his open-decked whaleboat safe and sheltered. He wrote in his log that there was, in this place, "enough timber to boil down any quantity of blubber".

Indeed, by 1840, just about all the whales and seals of Refuge Cove and Sealers Cove and the nearby islands had been turned into oil, coats and corsets, and all of the accessible tall trees had been felled. Such was the decimation that the place was abandoned for a while, until the trees grew back. The timber millers returned in the 1890s, only to have their settlement wiped out by the fire of 1906. This coast was hard to reach by land, and pastoralist's cattle sickened on it, with 'swamp disease'.

Unlike Bass we did not arrive in an open-decked whaleboat, but started our journey at 5am in Fitzroy, Melbourne, making sandwiches in Rob and Rosie's kitchen, Liverpool versus Crystal Palace live on cable TV.

You have to register for overnight walks on Wilsons Promontory with the rangers at the Visitor Centre in Tidal River. A modest fee is charged for each night spent out, and you must tell them the plan of your trip, which cannot be altered. My plan was a three-day triangle: Tidal Creek to Sealers Cove, Sealers Cove to Little Waterloo Bay, then back to Tidal River via the west coast and Oberon Bay; from 12 to 16 kilometres walking each day. The ranger warned me that the creek at the southern end of the beach at Sealers Cove was impossible to cross an hour either side of high tide. The day of our departure, Tuesday May 6th, it would peak at about five in the afternoon. The weather forecast for Wonthaggi, the nearest big town, was showers for the next three days.

"The ranger at TIDAL CREEK wasn't happy about letting a pair of old codgers like us out into the PARK"

I had intended to do this walk alone, and was looking forward to that, and having time to think. But I was apprehensive about the long winter nights and the possibility of camping in cold and rain, or of hurting a knee or ankle.

The day before I left home in Sydney, Rob Adams, my Melbourne architect friend, rang up and said that he knew someone who was keen to walk with me. It was safer, he said: "Dan — he's a helluva nice bloke. I think you two'll hit it off."

Dan, a Zimbabwean, was born in Harare in 1982, at the same time as I was living in that city, aged 27, writing my first book, *Days and Nights in Africa*. There was a nice synchronicity about that, I thought.

In Melbourne, on Monday, from a rain-swept phone booth in the city, I rang the number Rob had given me, and met Dan at a nearby camping shop in Elizabeth Street. "I'm wearing an orange jacket," he told me. He looked fit and cheerful — good qualities in a walking companion — with longish blond hair. He explained that he had made a gap in his work as a freelance TV editor in order to come on our walk. We looked over the abundant shelves, a bit overwhelmed by the many choices offered up by the 'outdoor industry'. We kept it simple: Dan purchased a new billy as the one I'd packed was bashed up and blackened, missing its lid, and in danger of leaking. I bought gas canisters for my stove and spare bootlaces. In an underground supermarket nearby, I found packets of miso soup and dark chocolate.

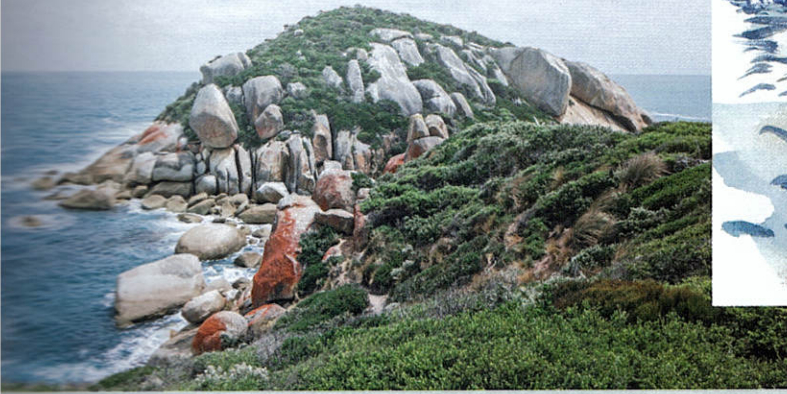
Rob and Rosie took us all out for dinner at Marios restaurant in Brunswick Street that night. I quipped to Dan's wife Karin that he looked strong, and could carry me out when I sprained my ankle. "He hasn't told you about his dodgy knee then," she said, laughing.

Next morning, with the creek crossing in mind, Dan and I started driving early, before 6am, in my silver hire car, rolling east for an hour and a half down high-walled expressways. At each rise, I could see out over receding grids of suburban street lights. By the time we reached the farmland of South Gippsland, grey light was seeping into the eastern sky. Another hour and a half took us through rain showers, past the park entrance, to Tidal Creek. There was impenetrable looking bush on both sides of the road and swamp wallabies and emus grazed at the verge.

Lamb's tails, pipe-cleaners, old bill, knitting nancy: these are the common names of mosses that grow on Wilsons Promontory. We walked past them as we followed the undulating path to Sealers Cove. They grew like fur over the muddy tracksides and rotting logs; fungi also pushed through the moist earth at the bases of trees. The boletus variety (called porcini by the Italians) was there: sticky green-brown top, spongy underside, yellow, bruising to green. I would have cooked some for dinner if we hadn't been so far from a hospital.

We passed no-one until midday, when, in a dark gully, at the base of tall messmate trees, we met a couple taking off their raincoats. They were elderly, probably in their 70s, tanned and lean.

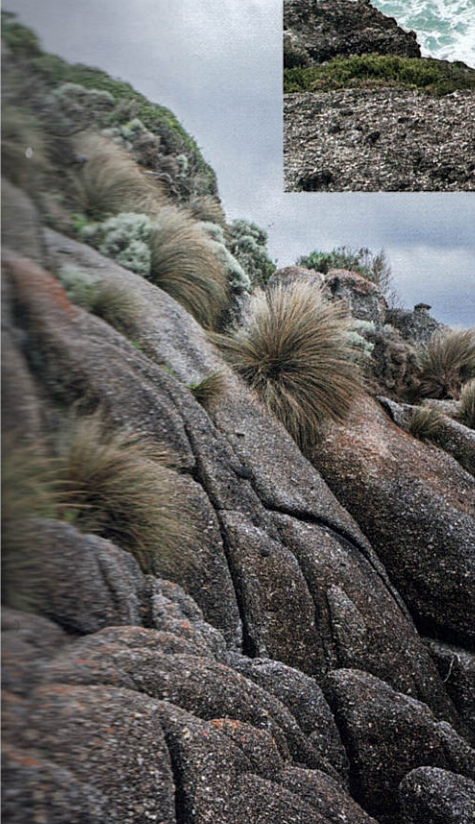
They'd been walking for three days and told us that, despite some rain, they had packed a dry tent each morning. "The ranger at Tidal Creek wasn't happy about letting a pair of old codgers like us out into the park," said the lady with a laugh. "You look pretty fit to me," I said. >



Navigation light, Waterloo Bay.

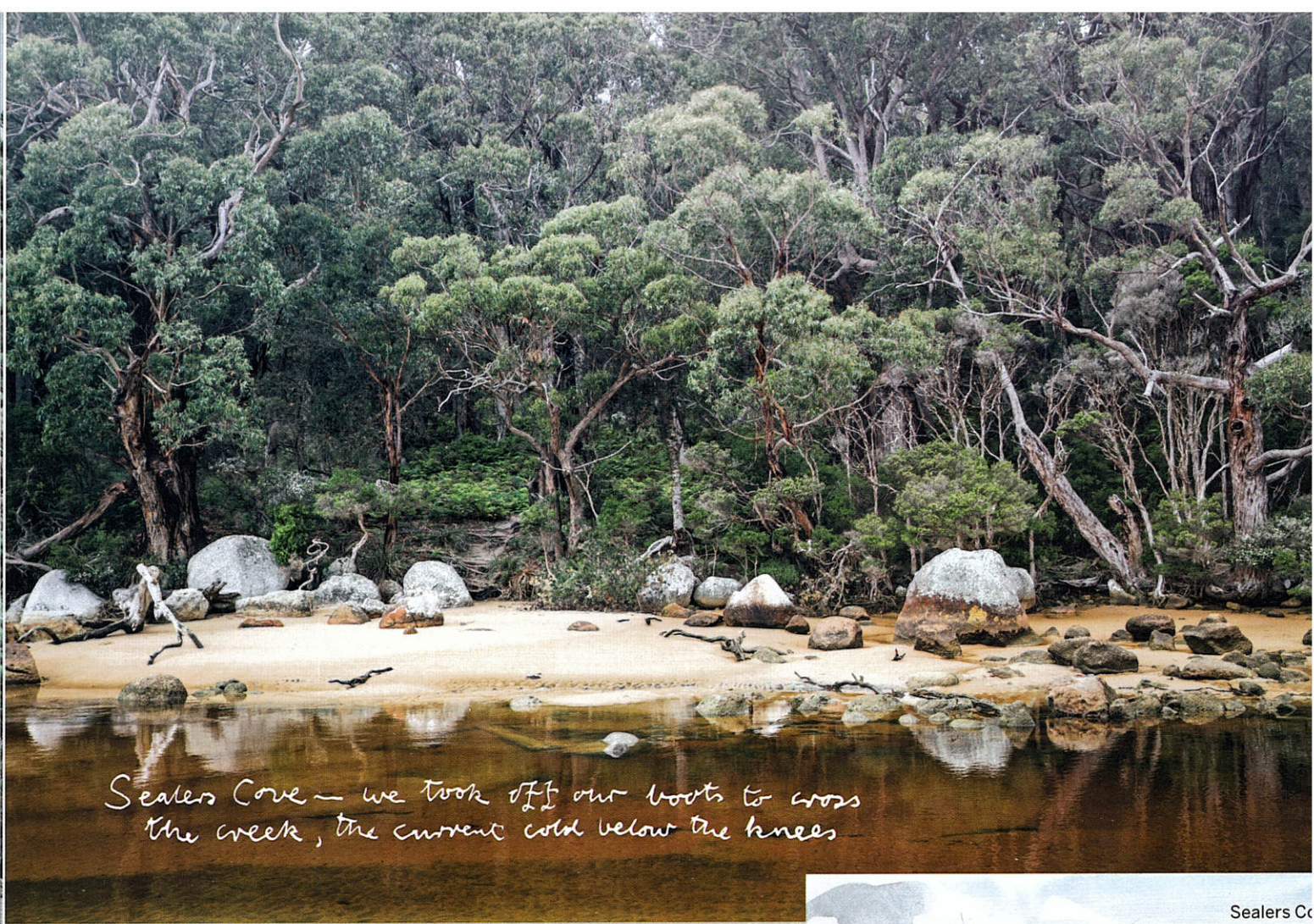


Whisky Bay on the West Coast - exposed to storms.

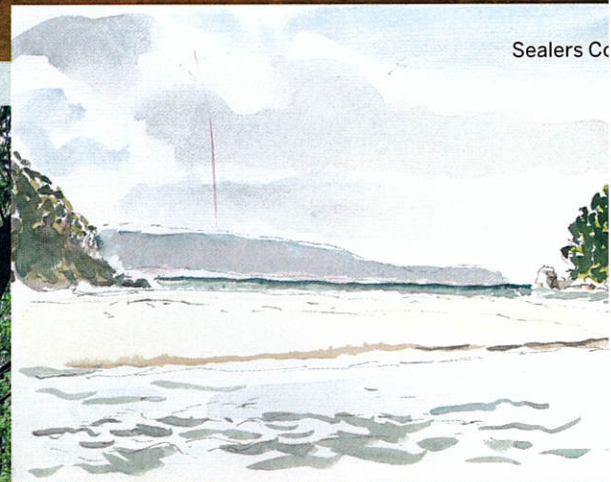


Sealers Cove - whole trees washed into the bay





Sealers Cove — we took off our boots to cross the creek, the current cold below the knees



Sealers Cove



Approaching Sealers Cove — in the 19th century, miles of tram track ran through here, taking logs out to a jetty

< The man, very short, with a long white beard, spoke with a regional English accent, overlaid with a flutiness that came perhaps from a cleft palette. We swapped track notes and, as we talked, the showers came back again.

The man showed me a pair of ochre-patterned Gore-Tex trousers he'd bought on eBay for \$35, ex British Army. He'd cut them into shorts with a pair of scissors and they looked enormous over his wiry legs, like a cartoon by Spike Milligan. For his top half he slipped on a green-patterned jacket, another eBay ex-army purchase. "He's desert below, and jungle on top," said his wife as they walked away.

We descended through a forest of tall stringybarks, each with a bedraggled hula skirt of bark halfway down its trunk. Sometimes a cheeky eastern yellow robin hopped just ahead of us on the track, and jumped up onto tree trunks, hanging sideways, and looking back. In the 19th century, miles of tram track ran through here, taking logs out to the long jetty where ships were waiting. At low tide you can still see its stumps.

We crossed a swamp on well-made boardwalks covered in wire mesh until we came upon the beach unexpectedly: hard-packed yellow sand, very clean, and a perfect crescent. No other human footprints dented its surface, nor crab or animal tracks; just a waving line of shells at the tideline.

If I were asked to place Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* somewhere, I would do so here, in Sealers Cove, on a grey winter afternoon. The place is pretty, but with an air of menace too. Steep forested headlands protect the dark waters of the wineglass-shaped bay and a creek loops across the sand at its southern edge. A few years ago, massive storms washed whole trees out into the cove, where a couple still stick out, like those in a newly-flooded dam. We took off our boots to cross the creek, the tea-coloured current cold below the knees.

It had stopped raining and there remained less than two hours before sunset, so I quickly pulled out my watercolour plates and brushes, knelt among the damp sand and driftwood, and did a few pages before the light disappeared. Dan came back from the locked-up ranger's hut where he'd set up our stove, clutching two cups of black coffee. "You can come walking with me again," I said. I pulled some fruit cake out of my bag and we sat watching a heron at the creek mouth, fishing from the incoming tide.

The campsites behind the beach among tall gums were muddy, and there was no-one else about, so we decided to set up on a small protected beach. It was separated from the rest of the cove by a big rock. We pitched our tents as close as we could to the bushes, but still less than a metre above the last high tide line. The sand was just firm enough to hold my pegs. Dan scrambled to the top of the rock which was shaped like a whale, a feat I could not follow. Up there he found enough mobile phone reception to check the tide times. "The next high is just before dawn," he called down to me. I figured that I would get out of my tent before dawn, as my bladder dictated, and check if we were in danger of inundation.

We hung my bicycle light from a coat hook on the wall of the ranger's hut and ate our reconstituted Thai chicken curry out of foil bags. The throb of a diesel engine came into hearing and we spotted the red and white lights of a boat slowly entering the bay below. I walked down to the water's edge and saw that it was shining a strong spotlight up and down the bush above the beach where we had walked that afternoon. Were they smugglers, looking for a barrel of cocaine perhaps, or fishing?

I switched off my head torch at 8.45pm and soon found myself dreaming: I was lying in a tent, inches deep with sloshing water, like a child's wading pool. I was plucking up wet journals and sketchbooks, shaking them. I woke in a panic, heart thumping. Nonetheless, I lay there dry and cold in my sleeping bag and I could hear the waves, a safe distance away, on the beach. I put on all my warm clothes and went back to sleep.

How do you talk to a stranger when you are thrown together on a walk like this? Well it wasn't hard, and quite often we didn't speak. At other times our subjects ranged widely: the constructed fiction of reality TV, the difference between painting and photography. Our common ground was Zimbabwe: I hadn't been there since the year after Dan's birth, 1983, but he had lived and worked there until recently, through the years of political turmoil and hyperinflation. "At one point" Dan said, "the US dollar bought one octillion Zimbabwe dollars."

He talked, however, with optimism about the ingenuity of people who 'make a plan' in hard times, their resilience, but their resignation also. >



*“A strong WIND came up...
and nearly blew Dan and his
dome tent into the LAGOON”*

< Coming to Australia, Dan had to complete a period of rural labour in a Tasmanian carrot factory where avalanches of carrots would pour down a conveyor belt all day.

We commented to each other on what we were seeing: stopping to locate a bird in a tree, to look at the long scars caused by boulders, big as houses, that fell during the 2011 floods, wombat burrows and snake holes, the plaited trunks of tea trees, rocks shaped like a crouching rabbit or a lemon squeezer. We puzzled over animal tracks — was it a deer, a wallaby, a fox?

Day two broke with more clear sky than cloud and we packed up breakfast watched closely by a picnic-savvy crimson rosella, its red the envy of a 16th-century Pope. As we trudged up the winding path to Refuge Cove, through tall straight trees, I thought about the conundrum: why certain wild landscapes are preserved and others not. I guess that over centuries popular ideas about what we see as beauty in a wild landscape have changed; but long views, unusual rock formations, waterfalls and gorges all remain the stock-in-trade of what a visitor to a nature park expects to find. Steepness helps preserve a place, too — it makes access by road, tilling the soil and grazing of livestock difficult. In the pioneering, commercially voracious atmosphere of 19th-century Victoria however, luck was needed as well, to save a place like Wilsons Promontory.

In 1893, the Australian banking crash stopped a town being built on the low country that connects the Promontory to the mainland, Yanakie Isthmus. A pub and another building were constructed, but the housing plots failed to sell. Around that time too, a Scottish ‘philanthropist’ who called herself Mrs Gordon Baillie, arrived in Melbourne promoting a zany plan to resettle 1000 displaced crofters from the Isle of Skye on Wilsons Promontory. There was a flurry of serious correspondence about her proposal in the Melbourne papers.

It’s telling that at this same time, the displaced Aboriginal people of the Yarra were fighting to keep hold of their land grant at Coranderrk, north of Melbourne. The modest success of their communal farm was undermined by the government, who evicted sixty of its able-bodied residents, deemed ‘half caste’. In 1893, a large section of Coranderrk was resumed. Meanwhile, Mrs Baillie, whose buxom ‘Flaxmanesque’ figure and charming manners had so impressed Melbourne society, sailed back to England and was later revealed as a serial fraudster. I would like to believe that her sympathy for the crofters was genuine.

In the end, the advocacy of eminent naturalists led to Wilsons Promontory being gazetted as a national park in 1905. The coastal strip was excluded until some years later.

A big wombat was grazing at Refuge Cove when we arrived, eating green shoots by the creek, its bum facing the track, nonplussed by our conversation and footsteps. Solid as a 1930s armchair, it didn’t budge. This cove was a whaling base, for about 30 years in the early 1800s, until

the whales were gone. Southern right whales were the species most sought — they gave large quantities of oil and floated when dead.

At the back of the bay is the so-called Sailors Camp, and yachts that moor here usually leave behind a carved or painted sign with their boat’s name and a date, nailed to a rambling wall near the toilets: Red Reef, Harmony, Blue Wind, Ocean Pearl...

After Refuge Cove the track ascends and becomes narrower, more intimate; well beyond the range of day-trekkers. The long strands of leaning xanthorrhoeas (grass trees) brushed our shoulders as we climbed.

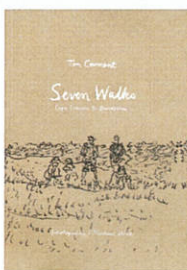
On the last steep forested spur before Little Waterloo Beach we spotted the burnt trunks of enormous old trees, many times the girth of all the tall gums around them. I learnt later that these were probably mountain ash; remnants of the terrible fire of 1951.

A little before dusk on our second day, we arrived at Little Waterloo Bay, and heard teenage girls laughing loudly on the track ahead. The campsites here were pretty full with two school groups, and muddy too, so we carried on another 800 metres to the more exposed Waterloo Bay. Rock and tree root steps descended to the base of a big lagoon and the northern end of a long white beach. There was a wide strip of round grey pebbles at the brown waters’ edge. I stepped down onto it and my boot sloshed calf-deep into wetness. The pebbles were floating pumice. “Thanks for the heads up on that one,” laughed Dan.

We walked up the beach looking for a flat, protected place to pitch our tents. A strong wind came up that evening and nearly blew Dan and his dome tent into the lagoon. My pegs held and I slept through. In the morning the prints of a fox encircled the sand around our camp.

On day three of our walk, silver-grey palings took us over sand, back across the low heath to the other side of the Promontory. There seemed to be more birds; wrens, honeyeaters, and wattlebirds, in this sandy country. Or perhaps it was just that we had started out early. I stopped to listen to them, looking across yellow wildflowers at a copse of acacias. In so doing, I realised the extent to which the sound of our boots on the track had muffled their calls; the wide-ranging pitch of their notes, the beauty of their random timing, and their placement.

By midday, we had reached the west coast, at Oberon Bay — quite different to the coves of the east, less benevolent, and exposed to winter storms. The back of the long lumber beach was strewn with driftwood, dead birds and a still smelly desiccated stingray. There were small treeless islands out to sea. We cooked our last lunch in drizzle, beneath brows of stained granite rising high up to our north. We skirted their base, on the last six kilometre stretch back to Tidal River.

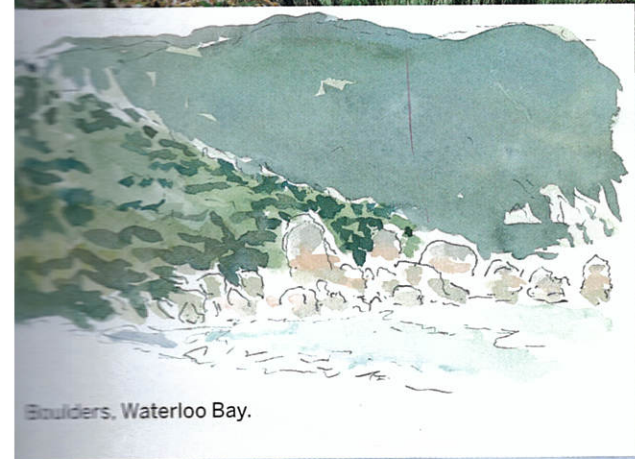


SEVEN WALKS

A collaboration between artist Tom Carment and photographer Michael Wee, *Seven Walks* details their adventures in iconic Australian wilderness landscapes. Order online at sevenwalks.com and enter the code nt2905 to receive a 20 per cent discount. National Trust price \$55.95.



The track to Sealers Cove —
re-made after the landslides of 2011



Boulders, Waterloo Bay.



Squeaky Beach