



Plate 31. - The Henty Surface and the West Coast Range from Eden.

Landscape and Man

THE FUTURE OF CENTRAL WESTERN TASMANIA

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ABSTRACT

Central western Tasmania is a highly distinctive region with a highly problematic future. Its resource-based economy like that of the state has resulted in widespread despoilation of public lands that have yet to undergo a trend away from exploitation toward conservation. Mining is remarkably stable, despite current difficulty, and will persist as the main economic base. Future mineral development will depend on the nature and extent of exploration as well as on economic and political considerations. Although the west coast has substantial forest resources and long-term market prospects, the distribution of the forests and adverse terrain together with emerging community values may restrict future exploitation. Tourism cannot be regarded as a panacea but scope exists both for its modest expansion and for innovations to cater for more discriminating travellers. A contentious issue is hydro-electric power development, which will probably spearhead the growing conflict over resource use. More research is needed to determine the extent and nature of water pollution attributable to mining and of man's impact on the vegetation. A conservation program for the region is considered essential and urgent but should not be imposed from outside or developed ahead of community support.

INTRODUCTION

On several occasions in recent years I have been asked to comment on Tasmania's future, and on each occasion the future has seemed to me to be less promising than previously. Today my task is to sum up the symposium by commenting on the future of central western Tasmania, and on this occasion my optimism has reached literally rock bottom. But unlike some of my biological colleagues I am not wholly given to pessimism and to prognostications of pending doom. Rather is it that if Tasmania's future is uncertain, then that of the west coast is highly problematic.

A review of the papers presented at this symposium suggests only four facets of the future on the west coast about which I can be reasonably certain. First, notwithstanding any evidence this week-end to the contrary, the foreseeable future will undoubtedly be superhumid. Secondly, as the evidence of the papers confirms, geologists and geomorphologists will continue to argue inter alia about the nature and extent of glaciation. Thirdly, the next decade will witness increasing conflict over resource use, particularly water resources, as the discussion on Ashton's paper portends. And fourthly, western Tasmania will continue to be rich in scheelite but short on sheilas. Beyond that nothing seems certain.

DISTINCTIVE MICROCOSM

Within Tasmania the west coast has always been to a greater or lesser extent a region apart. Contributors to this symposium have shown from widely ranging professional viewpoints how distinctive is the region in its geology, geomorphology, climate, vegetation, animal life, history, economy, and society. Although in recent years road links with the rest of the state have been greatly extended and improved, the central west has never been strongly integrated with other regions and notably not

with Hobart. To many Tasmanians the fascinating landscape of the west coast was until recently as remote, and at least locally as bizarre, as the moon.

Yet in many respects the central west epitomizes some key issues confronting Tasmania. Its economy rests primarily on the extractive industries which also play a central role in the state's economy. Moreover the interaction between man and the environment has had not only spectacular but widespread deleterious effects on the landscape, and while the impact may be more pronounced in the west than elsewhere, similar evidence of widespread environmental despoilation is to be seen in many parts of the state. It is also important to stress that on the west coast almost all the land adversely affected is public domain, and that in Tasmania as a whole the main incidence of environmental despoilation occurs on public rather than private land. This is not to say that ample scope does not exist for improving management practices for instance in the rural sector. But in our lowland agricultural and pastoral regions the turning point in man's use of resources - the trend away from exploitation toward conservation - was stimulated by the depression of the nineteen thirties and aided by the Agricultural Department. On public lands however, despite some exemplary management and local improvement, we have yet to witness in Tasmania a turning point in man's use of resources.

FUTURE OF MINING

Before commenting on the implications for the future of man's impact on the west-coast environment, it is necessary to assess briefly what has been said about the region's economic potential. Clearly in the foreseeable future, whatever might be the level of activity, mining will remain the cornerstone of the region's economy. But as Blainey states on the penultimate page of *The Peaks of Lyell*, 'mining is full of the unexpected, of sudden wealth and rapid decay.' Nevertheless, providing the west coast can surmount its present difficulties, there are grounds for cautious optimism, as Blainey points out and Reid confirms. Indeed, the record of the west coast for comparative stability, despite the vacillations of markets and governments, is impressive. Reid demonstrates that on present evidence the three main producing mines face operating prospects limited to two or three decades but the discovery of further reserves together with the likely long-term upward trend in the world demand for most metals seems likely to ensure a more protracted future. Solomon and Reid are agreed that the discovery of new deposits of massive sulphides yielding copper, lead, and zinc appears probable and of new tin deposits associated with granite intrusions possible.

A critical issue discussed by Reid but deserving emphasis at this stage is therefore the future of exploration. While the probability of further mineral development seems high, the rate of development will be markedly affected by the form that exploration takes. On existing mining properties the cutback in exploration in times of recession like the present can alone have significant medium-term repercussions on the region. But as Reid indicates the superficial exploration of the more prospective parts of the region will be completed in the next decade, and the subsequent phase of exploration and mining will require organizations with extensive capital and technological resources. We have long since passed the hellbent exploration phase of the Blainey box of matches, and even if a box were enough, the ecologists would claim that it is too much. Since new mine exploration requires not only potential long-term markets but also large investment, including investment in infrastructure, the decision maker will be influenced not only by economic considerations but also by his perception of political attitudes. Fortunately as Reid concludes the state government appears sensitive to the complexity and ramifications of the salient issues.

FUTURE OF FORESTRY

At first sight the future of forestry on the west coast might appear to be much more clearly discernible than the future of mining. The central west obviously has

substantial forest resources, though it cannot be contended that their environment and distribution are the most felicitous to facilitate exploitation. Moreover the world seems likely to experience long before the turn of the century a chronic shortage of forest products, and the west coast might well share in the limited prosperity that Tasmania might then enjoy from the further development of its forest resources, assuming of course that they are then in sufficiently good shape for expansion to be possible. But the next few decades may also witness the emergence of new community values regarding natural resources, the environment, and especially such distinctive regions as the central west. At second sight therefore the future of west-coast forestry would seem to depend on the interplay between three sets of interacting factors and the probable outcome appears far from certain.

Many of the principal known facts concerning the scale and nature of the west-coast forest resources are summarized by Skuja. Although nearly three-quarters of the land in the region carries vegetation other than forest, and no accurate assessment of the quantity and quality of the available timber has yet been made, the size of the resource is described by Skuja as 'enormous', particularly having regard to the current usage rate. Yet it seems unlikely that the central west contains much more than a few per cent of Tasmania's sustainable yield of eucalypts, and while the potential of merchantable yield from the rainforest may be substantially greater, there are formidable constraints, highlighted by Skuja, to their exploitation on a large scale. These constraints include inter alia problems stemming from location, access, terrain, and the need to protect the environment.

The eighties are likely to be decisive for the future of the forests. Skuja concludes that 'notwithstanding the vast potential resources' the current level of harvesting will probably continue until such time as the results of a resource level inventory becomes known in the early eighties. By that time the world demand for forest products will almost certainly have expanded considerably under the stimulus of rapidly expanding tertiary sectors in the post-industrial societies of the west. While forestry like agriculture is subject to fairly rapid, short-term fluctuations in demand, its long-term future, given the growth in paper-stuffed white collars, seems assured. But we have still to reckon with a slowly, but perceptibly awakening change in community attitudes to the environment, which hopefully by the mid-eighties may have reached such proportions that a projected expansion of forestry on the west coast might not eventuate. Selective logging, as Kirkpatrick affirms, seems certain to continue but by the late eighties there might also be a greater concern for such questions as watershed protection, the relationship between man and vegetation, and the value of forests for recreation and tourism.

FUTURE OF TOURISM

Tourism is all too often seen as the panacea for ailing regional economies, and in Tasmania, with its persistent, indeed mounting economic ailments, the tourist potential is at least proclaimed loud and clear, even if proclamation is rarely succeeded by action. In my view many commentators on the tourist industry - and I do not include Smith among them - overstress the Tasmanian potential, given the widespread tourist preference for a warmer climate and a different culture as well as the differential costs of alternative opportunities available to mainland residents. Yet the west coast undoubtedly has the basic ingredients for successful tourism: a judicious blend of the unfamiliar - and mercifully the Queenstown man-made landscape is unique - with the familiar, such as those appallingly homogenized motels. Many tourists tend to be ill at ease, if all aspects of a tour are unfamiliar; but if all aspects conform to what they are accustomed, a tour disappoints. I would therefore strongly endorse Blainey's plea, as other speakers have done, for some restricted conservation of despoilation, not just to sustain tourism but as part of our heritage and as exemplifying the devastation possible by uncontrolled industrial development.

But even for tourism the central west offers a distinctive, albeit modest challenge. The landscape with its evergreen vegetation and soft light may have less appeal, as Blainey speculates, to the average Australian's concept of scenic beauty today than it did to the visitor of the 1890s. But by comparison with such visitors the tourist of the 1980s will be much better educated, far more affluent, and receptive to informed commentary on selected major issues. Tasmania should aim to project for at least some of its future tourists an image other than that of a former penal settlement, of colonial architecture, and pseudo-English countryside. The saga of the subjugation of the Tasmanian forests over the past century seems to me to be as fundamental to the history not simply of Tasmania but of man in relation to nature as the penal settlements are to man's social development. At the same time the west coast in exemplifying this saga can provide the unfamiliar for those who seek only the spectacular and the quaint. For I believe that in future there will be increasingly a demand for a more perceptive commentary on the historical and physical environments. It was Sinclair Lewis who said that travel, if it be only the accumulation of miles and coloured slides, 'merely provides the victim with more topics about which to show ignorance.' In my more disillusioned moments, after reading essays or examination scripts, I tend to think much the same can be said of education.

DEVELOPMENT OF WATER RESOURCES

If the potential of tourism resembles mining in that it is strikingly indeterminate, the potential of water power resembles forestry in that it is susceptible to fairly precise measurement. Ashton reveals that the potential average energy output from the lower Gordon, King, and Franklin catchments amounts to nearly one-quarter of the state's hydro-electric potential. Alternative schemes for power development are currently being evaluated by the Hydro-Electric Commission not just in relation to engineering considerations and cost but also to a wide range of environmental factors. Lake and his associates show that owing to 'heavy metal' pollution in the King River the construction of a dam in the King River Gorge 'may well create some deleterious and long-lasting effects'. If we leave aside their curiously inappropriate choice of adverb, their conclusion bodes well (or ill?) for a lively debate on any decision to develop the water-power potential of the region, particularly as pollution is only one of several major issues involved.

Although water resources are one of Tasmania's basic assets, they seem rarely to receive comprehensive and balanced appraisal. Less than a fortnight ago I chaired a seminar organized by the Tasmanian Housing Department on the state's future housing requirements under the title 'Towards the Year 2000'. In his opening address the guest speaker from Melbourne cited the *First Report of the National Population Inquiry* to the effect that the maximum permissible population of Australia would be determined by water supply. On this criterion he cited Australia's capacity as 280 millions, of whom 90 millions would be in Tasmania (and presumably tens of millions in the west). These facts were duly reported in *The Mercury*. But the press omitted to report my comment: that man does not live by water alone.

POLLUTION AND CONSERVATION

Whatever may be the future development of the state's water resources, one thing is certain: given the evidence of the King and Queen Rivers, the west coast will never be a place where the tourist will sojourn in order to take the waters. In fact, Queenstown is the only place where I have felt tempted to try my hand - or rather, foot - at walking on the waters. It is unfortunate, as Blainey stated in reply to a question, that the upsurge of community concern with pollution and conservation in the late sixties and early seventies should have preceded a period of depression, for in the immediate future unemployment will continue to be a more vital preoccupation of government than environmental protection. Meanwhile it would seem essential that research continues into the extent, nature, and effects of pollution and, as Kirkpatrick

highlights, on man's impact by bulldozer and firing on the vegetation. While advocacy for further research is an entirely predictable outcome from an assembly of scientists, the extent of existing knowledge on so many aspects of the interaction between man and the landscape on the west coast is so meagre than numerous topics would amply repay deeper inquiry.

Research findings will be an essential input into any conservation program along the lines advanced by Davis. But it is to be hoped that sophisticated machinery and elaborate programs for resource management are not developed prematurely: that is, too far in advance of the growth in community support for the programs to be implemented effectively. Admittedly the west coast, as Lee analyzes, has a distinctive demographic and social structure; its population has a tradition of environmental exploitation, an isolation, social structure, masculinity, and mobility that seemingly combine to militate against a speedy emergence of community concern for environmental protection. But my limited experience of adult education in the region more than a decade ago encourages me to think that given the right approach and more favourable economic conditions community concern for this splendid environment might be nurtured to good effect. But I am also persuaded that bureaucratic imposition from outside the region might tend to discredit conservation and seriously delay much needed innovation.

CONCLUSION

This symposium has garnered much of the knowledge that currently exists on the interaction between man and the environment in central western Tasmania; the papers not only synthesize the substance of extensive publications but present the results of much original research. Accordingly the proceedings will long furnish a rich source of material on the central west. But more importantly the proceedings may also contribute to an increasing awareness, both by government and the people, of the problems that stem from man's use and misuse of a highly complex environment. Although Tasmania currently faces a contracting economic future and the short-term prospect on the west coast seems particularly bleak, the long-term prospects open up much more attractive vistas. For both Tasmania and the central west are not only magnificently endowed by nature but enjoy resource-based economies in a world where resources are finite and will without doubt assume ever increasing significance to man. At present resource-based economies suffer short-run oscillations of fortune and rarely experience a sudden and marked upsurge of growth. But their futures are guaranteed, providing - and these are pertinent provisos - that the non-renewable resources are managed so as to give maximum stability and the renewable resources to give sustained yields. In both cases resource management needs to be achieved with the minimum of environmental damage. Many years may elapse before Tasmanians recognize their bounty and acknowledge their responsibility. But the more both the deleterious *and* the beneficial effects of the interaction of man with the environment can be demonstrated, the closer Tasmania will come to an ecological equilibrium that must surely be the desire of everyone who has participated in this symposium.