

For the children ...

Bob Brown

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1 comments



Presented by Bob Brown to an overflowing crowd at the Lindisfarne Citizens' Activities Centre, Hobart on Sunday, 23rd December 2012.

Firstly, I welcome you all on behalf of Bob and his family to this celebration of the life of Helen Gee. I pass on the condolences and enormous admiration for Helen from the National Leader of the Australian Greens, Christine Milne, who is in Seville, Spain.

A family funeral and burial was held two days ago, on Friday 21st December at St Alban's Church, Koonya.

Helen Gee was born in Launceston in 1950. Her father died when she was three. Helen grew up in Westbury (she was known as 'the Westbury tomboy'!) where she loved to roam and explore. Her mother, Diana, took her with brothers Harvey and Nick and sisters Annabel and Ros camping, walking and skiing. This fostered her love of the bush.

A keen skier in her university days, Helen completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Psychology at the University of Tasmania and then took off for a year walking and climbing in New Zealand. Her outdoors career was interspersed with periods working as a nurse and on one of these she precipitated a national strike: the mental health hospital in which she was working as an untrained nurse aid was so understaffed that she was left alone one night to administer the whole place including giving drugs. When Helen had to call a doctor in, he couldn't believe that there was no registered nurse and sent her home saying 'don't come to work tomorrow as we will all be on strike!'.

Back in Tasmania in the early 1970s, Helen helped the campaign to save Lake Pedder (and since the 1990s she has been a leader in the ongoing advocacy for the lake's restoration through the group 'Pedder 2000').

Helen took off again for a year's teaching in Darwin and then travelled to Europe and worked on a farm in Wales, studied ceramics in England and rode a bicycle around Ireland.

Back in Tasmania once more, Helen joined the South-West Action Committee which was campaigning against the triple threats to wilderness of mining, logging and hydro developments. She worked with the nascent world's first Greens Party, the United Tasmania Group, and in 1976 she helped set up the Tasmanian Wilderness Society.

Helen saw that her skills were best employed as an educator in a world in which an informed public is essential to democratic decision making.

Together with Janet Fenton, Greg Hodge and Chris Cowles, she set about compiling the South West Book.

After three years, this mammoth compilation of facts about one of the world's great remaining wild areas was published in 1978. Let me quote from the South West Book's preface:

"The future of the South-West will depend upon the outcome of a conflict that very few people have resolved, even within themselves - a conflict between the drive towards an even higher level of material consumption and the feeling that beautiful natural areas should be protected and cherished."

Earlier in 1978, and five years before the blockade and High Court decision that saved the rivers, Helen produced for the Wilderness Society the first book on the Franklin River. In this forward she wrote that:

"The Franklin is a wild and wondrous river, inherently part of the South-West Tasmanian wilderness. It remains much as it was before man came to its precincts. In the next 25 years we may see it utterly destroyed.

This booklet has been prepared by the Society in the belief that Tasmanians do really care, but that they lack the information that will add meaning and direction to their concern. It is our moral duty to fight for the protection of these rivers - to alter outmoded legislation, to stress the rights of wilderness for its own sake. The alternative is our own destruction via the economic growth spiral."

In 1973 Helen met Bob Graham who was to become her life's partner. Bob tells me that their first outing in Tasmania was a walk down the Jane River track - for those who can't locate it, it leaves the Lyell Highway near the Franklin River bridge - and across the Prince of Wales Range and the Spires to Maydena where they emerged a week later! It was to be the first of many trips Helen and Bob took travelling - walking, canoeing or rafting - in the most remote areas of western and central Tasmania.

Then Bob and Helen bought 'Stonehurst', a 5,000 acre grazing property near Buckland in south-east Tasmania. Helen contributed greatly to the farm work. She especially enjoyed the horseback stock work. The two were married in 1979. Daughter Alice was born in 1980 and son Tom was born in 1982.

If you read the letter which Helen wrote to her mother-in-law Flo the day after Alice was born, you will see that on the day before the birth Helen had been busy holding calves down for marking, milking the cow, etc.!

Interspersed with relief teaching at local schools, Helen worked as an Australian Conservation Foundation Councillor, a Wilderness Society campaigner and, later, a conservation representative on the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Consultative Committee.

In 1980 Helen and Bob compiled the 'West Wind and other verses for the Tasmanian Bush'. They wrote that:

"This little book of verse has been compiled in the belief that there are many who would enjoy, as we do, to read a few lines on a warm rock or beside a glowing fire at day's end. There is always room for such a book in the wanderer's rucksack."

Helen loved the children having their formative years on the farm, and she remained active in environmental issues. Together with Bob she played a main role in saving the forests of the Douglas-Apsley from logging with, in 1989, their protection in the 16,000 hectare Douglas-Apsley National Park.

The more recent and still unfolding protection of the Wielangta Forest has come out of the efforts of Helen, Bob

and a small band of other locals galvanizing statewide, national and international support.

Helen had worked as an Aboriginal site recorder and she visited Cape Barren Island with ABSCOL, an Aboriginal community organization. Out of that visit came her book - and she felt privileged to write it - on the life and times of Ronni Summers, the Tasmanian Aboriginal elder and musician who grew up on the island.

At 'Stonehurst', whenever Bob lost a small object on the large farm, it was most likely Helen who found it. Together they found bigger things. One summer's day Paul and I were treated to a picnic way up in the back blocks of 'Stonehurst' - I well remember that possum in aspic was on the menu - and I told them that, despite satellite positioning equipment, people had been unable to discover the location of the French garden of D'Entrecasteaux's expedition which sheltered in Recherché Bay in far south Tasmania in 1792. Over the following few weeks, Bob studied the maps of this incredibly scenic and historically significant place and formed his own search plan based not on satellite trackers but plain old bush nous. And, indeed, they found it. It was Helen who found the first rock in the 9m by 7m rock surround of the garden, the oldest European artefact in Tasmania. Their find proved to be a breakthrough moment in the campaign for the site, threatened by logging, which was finally protected in 2006.

Bob and Helen travelled to many remote parts of Australia but more importantly contributed as volunteers to managing and caretaking on Deal Island and Three Hummock Island, both in Bass Strait, and at the Eyre Bird Observatory in Western Australia. It was this spirit of cherishing and protecting the natural environment of Tasmania and Australia as a whole that motivated Helen to contribute a major part of her life to the cause.

Her cause was not without cost: for example, in 2006 Tasmania's biggest logging company, Gunns, sued Helen and 19 others for \$7 million in a suit which ultimately failed and rebounded on the company.

Through all these events were family concerns. Helen was very close to her sisters and the loss of her younger sister Ros in 1997, leaving two sons without their mother, was particularly hard. Helen put a lot of effort into the wellbeing of her mother, Diana, comforting her up to her death, at the age of 93, in May this year. This sad event was followed by instant joy for, just a day later, Alice gave birth to Evelyn Diana. So Helen and Bob had a granddaughter and she is here with us today.

Helen had to have brain tumors removed on three occasions. Amongst all this, walking in the wild country she loved, she broke a leg and an arm. The associated surgery and incapacity were faced with her trademark courage and optimism. Indeed, it was these qualities, her positive attitude, that was her recipe for coping in tough times.

Helen was very musical and creative. She loved to sketch and paint. She enjoyed singing, playing the guitar, the piano and the mouth organ, particularly with family and friends. She joined with gusto in other local activities including the spinning group, the book club, the art group, music appreciation, chanting and song circle and, of course, the Thursday walking group.

Thinking globally and acting locally, Helen worked for the feisty Tasmanian National Parks Association and was involved in the local Landcare project, co-ordinating the removal of willows in the Prosser River catchment.

Perhaps the greatest memorial for Helen Gee is in the

intact places for the protection of which she played a major role including the now vast Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, Recherche Bay, the Douglas-Apsley and Wielangta. One day too she will be remembered for her bold, holding action for the restoration of Lake Pedder.

Helen's children continue her philosophy: Alice in her work with the Wilderness Society and Tom with his adventure guiding, both helping inspire the next generations to love natural places.

And through Helen's inspiring story is woven the love and companionship of Bob, her soulmate for the last four decades. Theirs, together, has been a truly wonderful contribution to Tasmanian rural life, Tasmanian literature and song and, above all, to the protection of Tasmania's wild and scenic heritage. Bob, we grieve with you and your family at your loss of Helen and thank you for all you have, together, given us. She, with you, has given our world so much to celebrate.

This year, 2012, along with Peg Putt, and with Cassy O'Connor as Minister (they are also both with us here today), Helen Gee was placed on the Honour Role of outstanding Tasmanian women. It was a fitting and wonderful way for Helen to be recognized in her own lifetime.

In 2001, The Wilderness Society published Helen's next encyclopedic work, this time on the struggle to protect Tasmania's ancient forests. It had taken another three years' work and was the compilation of interviews with a great range of activists for the forests. Helen wanted them to tell their stories as an inspiration to the next generation. I quote from her introduction:

"In this book over 100 remarkable Tasmanians, many internationally renowned, bear witness to the tragedy of

industrial forestry. It has been my pleasure to work alongside these selfless people for over three decades....

The long tradition of political protest in Tasmania has been vindicated by the great international reverence afforded this birthplace of the Global Greens. Only by claiming the past and learning from it can a new generation muster the determination to explore fresh avenues for the healing of the land and its people.... Hope lies with the rage of the rising generation, who will insist that we live on ecological terms rather than with the still dominant economic paradigm.”

Helen went on to write:

“This book has been produced for the forests, in the public interest. It was conceived out of a gut-wrenching shame and horror at what arrogant Europeans have done to this ancient Island in a mere 200 years. It will, in some places, no doubt offend some but the stories must be set down. It is a record of our past to inform the future, and it is dedicated to brave activists everywhere.”

Helen’s book is in the remote library of one of those brave activists as we gather here: Miranda Gibson has it with her in her forest-protecting perch 60 metres high up that giant eucalypt on the ridge below Mt Mueller in central Tasmania.

If, as we now hope, Tasmania’s most spectacular forests, the tallest flowering forests on Earth, win the World Heritage status they deserve in 2013, it will be with the spirit of Helen Gee and will bear her wholehearted stamp of approval.

In 2004, Helen’s next great eclectic book, ‘A River of Verse’, was published. This book was more for the fun of selecting from 200 years of Tasmanian poetry. It was

dedicated to the children of the coming century including those she named up front: Liam, Claudia, Elliott, Ella, Chloe and Rex. No doubt to that she would now add Evelyn.

‘A River of Verse’ includes her own poem spanning these two centuries and highlighting her optimism overriding Tasmania’s terrible early modern history.

The generous philosophy of Ronni Summers is written into it:

*“200 years on
we fathom the sorrow,
reaching out
building bridges,
all of us bearing
or sharing the old pain of*

*Tasmanian history
written in blood
and the child was never told -
greed was never explained but I*

*Reach out
beyond the guilt
of perpetration,
welcomed now
to this land we walk,
walking it together with*

*Song and spirit
bravely
preparing the new world
for the children.”*

In the forward to ‘A River of Verse’, the late Margaret Scott wrote:

“Helen Gee has done her state a good service by bringing ‘River’ together. She has, for one thing, given us an amplified vision of the past, and in bringing forward among the established names a crop of up-and-coming poets, she has left us with high hopes for the future.”

Helen has indeed left us with high hopes for the future. In an earlier poem, confronting the short-sighted loss of Tasmania’s wild places - and could this not be applied to today’s threatened Tarkine? - Helen wrote of changing the old mindset. Her words are addressed to those who cannot see this island’s superb, pristine natural loveliness for its own intrinsic value:

*“When I take a silent walk along a lonely beach
Far across the buttongrass lies a mountain within reach
Someday I’ll take you to its height and let you see...
Now I’m the one who’s travelling on....”*

And so, Helen, you are now travelling on.....

You leave us sad but happy, wanting more but truly grateful for the life you shared with us.

All who love Tasmania’s wild and scenic splendour, its songs and spirit, will forever be in your debt.

Thank you Helen Gee. Farewell!

(My thanks to Bob Graham for providing the template of information for this eulogy.)

Bob Brown

23.12.2012

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Comments (1)

1. It would be a great thing if Helen’s name and the story of her life could be perpetuated in some way.

The way in which she lived and what she was able to do would be a real inspiration to those who will follow in the struggle to protect this special place.

I'm thinking that perhaps a feature of the Tasmanian landscape could be named for her and would be wonderful to put together the story of her life in a form that will last - a book perhaps.

Posted by jill mcculloch on 12/01/13 at 03:16 PM

- See more at:

<http://tasmaniantimes.com/index.php/article/for-the-children-#sthash.3SEijEAm.dpuf>