

SHALE

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PART 1

Time

Although I promised mum I would arrive by dark I doubted the possibility. This wasn't about arrival at her place, which was after 11 the night before, it was to reach Queenstown by dark. Queenstown is an almost mythical place on the western side of Tasmania. While making some effort to capture tourists like Strahan successfully does, Queenstown is much more introspective; edgy and ambivalent about tourism. The main tourist venture is a train that takes visitors away from town. Mum has always been adamant about avoiding west coast towns, particularly Waratah, which I found odd. Being contrary I made it a point when I first managed as an adult to get to Waratah to send mum a local postcard. Years later I found we had ancestors who moved to Waratah in 1878, the Hansons, he from Dunblane in Scotland, her a Nicholson from Aglishcloghane in Ireland. Mum easily shares the rationale for her Waratah phobia. The very short story involves mum and her sister, Pat, viewing the town from a "dicky seat" at the back of their grandfather's converted Ford, on a substantial yet hazy day-trip excursion from East Devonport in the late 1940s. Mum recounts, 'Made me nervous when we drove through because people were on their verandahs smoking at pipes and looking at us'. That's all. She can't remember them even stopping in the town, which seems odd given

it is not on a road to anywhere else. Only this year, 70 years later did she visit Waratah again. We are both stubborn.

The Hideout. When I arrived in Queenstown at 6.30pm, it was an hour past dark, and what a damn dismal ride it had been, in my van, pushed by driving rain and vehicles backed up behind me, seemingly chased by the hounds of hell. The thick mist that intermittently descended upon our joint passage was more Conan Doyle than broadcast by the Bureau of Meteorology. I was escaping, circumnavigating Tasmania to get to a new project in a town that seemed ideal for hiding. My hideout. And here we are. Me and shale. I've studied its properties, its deep time maritime origins, age and affiliations, locations, even my family connections to the Shale works at Latrobe, Tasmania: nil, versus our multigenerational commitment to the family operated Alfred Colliery directly across the river. Both ventures similarly doomed. Carrying shale further west to the mining district, to a precinct in tempo with this, on the surface, unprepossessing rock, amplified its properties.

How to explain it? From insipid beige to grey, shale holds fast organisms, plants and animals, as such it is a kind of book, a bittersweet lodestone.

Shale is akin to the grapefruit portions I was offered from my Scottish grandmother's plate as a child, so unexpectedly tart and sour, and moreso, enduringly shocking that my grandmother liked it. In this way, from components and chance I learnt to expect the unknown, to be unassured. She was not me. I cannot presuppose, or claim to know that which is beyond me. Even sleeping I am not at rest.

Perhaps it was the lack of aura, the apparent inertness of shale that initially drew me to it, to check if it was truly dead or just play acting in the way much of Tasmania seems impenetrable. With the blankness of slate, opaquely scrying, shale can carry, forecast or broadcast what we wish. I can denote shale a witness, for it and its kin must have seen a lot across this troubled island over the millennia.

In 1901 *The Examiner* newspaper in Launceston listed the key events of the previous year. In 1900 this island, this homeland of my mother's people for more than 45,000 years, had been colonized by the flag raising British for less than 100 years, an endlessly horrific century. Past events enacted upon my family on this island have cast a pall upon my outlook. I extracted the deaths of 1900 in northern Tasmania, as listed by *The Examiner*

newspaper, to see if there was a pattern to decode, for I create a bearable distance through steadfast dedication to the task, to the analysis of history. Slicing time.

1900 IN BRIEF – A SYNOPSIS OF EVENTS*

January

- 1st Mr. Sidney Russell drowned at Barrington.
 5th Geo. Cooper, 13, accidentally shot at St. Mary's and died. Disastrous fire at Scottsdale; two shops and dwellings destroyed.
 6th Rev. J. W. Simmons died at Hobart.
 29th Rev. W. H. Bowe arrived to take up position of city missionary, vacated by the death of Mr. R. Marshall.
 31st William Brooks, aged 5, drowned off West Ulverstone wharf. February.

February

- 1st William Holland, an old resident of Mount Nicholas, suicided.
 20th Tamar regatta. Royal Grachan, 15, killed, his head being crushed between the Agnes and Rosevears jetty.

March

- 5th Tasmanian Bushmen, 50 strong, left Hobart for South Africa in the Atlantian.
 11th Walter Pennington accidentally shot at Frankford.
 22nd Alfred Eades, an old employee at Mount Bischoff mine, killed by a fall of earth.
 26th Mr. F. L. Fysh died, aged 63.
 29th John Moran, a youth, killed at Glengarry by a burning log rolling on him.

April

- 12th Superintendent Pilling committed suicide at Strahan.
 16th (Easter Monday). Charles Ernest Williams, a jockey, received injuries at Deloraine races from which he died.
 18th Messrs. Alfred Haywood and James Smith died.
 25th A young man, named Charles Cook, suicided at Queenstown.
 26th Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen sailed from Hobart.
 27th Frank Gotschik fatally injured at the Lyell smelters.
 29th Mrs. David Burgess drowned in the Mersey.
 29th Mr. John Brickhill, a colonist of 57 years standing, died.

30th Richard Lawrence, 13, ran over at Devonport and killed.

May

3rd Mr. James Finn, Cressy, died suddenly.

4th Mr. Wm. Bald, 33 years a resident of Scottsdale, died suddenly. 10th Foundation stone of new wing of Queen Victoria Hospital laid by Viscountess Gormanston.

13th Mr. J. W. Simmons died, aged 85.

20th William Lee, a labourer, aged 47, roasted to death in his cottage, Lawrence Vale.

22nd Steamer Wakatipu quarantined at Town Point owing to having aboard a case suspected to be plague.

27th Con. Cronin and Thomas Murphy, miners, buried alive in the Lyell Tharsis.

29th Three-year-old daughter of Mr. A. Bessell, Sheffield, burned to death.

31th Mr. Walter Ridley, State-school teacher at Hadspen, died in his 69th year.

June

6th Great rejoicing at the occupation of Pretoria.

16th Mr. W. Excell, sen., a West Kentish pioneer, died suddenly.

17th Mr. W. I. Thrower died at Sydney.

24th Destructive fire at Lyell Reduction Works. Damage estimated at £ 20,000.

July

9th Patrick Smith burned to death at Queenstown.

10th Archdeacon Hales died, aged 78.

12th Mr. R. G. Talbot, squire of Malahide, died suddenly while on a visit to Victoria.

13th Joseph Mosley killed by a fall of quartz on the New Golden Gate mine.

14th Mr. Edward Sanden died, aged 89.

16th M'Murray's Commercial Hotel, at Wynyard, destroyed by fire. Sarah Herrick, aged 9, killed by a falling limb at Dunorlan.

26th Ada Kipyen, a half-caste Chinese, shot two men named William Manson and Pete Thompson, at Garibaldi. Manson died.

31th Coroners jury returned verdict of "Justifiable Homicide" in regard to Garibaldi tragedy.

August

9th James Kirby, 26, drowned in a vat of wort at the Esk Brewery.

19th Miss Mary Fitzgerald found drowned under the New Pier.

20th Mr. John Kelly, superintending engineer to Union S.S. Co., and Mr. Sidney Gaunt, of Windermere, died.

- 22th Mr. Charles Kent, died in his 76th year.
 30th Mr. Patrick Keenan, an old resident of
 Quamby Bluff, died suddenly.

September

- 2nd Mr. W. Abey, Deloraine, died.
 3rd News received of the death, at Sydney, of Mr.
 F. L. Von Bibra, a Tasmanian pioneer.
 6th Fatal accident to Mr. Henry Warden, at
 Castra.
 14th Mr. John Lyne died, aged 90.
 23th Mr. Henry Bennett passed away.

October

- 3rd Thomas Leith, 43, killed at Frankford.
 8th Messrs. Mallet, Brakey, and Welsh drowned
 in the Pieman River.
 9th William Payne, aged 18, run over by a dray at
 Derby and killed.
 11th Mr. A. Horsham, chairman of Ulverstone
 Town Board, died.
 12th Mr. P. G. Monaghan died, aged 54.
 22th A man named George Miller found
 drowned at Ross.

November

- 2nd William Cullen, of Ringarooma, succumbed
 to snakebite.

- 14th Mr. John Bradley, M.H.A., died suddenly at
 Hobart.
 20th Henry Smith found drowned at Devonport.

December.

- 19th Mr. A. B. Biggs, F.R.S., died.
 29th Call made for more colonial troops for
 South Africa. Tasmania prompt to respond.
 31st Another year, a new century, and the
 Commonwealth ushered in with éclat.

* *January 1901 p. 5. (DAILY), '1900 IN BRIEF,' Examiner
 (Launceston)*

I don't keep to others' time and my natural habitat
 is a dark place, a place where I need to feel along
 the walls for a missing light switch, where perhaps
 if I scratched in a corner I would eventually reach
 daylight. I like to think in the dark. Where is this
 place?

In Queenstown I met locals, but was afraid to ask
 how local, meaning how long local, because hardly
 anyone here across this island is here long, and
 those proudly pronouncing their seven generations,
 bring on a headache, for it means that their
 ancestors, for me, rather than the proud pioneers
 they profess, were responsible for the annihilation

of mine. And being awash, yet again in their smug pride, that fights against my knowledge of their bloodened aura, is exhausting to bear, and so must I tell them what they genetically surely know, at their base-lode, from the core of their particles, but refuse to acknowledge? Their complicity gives them a good education and prospects, a house, perhaps even a nice coastal shack, and a conqueror's certainty. Must I air their dirt and by doing so damage my own chances on their playing field? At Queenstown all I want is to sleep.

On my second last day in Queenstown there was a select meeting in the Museum, of geologists and locals, there to determine the reassembling of the collection, to make it accessible for the regular visitor. Introduced, I describe them, the gathering of people not the rocks, as I witnessed, for at the end this is all I do, view, collect, collate, describe, attempt to make sense of the grand disruption I've inherited. They were hunkered in a circle, intent on something. As I approached I asked if they were planning a bank heist, as such was their appearance. After this they couldn't take me seriously, which, with my profession: artist, I don't blame them. I then discordinately professed my disenchantment with shale, its blankness. With this these geo-advocates became animated. Distressed by my

misunderstanding of shale they keenly determined to instate its significance. Their enthusiasm forced me to be reasonable, to reconsider shale's worth and not its fracturing blankness and so I began to retranslate shale, to truly figure its potential. They explained how the finest particles descended to blanket and make the substance of shale, that shale with its trilobites and ferny captives was not just a story but THE stories of life. Layers upon layers. Shale was first purported by western science to be intergalactic, to carry the mysteries of the universe. As this meeting unfolded, its topic for me was the affirmation of the indisputable significance of shale, such that I grasped for its meaning for me, its metaphoric relevance, for where we aligned. Shale compresses and covers, yet can erupt and crack and split and reveal what it has held firm, and shows that everything is interconnected, cause and effect.

In this sense shale is Tasmania. Layer upon layer. A dark confusion.

PART 2

Evidence