



BATTLE FOR THE FRANKLIN by Roger Green (Introduction)

Roger Green is a writer and conservationist. He presented the Australian Conservation Foundation's case for preserving South West Tasmania to politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra in 1982 and 1983. After the Liberal-National Government of Malcolm Fraser decided not to save the Franklin River, Roger worked on the conservation movement's plans for electing a new Federal Government in 1983.

Roger's involvement in wilderness conservation began with the Colo Committee in Sydney in the mid-1970s. Later he convened the Pittwater Branch of the Tasmanian Wilderness Society. Roger has worked as a freelance journalist for many newspapers and has also written for radio and television. He is currently writing about politics in Canberra.

Geoffrey Lea is a photographer who lives in Hobart. In 1976 he was drawn to Tasmania by accounts of Olegas Truchanas' journeys on the western rivers. He Liloed down the Gordon River and travelled much of the South West. In 1979 he returned to Tasmania and worked briefly for the Hydro-Electric Commission on investigations at the Gordon-below-Franklin dam site. Soon after, he joined the Tasmanian Wilderness Society and began working full time to protect the area.

Dedication

To the thousands of people around the world who have
kept the Franklin River flowing free.

BATTLE FOR THE FRANKLIN

**Conversations with the combatants
in the struggle for South West Tasmania**

Interviews by Roger Green

Photographs by Geoffrey Lea

Fontana/Australian Conservation Foundation



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Map page 7 by Anna Warren

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[Cover photograph: Sir John Falls, near Gordon-below-Franklin dam site (Geoffrey Lea).]

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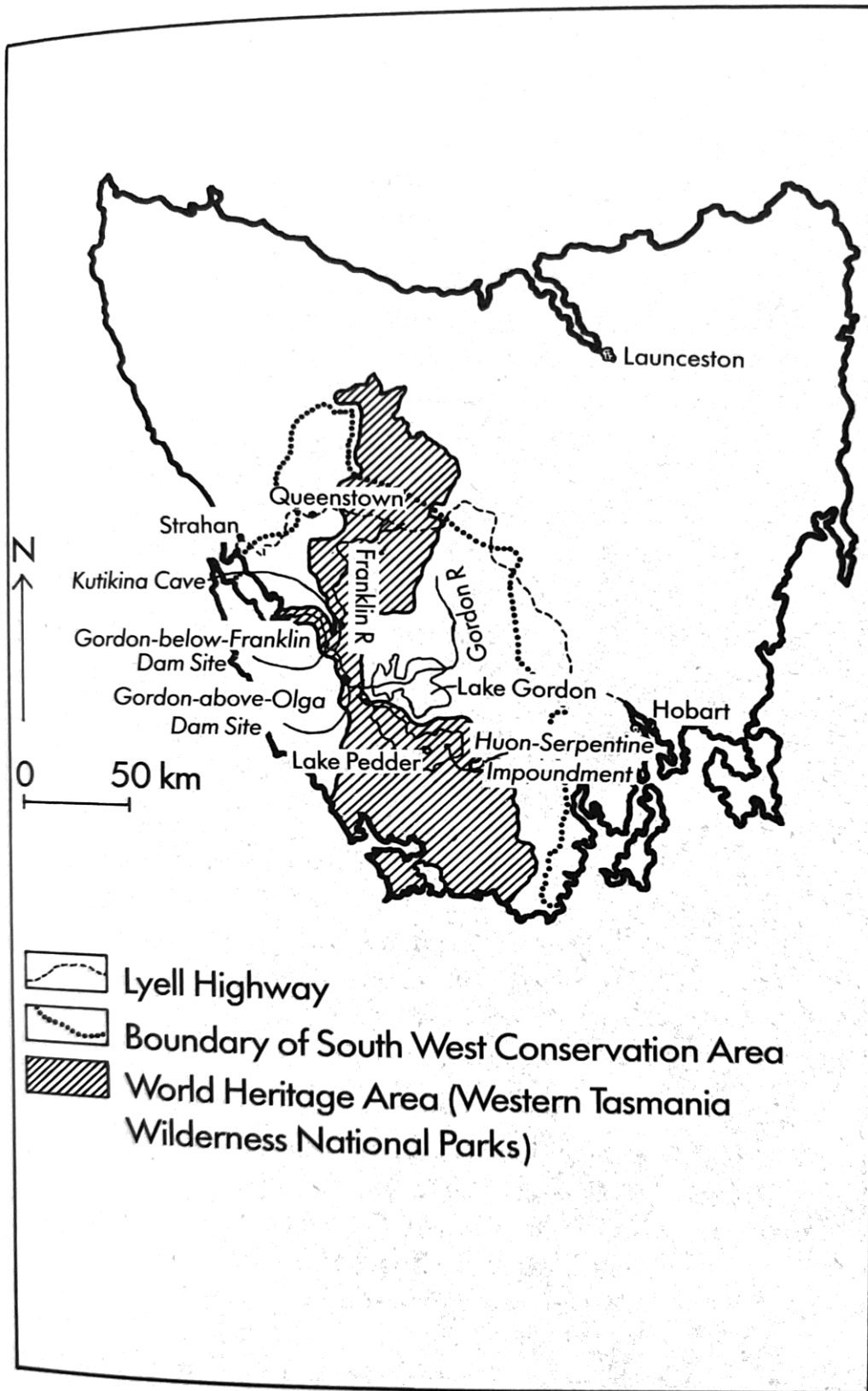
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Introduction

At the beginning of 1972 the Serpentine River snaked across a highland valley in South West Tasmania and flowed into a placid lake lying between ranges of jagged mountains. The lake was Lake Pedder. A breeze blowing across its surface would stir a sea of diamonds, or as clouds covered the sun the sharp reflections of mountains would disappear into the lake's dark waters.

Paddling children run from the water up the wide white moon of sand. The rapidly-changing atmosphere brings cries from families and the clicking of cameras from photographers like Olegas Truchanas trying to record the swirling mists on the lake.

That was the last summer of Lake Pedder. No photograph could capture the beauty or the magic of that singular place, the excitement of those whose eyes beheld the scene, who whiffed the reaction between the weather and the lake, who heard the wind play the bent trees on the sandhills and the rain patter on the water. Lake Pedder disappeared under steadily rising water in the middle of 1972. A dam down the Serpentine River impounded water that rose to cover the river's banks, the swamps on either side, the lake, the beach and the dunes. A layer of the water at the top of the impoundment would later make hydro-electricity.

In 1972 Australia was changing. The people elected a reforming Labor Government whose first act was to pull troops out of the Vietnam War. There was hope for a prouder, independent Australia that cared for its people, its culture and its landscape.

In Tasmania little had changed. Doubts about the way things were done met a concrete-solid Establishment: for more than forty years the State's Hydro-Electric Commission had directed Tasmanian development. The colony built on mining, logging and agriculture in the nineteenth century discovered, in the twentieth, that cheap electricity generated from fallen water could attract the industries that smelted the ores and pulped the wood. From the 1920s that single idea, propagated by the Hydro-Electric Commission, mesmerized the governors of Tasmania. In the 1960s its pursuit stirred environmental protest, but that opposition could not save Lake Pedder. Ten years after Pedder, in 1982, with the largest conservation battle in Australian history reaching its peak and with power demand below predicted levels, the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission began work on another dam on the lower Gordon River, a dam that would flood the Franklin.

The Gordon, the mightiest river in Tasmania, was dammed once in association with the flooding of Lake Pedder. Downstream the river surged through slots in mountain ranges before winding a course between steep banks covered with rainforest. From the north entered the Franklin, the last major river in Tasmania surrounded by wild country and flowing free from its source to the sea. The Franklin and lower Gordon Rivers were at the heart of the Wild Rivers National Park, later inscribed on the World Heritage List. Below the junction of these rivers the Hydro-Electric Commission picked a site for the Gordon-below-Franklin dam, the last great dam site in Tasmania.

Late in 1982 conservationists from Tasmania and the mainland began arriving in the fishing village of Strahan on the windswept West Coast of the island. From Strahan a four-hour boat trip took protestors across Macquarie Harbour and up the Gordon River to their camp near the dam site. In mid-December conservationists started a blockade of dam work. The conservative government of Malcolm Fraser in Canberra, which had earlier said it would not intervene in the dam dispute, in January approved an offer of \$500 million to Tasmania to leave the Gordon River and build a power station elsewhere.

The offer from Canberra was closely followed by a Federal election campaign and while the blockade continued the Tasmanian dam was a major election issue. Bob Hawke, leading the Labor Party, promised to stop the dam, using legislation if necessary. The Labor Party won the election and attempted to negotiate a settlement with Tasmania. However the Tasmanian Premier, Robin Gray, continued to refuse Federal offers so the Federal Government passed legislation which was subsequently tested in the High Court. On 1 July 1983 the Chief Justice announced that work on the dam must stop. After five years' campaigning for the Franklin and more than fifteen years' battling hydro-electric development in the wilderness of South West Tasmania this was the Australian



conservation movement's greatest victory.

Still, in Tasmania little had changed. Within weeks of the decision stopping work on the Gordon-below-Franklin dam, the Tasmanian Parliament approved the construction of seven more dams in the highlands and river gorges of South West Tasmania.

What makes the Hydro-Electric Commission want to keep doing it?

Building dams can be fun. Then, after a few times, it becomes a habit.

In Tasmania it must have been a terrific challenge to trek the wilderness in search of the perfect dam site. Once the place was found trails would be blazed, an access route built across rugged country and then a dam would be designed and built by the highly-skilled and ambitious young engineer keen to leave a mark on the world. Such activity would be even more satisfying for one convinced of the necessity of the project, convinced of the economic and moral good of the work being done. The joys of engineering could capture many a young graduate.

Some are hooked for life. In 1947 Russell Ashton graduated in civil engineering from the University of Sydney and began working with the Hydro-Electric Commission of Tasmania. The next year he was on the banks of the Franklin River in the wild South West, investigating its hydro-electric potential. Since 1977 Russell Ashton has been the Commissioner of the Hydro-Electric Commission. For more than 35 years he has been planning to build a dam on the Franklin River: no wonder he has been so keen to finish the job. He is still keen. For many in the Hydro-Electric Commission the 1983 High Court decision stopping the dam is just a temporary setback. When the government changes in Canberra they believe work will resume on their Gordon-below-Franklin project. What is three or six years after thirty-five?

Why didn't the 1983 decision shatter the HEC world view and bring their world tumbling after? The Hydro-Electric Commission, like many other large institutions, has developed the resilience and survival instincts of a living organism. It has a life and destiny quite independent of the government that is nominally running Tasmania. This corporality, more than anything, sustains the Commission's enthusiasm for projects where the economics are unsound, the energy is unnecessary and the environmental effects are disastrous.

The HEC is more resilient than other institutions. No other authority operating 'under' a popularly-elected government could have survived so much public criticism, so many charges of impropriety and so many embarrassments without major structural changes. The Hydro-Electric Commission has been secretive, party-political during election campaigns, hostile to public review and unresponsive to changing needs. It has refused to carry out government policy, indeed lobbied for the removal of its Minister and the State Premier; but still it survives unchanged. There have not even been significant shifts of personnel.

The Hydro-Electric Commission sees itself above politics, it has a mission. The only reason that the Commission has survived so long is because a belief in the destiny of dams has infected more than the employees and their relatives; many Tasmanian people have succumbed to the condition, variously known as Hydro-philia or Dam-mania. How could Australia's natural or archaeological heritage be allowed to subvert such a reality?

The HEC is a dinosaur in its death throes, ransacking its own tiny island, cutting off its own life-support system. The Tasmanian dam builder is now an endangered species: its habitat is being destroyed as the State's dammable rivers and streams are progressively choked with rocks and concrete. With many of the surviving wild rivers now in reserves under Federal protection the species must migrate, mutate or face extinction.

Why do conservationists oppose the Hydro-Electric Commission's dam building? Why fight for years against the powerful forces of the State to save a trackless wilderness?

A love of beauty. Rows of glacier-gouged mountains fade into a misty distance. Water drips onto a quivering fern frond. An azure kingfisher flits along riverbank lighting on the fine, scaly branch of a huon pine. Nearby rapids crash on worn rocks.



The wild mountains, rivers and forests of the wilderness excite our senses so that even paintings and photographs of the landscape can stimulate our imagination wherever we happen to view them. The sheer physical beauty of wilderness unaffected by roads, buildings, agriculture or introduced species inspires those who work for its preservation.

But the beauty is more than skin deep. The experience and understanding of a natural area begins a relationship that adds more pleasure and intellectual satisfaction to that derived from the raw visual beauty.

A trip through the South West of Tasmania is an adventure where the challenges presented by rocks, water and the profusion of plants are, usually, surmounted and remembered for life. Nature is coloured by contrasting experiences: rough and smooth, wet and dry, sharp and blunt, enclosed and panoramic.

Wilderness travel is usually physically difficult, not only because the visitor has to be self-sufficient but also because it is only the least hospitable country that survives as wilderness — land that has failed to attract economic interest because it is too dry, too steep, too cold, barren or remote. Crossing such terrain can produce the same euphoria as performing before a large audience or winning a conservation battle.

Another kind of joy comes from knowledge of nature. Wilderness offers the chance to study complete ecosystems that have been minimally affected by humans. There is beauty in the detailed picture of an ecological niche, the food webs of a forest, patterns of growth and decay and the cycles of inorganic compounds and elements. Scientific understanding produces simple images of the fundamental particles and pathways that constitute the complexity and variety of a natural world. These theories have their own shape and beauty. The explanation of the nature of wilderness can please as much as the naive experience itself.

The wilderness also presents an object, outside of human direction, that may be interpreted in different ways. As in a great work of art observers can find many meanings in wild life — the different views of the scientist, artist, bushwalker and Aborigine and also different feelings about the meaning of life on earth. Whether it be melancholy, sublime or ridiculous there is no limit to the exegesis of nature. Limits come when the landscape is modified by human engineering. There are not many different responses you can have to a 100-metre-high dam wall; just awe, brute, head-cracking awe.

In nature we may find beauty in the most blasted heath, sheer cliff or desert. And just as in art, scarcity and the death of the Artist increase the objects' value so does the value of wilderness increase. No new Picassos or new wildernesses will be created.

There is more to natural beauty than its physical qualities and their interpretation. As with paintings the object itself has qualities that cannot be reproduced. A forgery perfect in every detail is not as valuable as the original. So a room equipped with machines that could recreate the sights and sounds, even smells, of a wilderness would be no substitute for the original. The experience would lack physical substance and does not have a history. It would be like sex without the flesh, without the other's personality and without the history of the relationship, however short. And while that is common it is a symptom of our video-alienation from life.

The sensual experience of wilderness is not essential for it to provide pleasure or inspire advocacy. The simple knowledge that a wilderness exists can provide enjoyment. An audio-visual presentation of the lost Lake Pedder, though extremely beautiful is also profoundly sad, tinged as it is with the knowledge that that wonderful place no longer exists. Knowledge of the existence of beauty, in nature, art and people, is a source of happiness whose loss compares to lost love.

The beauty of a wilderness exists today because of its history, natural and social. What we see now is a product of that history, and can teach us about it. In South West Tasmania can be found the story of the splitting of the ancient continent of Gondwanaland, the geological forces that shaped Tasmania and the glaciers that carved its mountains and valleys. Then those reaches were colonized by plants similar to those in the formerly-connected parts of New Zealand and South America and animals from what is now mainland Australia. Humans lived in caves by the rivers during the last Ice Age, about



20,000 years ago.

The preservation of South West Tasmania by our society adds another chapter to that history, showing a quality of Australian society in the late twentieth century. The scarcity of wilderness and the human domination of nature on this planet mean that Tasmania's wilderness survives only by our leave. In a way the existence of that wilderness beyond 1983 is one of our cultural artifacts.

Retaining wilderness is like collectively creating a work of art, a museum of nature full of the treasures of beauty and knowledge. The museum is not a heavy stone building filled with dusty boxes and glass cases but a light and open resort of the Muses, a place for the poetry and drama of nature. We value such a place, like Michelangelo's David, whether or not we see and touch it.

Through our understanding of and feelings for the complex beauty of wilderness we can develop a love of nature. An initial acquaintance with photographs may stir the curiosity enough for a strong attraction to begin. As in human relationships, perceived beauty can lead to love.

I grew up on the edge of a suburb surrounded by bush. My childhood playground nurtured an abiding fondness for Sydney's sandstone country. While the accident of my birthplace may make my particular affection seem arbitrary, my love for the scrawny trees and kookaburras over the back fence is easily generalized to Australia's surviving natural lands. And anyway all love is arbitrary.

Once a loving relationship begins there are no limits to the qualities that relationship may develop. The rapture of the soul in the presence of the other, the vicarious experience of the loved one's state, the care and concern for the other's well-being are all typical of the wilderness-lover.

This state need not be peculiar to rafters and bushwalkers. Anyone can appreciate the beauty of the wilderness, anyone can feel concern for life that is dependent on human actions as we are dependent on it. In any good relationship a sense of responsibility follows the satisfaction of the desire to experience beauty. Our emotions and moral sense dictate proper forms of conduct in dealing with nature as well as other people. Love is more than the pleasure of beautiful company, it involves more than the use of the loved object to serve the lover's interests. Even though the caring that is born of love may benefit both parties one does not care for that reason, conscious of the profit.

Our relationship with nature depends on the same qualities as our relationships with people — perception, affection, trust. When we love an untrammelled piece of wilderness we want it to live, for its own sake.

Tragedy may occur when the beauty of a forest or of a person is not noticed until too late. Without keen observers the value of a natural area will be overlooked and fail to become a social issue. There are many people who still do not see the beauty of wilderness and such blindness in our society threatens valuable natural places as much as callousness.

Though I emphasize the beauty of nature and natural processes I do not want to suggest that nature is just a decorative adjunct to human existence. We should not anticipate a change of taste that will lead to the destruction of wilderness. It has a use-value of other sorts. Like art it offers the chance for understanding of the world and of oneself: adventure and comradeship in the wild are amongst the best means of self-discovery.

Wilderness is materially important to our life in the city. Natural areas are the sources of valuable chemicals and genetic materials for use in medicine and industry, they offer reference areas for the study of urban and industrial pollution. And when we want to get away from that we can visit wilderness areas, supporting commerce in nearby towns. But the direct and indirect commercial uses of wilderness do not explain why conservationists fight for it. The love of its beauty does.

A few conservationists may espouse pantheistic or other religious beliefs; and the campaign for the Franklin may have seemed like a crusade complete with a spiritual leader, Bob Brown the Lionheart, but it was really just a band of secular people who wanted to protect the wilderness they love. Most would also care about the poor and weak in our society and have a keen sense of social and natural justice.

However, I do not believe that the plants and animals in wilderness areas have rights. Even the



concept of human rights is hopelessly idealistic. My experience as an active conservationist has taught me the need to be a ruthless pragmatist. Only people with power have rights.

The South West Tasmanian struggle does show the power of ideas. The popular feeling that the wilderness should be saved prevailed, at least temporarily, over all the forces that could be mustered by the alliance of capital and state in Tasmania. These forces included all major industrialists, the Government and Opposition parties, the media and some unions. In spite of this confederacy a dam in the heart of the wilderness was stopped. Why was the Gordon-below-Franklin campaign successful?

Because thousands of people were convinced enough of the value of the World Heritage area in Tasmania to commit themselves to the fight. And because they managed to convince enough other people to make the political momentum of the campaign unstoppable.

Many were already motivated by memories of the Lake Pedder tragedy. Others who had been to the South West joined in. From that point the pleasure of fighting for good alongside one's peers, being part of a family as some have described it, spurred conservationists to greater efforts. Those efforts were directed so that the maximum publicity for the wilderness could be generated. Australia had to 'see' what was at stake. Even though this advertising has affected the wild quality of the Franklin, being rafted is better than being dammed.

The gradual escalation of the campaign from Tasmania to the national stage was assisted by the placing of ineffective obstacles in the conservationists' path by those who wanted to build the dam. Perhaps we owe thanks to our opponents: to the Tasmanian Legislative Council for its refusal to accept the 'compromise' Gordon-above-Olga scheme, to the Tasmanian Labor Government for its outrageous 1981 referendum that did not offer a 'No Dams' option, to Malcolm Fraser for procrastinating just long enough to successfully raise the South West in the national consciousness and then offering Tasmania \$500 million to prove the dam was a national issue after we'd been told it wasn't, to the Tasmanian Liberal Government for introducing just enough draconian measures to guarantee massive publicity for the Gordon River blockade but not enough to make any of the arrests stick and even to the Hydro- Electric Commission for refusing to appear modern and reasonable. Of course it would be better if all these people took a more benevolent approach to the wilderness.

The fact that they do not, perhaps indicates how few of the old beliefs have been changed. By exploiting traditional ideas and traditional paths of political procedure the movement to preserve the wilderness of South West Tasmania has accepted the legitimacy of those ideas and methods. There may have been some shift of ideas towards a greater appreciation of the value of wilderness but the political structures that produce dam-building proposals have not changed. In Tasmania the same old system goes on. There will be more dams, more power stations, nothing fundamental has changed. The same battles will be fought over and over again with the conservation victory being the exception. What can we do to change Tasmania?

At least, as Bob Brown says, the saving of the Franklin offers us hope. It shows that many people working together can achieve something.

This book is a first rough draft of history; it gathers together the accounts of those fresh from the clamour of battle for the South West Tasmanian wilderness, those who lived, if only in a limited sense of the term, to tell the tale, recorded by one of their number. Conservationists as well as politicians from both sides, and dam workers, tell their stories in their own words. The stories give an idea of the challenges, the risk of devoting oneself to a cause that, at the outset, seems to have little support, the tactics employed by both sides and the perceptions of those at the front.

These yarns throw up material that can be expanded, contradicted or criticized by those who follow. They contain clues to the values and ideals of the characters speaking and also hint more generally at the way the world works. The definitive history of the conservation struggle over the rugged and beautiful South West, a struggle that still goes on, will take years to write. This is just part of the story — the loss of Lake Pedder and the saving of the Franklin River — told by a few of the many thousands involved. There are other people with great tales to tell, other places that have been fought for and lost and others that may yet require protection. Much valuable wilderness remains outside the boundaries



of the World Heritage area and is threatened by logging, mining and damming.

In the course of collecting the stories that make up this book I have noticed how people's manner changes as they move from being the struggling underdogs to winners. The nature of conversation changes from why something should be done to how we did it and how we'll do it again. Those who thought they had the power, change from being abrupt and dismissive and begin to justify their position and appeal for compassion. Such is the prerogative of the weak.

Many people working together have made the production of this book possible. I would like to thank all of them: those who told me their stories and the hundreds of others who could have, those who put me up and put up with me — Barbara Lane, Jill Hickie and Leonie Steindl in Hobart, Ross Scott and the Hooley family in Melbourne; my friends at the Environment Centre in Canberra and the Wilderness Society around Australia for their help and for the use of their facilities, Penny Figgis and Joan Staples at ACF in Canberra for their ideas and moral support during difficult times, Lincoln Siliakus for suggesting that I write a book, Monica McDonald from the Australian National University for getting my brain working after 12 months in ideological mothballs, Virginia Williamson for helping with transcribing, Geoff Lea for his photographs and his thoughts, others who offered photos, my parents for everything, and Haydn Washington, Milo Dunphy and Bill Dixon for getting me into the South West campaign in the first place.

Roger Green, Canberra, October 1983
