

PETRIFIED WOOD

Mary Scott

Herein lie reflections on journeys long and short,
weighty and slight. Travels through space and time
meet excursions into the substance of geology, rock
and wood, and forays into the human imagination.

JOURNEY 1

A backbone snakes from twenty-eight degrees north to forty-four degrees south, dividing the verdant from the drier terrains and the sea from the inland lakes. It curves down the eastern side of New South Wales, through Victoria, then veering seawards, it gathers in the Kent Islands. Rising to the summit of Flinders Island it tumbles downhill across the denuded granite peaks of the smaller islands, Barren, Clark and Swan. It disappears beneath the churning foam, running with the seabed until it surfaces, once more, at Cape Portland in northeast Tasmania. From there it thrusts inland, fracturing into an intricate network that takes in the four reaches of the Island in a generous backwards S. It completes its earthly course at South Cape, the southern-most point of the small heart-shaped, ancient-peopled island.

We of the northern terrains crab though baking summer heat, on our annual pilgrimage to the far south. Roused at four to beat the rising temperatures, we are impatient to add our shrieks to those of our nineteen cousins. We are corralled within the metal narrows of a Holden station wagon, with open windows substituting for air conditioning. Without restraints, the bench seat is a concourse for tournaments and knockouts.

On bent knees, with bodies turned backwards,
hands free, we teeter as a team through curves and
corners. The oily vinyl that sucks at our bare brown
thighs is useless as a brace and, as the car swerves
sideways through a left curve, we collapse as one,
larger bodies smothering small.

The highway in the distance bleeds into a watery
shimmering haze. The ridge of mountains far-off
in the east guides us south, my listless gaze drawn
to its serpentine form.

In the archives of The Launceston History Centre,
I discover a book held together by a loose strand
of red ribbon. I am on a mission. A box of family
letters and papers, left in my care following
the death of my father, was the catalyst to find
out more about You, my great grandfather. A
few biographical details had passed down the
generations and I had, already, unearthed a vast
collection of correspondence, diaries, notebooks
and articles.

From photographs, I see that you were of slight
build and a spruce dresser. I scan testimonials
that speak to your intelligence, humour, patience,
generous spirit and open-mindedness. From your
writings, I glean that you are a man of insatiable
curiosity, single-minded in your drive to know
all things about everything and in possession of
a passion to educate that is so great that you
pass along, with great gusto and often poetic
license, your knowledge to any that listen.
You are, absolutely, zealous and hard working.

Even you have something to say, adding that you
had acquired from the Americans a 'directness of
method and practical aims,' from the English an
intense love of 'art, literature, architecture, and
all articles of virtu (sic)', and, from your Scottish

ancestors, ‘a lion’s share of continuity, fixed determination, and bad temper!’¹

I am in the archives once more, searching for information on your scientific research. The book, despite its unremarkable brown leather cover and its lazy ribbon, offers promise, for on its spine, in gold, are tooled the words WOOD HISTOLOGY - H. H. SCOTT. Inside, its endpapers are marbled by blue, white and flesh-coloured blots, suspended within rivulets of magenta and ochre ink. The pages are not bound within the spine, but are bundled within twenty sets of two to six sheets of paper, each trussed by bands cut from manila envelopes stamped IF NOT CLAIMED WITHIN 7 DAYS, RETURN TO TOWN HALL, LAUNCESTON. On each is also written the scientific nomenclature and common name of a Tasmanian wood. Slipping free four sheets of blue-tinged paper, I am pleased by their softness. I suppose that you, too, appreciated the paper’s preciousness, for each page is carefully inscribed with an elegant cursive script.

On the first page is written, ‘The Vegetable Histology of the fossils found in the Launceston (Miocene) Tertiary Basin, including a recapitulation of Woody Trees, recorded by Mr R. M. Johnston in his ‘Systematic Account of the Geology of

Tasmania’, 1888. Special Note: Although Mr Johnstone added 14 plants to the list of Miocene fossils only 4 fossil woods were detailed and none of these were associated with leaves, or fruits, otherwise described, hence wood histology is practically a new departure.’²

A pale-yellow streamlined ship is moored snug against the dock. We had been en route for twelve hours, or more. All that we can muster in the flat motionless air are sly prods and impetuous kicks. Dad noses the Holden into the long queue. The cars up front are nudging onto a platform, which bridges the dock and the ship's stern, and disappearing into a cavernous void. A ro-ro they call her, the first roll-on roll-off to be built in our nation, Dad remarks, though not in the satisfied voice of a patriot.

We lean out the windows and peer along the slowly inching line. A flock of seagulls takes flight, casting a shadowed arc across the water. The Holden reaches the ramp, rolls into the massive hold and, bumper to grill, comes to a gentle halt. The rumbling of the engines quiets our relieved sighs and we spill from the car with overnight bags slung from our shoulders. We climb the metal stairs, and push along narrow sour-smelling passageways, until we find our cabin. A tussle erupts as my brother and I claim the top bunks. A deep and resonant horn indicates the ship's departure and we clamour for the door.

Now on deck we watch. The hefty ship, in a miraculous feat of buoyancy, heads towards the strait that separates the mainland of Australia from its southern-most state. The wind carves irregular marks in the water and an endlessly dispersing line surfaces in the ship's wake.

Around us, coloured streamers snap and flick skywards in the rising wind.

Eighty years earlier you disembarked from a coal-fired steamer at the fledgling settlement of Launceston. You were only twenty-two but were, already, impassioned by nature. You had left your home in Taunton, England, two and a half years earlier aboard the *Invercagill*, a sleek, full-rigged sailing ship, one of the fastest clippers afloat. The ship followed the Great Circle Route, down the west coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope and into the Southern Oceans.

Your discomfort was great. Conditions were cramped and the icy Antarctic winds stirred the sea into towering waves, and the ship rolled treacherously. For long stretches you and your companions were confined to quarters, in the dark, for fear of fire issuing from broken lamps. It was fortunate that the voyage of seventy-six days was one of the fastest on record.

You landed first in New Zealand but, several years later, sailed to Launceston, arriving on April 8, 1890. You came, I imagine, knowing of Tasmania's remarkable natural landscape, its exceptional biology and its geographic isolation. Here, in a place so rich with natural advantages lay the opportunity for you to make your mark.

The weatherboard house stands at the rear of a long block. On the southern side of the dirt drive grows unkempt grass, and opposite, is a dense conifer hedge. A small veranda is the only distinguishing feature of the house. The curtains are drawn, foreshadowing the silence that seeps under the back door.

The boards under our hesitant feet creak as our grandmother shepherds us into the lean-to kitchen. The air is thick and the shadows of things shape the walls. A profusion of reading matter and other stuff smothers every surface and slides from seats and tables, no longer fit for purpose. On the stove are two saucepans, their lids set with bricks to keep them sealed.

My siblings are apprehensive, but for me, a keen-eyed child, the house, more a museum than a family residence, is a trove of never-before-seen treasures. To the rear of the kitchen are musty rooms bloated with glassware, microscopic slides, measuring instruments, fusty relics and whatnots, all dulled by sticky dust. Shelves thrive with jars stuffed with strange fish, dead eyes on stalks and ragged spines, some elongated past practicality, others bulbous and arcane. Rarely beautiful, these monsters have been wrenched from the seas'

depths to be imprisoned in formalin. The walls are lined with over-flowing bookshelves, capped by dark nooks that can only be reached by standing on the chipped apple-green foldaway steps. I stand on the top rung, and stretching, take down a diamond-shaped object. I see in my hand a medium-sized rock, its surface entirely patterned with the fine traces of exquisite fossils.

My grandfather is working. I pocket the fossil rock, and, lugging from the bookshelf a hefty tome, I climb into a chair and nestle between its stubby wings. With the book's pages spread across my knees, I trace with a finger the oh-so-fine drawings of exotic plants and curious creatures.

The house breathes, just, in the velvety silence.

In my hand I hold the diamond-shaped rock. It is made of a yellow claylike stone, most likely a siltstone, and is about six by four inches and half an inch thick. From side on, horizontal layers of compacted fossils are visible and, on its front and back, they stand out in perfect relief. The rock is almost entirely composed of the crushed, frond-like layers of the *Fenestella* and the erect branching structure of the *Stenopora tasmaniensis*, both of the genus *Bryozoana*. The *Fenestella* is a coral-like plant of a netted appearance, with tiny window openings in the mesh skeletons of fan-shaped colonies, whereas the *Stenopora* is composed of simple tubes, variously aggregated and radiating outwards at irregular gaps. In my rock, the tubes are of different widths, some as slight as one tenth of an inch, others are wider than my thumb, but all are covered, at regular intervals, with minuscule holes. *Stenopora* had, in life, a round or oblong mouth with a row of tubercles looped about its edge.

I consider my rock and think of how the force of gravity had compressed the organisms within layers of silt. When one layer of sediment is pressed against another, the negative marks that are formed are called imprints or impressions. But I reckon that my rock is formed of neither impressions nor imprints, for each has bulk. There are layers upon layers of