

CHAPTER XV

John Watt Beattie of Tasmania

THE reason this book that you are now reading came to be written, is because a good-looking young man out of Scotland married a pretty girl named Emily Cato, a daughter of Joseph Cato of "Paraclete", Mount Stewart, Tasmania, and so became my cousin John. As a child, I was given the run of his huge studio in Hobart, and here I was caught up in the madness of photography. John Beattie was an explorer-photographer who spent his life and earned his living on the mountain tops and in the valleys of the beautiful island—bringing back his magic pictures of lakes and rivers and far-flung peaks, which, in many instances, he was the first man to discover.

To my young mind, Cousin John led the best life of any man alive, and I decided to follow in his footsteps. All this, despite the fact that with the most outrageous misjudgment of character, my fond parents had dedicated me to the Church.

John Beattie was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1859, was educated at grammar school, and learned his wet-plate photography from his father John Beattie, senior, who conducted a highly successful portrait studio in George Street, Aberdeen, where he was a prominent and forceful figure in public life. When John Sr. was well over seventy, and nearly blind, he felt that his Scottish principles had been so outraged that he must turn his back on his native land, as a protest, and emigrate to Australia.

This part of the story is best told by Professor A. H. Charteris, Challis Professor of International Law, Sydney University, in his book *When the Scot Smiles*. The Professor writes: "What greater illustration of Aberdonian tenacity of principle could we find than that which was given to me by Mr. Beattie of Hobart when I enquired what it was that had brought him as far as 13,000 miles from his native land. 'I will tell you', returned the excellent man. 'My father emigrated from Aberdeen for conscience' sake. And this when he was over seventy-five too. He had been for many a year a leading elder in the West Free Church, Aberdeen, and few men were more respected in the city. But a new minister was inducted to the charge, against my father's vote, and his views on the place of instrumental music in Divine service proved more than my father could condone. Representations to the headstrong clergyman were fruitless. My father then took the only course open to a man of principle. He resigned from the eldership and later lifted his lines from the Church, joining, of course, another where the mode of worship was less outrageous. But the mere presence of this mischievous imposter in Aberdeen so weighed

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upon my father's spirit that he finally came to perceive that the city itself was not large enough to contain the two of them with any comfort to himself. And as the only way of escape, his thoughts turned to emigration to the Colonies. His decision came very suddenly. As his eyesight had failed, he relied on his family for reading aloud to him at night. And I recollect very clearly that one night when I was seated with him at a table turning over the pages of a large illustrated book on Australia, he pointed to a full-page steel-engraving and asked me what might the subject be? I read out the title "Sheep-rearing on a Victorian Station". My father pondered for a moment, and then said in a firm voice, "That's where we are going to, then!" And from this decision nothing could move him. I was deputed to spy out the land in advance. I came out to Melbourne equipped with introductions to the leading graziers in Victoria. I made my inquiries there and in Tasmania, and on every hand I was advised on no account to start in that business. Times were bad, and I would only lose money. I went back to Aberdeen and so reported to my father, who made no reply except to say that his mind was made up. For him it was now Australia or nothing. So the whole family of us came out, with this aged man leading, as it were. And we did buy our station in Tasmania. And the times were bad, as everyone had told me. And we did lose our money, as everyone predicted. All of it.' "

That's how it came about that John Watt Beattie arrived in Tasmania in 1878 at the age of 19, and for a few years worked on the 320 acres his father purchased at Mount Lloyd, New Norfolk, where they lived in an old home called Murray Hall.

Their farm labourers were old convicts who had an enormous influence on John's life. Concerning this part of the upper reaches of the Derwent River, Charles Barrett the naturalist wrote: "Doubtless God could have made a lovelier valley but doubtless He never did." It is one of the most photogenic places in the world, and so, within that first year the course of John's life was set—to interpret the beauty of the place with his camera and to study and collect the records of its tragic history.

Many years later John wrote some memoirs of his life, and of this first year he says: "These were the days when my soul got soaked in the lore of Port Arthur, all our working men being 'old hands', and the romance of their experiences fascinated me. And then there came the wild freshness of my photographic wanderings into the beautiful scenic surroundings of New Norfolk and district. Bushland clearing was not to my taste. I photographed all around the countryside, and it was in 1879 that I made my first real photographic expedition, using my father's horse, and hiring the Glenora mail cart from old Bob Marriot. Our party consisting of Messrs. Alex Riddock, and Richard Smith, the village school-master, and myself, made a start for Lake St. Clair. That was the first time gelatine Dry-Plates were used at the lake, and I was so delighted with it all and so energetic that dear old Mr. Riddock declared, as we sat on a log at the end of the lake, 'John, if you will come to Hobart Town, I'll put down £200 to start you in business.'" (This is from the *Hobart Mercury*, 25th June, 1930.) It is of importance to our history because 1879 is the earliest date I have been able to discover for the use of gelatine Dry Plates in Australia.

"In 1882," says John in his memoirs, "one of the Anson brothers, photographers in Hobart, came up in a dogcart and pulled me out of dear old Murray Hall, took me to

town, and there I've been ever since." Soon John was a partner in the firm and in 1891 he bought the Ansons out.

Almost immediately the studio was exploded into a huge business. The Ansons' studio was a small part of the largest building in Elizabeth Street. It contained three storeys consisting of two large shops and upstairs offices. Gradually John took over the whole building. The shops were turned into exhibition rooms, one for landscapes, and the other for portraits and groups. The basement was used for making and mixing chemicals and sensitising printing papers. There was a large framing department, and workrooms and darkrooms, the Beattie Lending Library, the Beattie Museum of Van Diemen's Land relics, a huge studio where groups of seventy or eighty people could be taken, and access to a roof top for sun printing.

Though his enterprise was enormous he was not a good business man, his margin of profit being too low. Once I said to him: "You have no competition in this city, and you turn out tens of thousands of photographs a year. As you sell them to people who want them, if you added sixpence to every print people would still buy them and in a few years you would have a fortune." John looked at me as though I'd just made a dishonest proposition. In fact, to him, with his high principles and fierce Scottish integrity, it was dishonest. To profit by an advantage was beneath him; if an advantage existed then he felt it his duty to be his own competitor. He certainly lived in comfort, but not with the affluence he deserved.

At every event of interest in Tasmania between 1880 and 1925, John had a box seat. And during those years he photographed every part of the island. What beautiful photographs they were! The conservative Hobart *Mercury* wrote: "The Prince of Landscape Photographers in Australia . . . a man of outstanding personality, who has been a good friend to Tasmania."

Let us admit that he had wonderful subjects for his lens, a sparkling light, a soft mellow sky, and a clear air for his perspectives—but so had others. It was John's personal interpretation that made his pictures outstanding. It was the exhausting climb for a still better point of view, the hours spent waiting for lovelier clouds and longer shadows. It was patience and endurance and strength and good taste and balanced judgment. It was these things too. But the truth of it he tells in his memoirs, and it was not an easy truth for a great lion-headed Scot from the stock of that fierce old Puritan father.

"I have been essentially an outdoor man," he writes, "I love the bush, and nothing gives me greater delight than to stand on the top of some high land and look out on a wild array of our giant mountains. I am struck dumb, but oh! my soul sings."

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John Beattie's professional landscape work began in 1882, and was perfectly timed. The tourist industry was under way but Tasmania had no pictures to show the world of its beauties. A smattering of small prints had previously been made of the lowlands, but it had been quite impossible to tackle this "Isle of Mountains" with the Wet Plate.

John and the Dry Plate and the tourist traffic arrived at the same time. Within a few years his great camera had covered the beautiful willow-lined reaches of the rivers, the

old English lanes with the hawthorn hedges, and the lyric charm of its midlands where hamlets nestled around the ivy-mantled towers of old churches. Before 1890 he had humped his camera into the forests and up to those majestic peaks where "his soul sang" and he felt close to his God.

He wrote in his memoirs: "I used to hump around a big 15 x 12 camera with a weight, fully charged, of about 60 lb. I often feel I could kick myself for being such a fool! If I had only used a whole plate camera I would have done double the amount of work with half the wear and tear."

The West Coast was his real home and he had it practically to himself. One could stand on a high range above New Norfolk and look west over a vast territory where mountain piled on mountain as far as the eye could see; a remote sombre evergreen country, savage, primeval and menacing; an almost impenetrable rain forest where in deep gorges lay the rapids of the Gordon, the King, the Pieman, and other great rivers never yet traced to their sources.

This was John's challenge. Within a decade he knew so much of this wild country that when the Government wanted information concerning the possibility of tracks and roads and water and timber resources, John was sent for to stand facing the assembled parliament and answer members' questions. For these talks there were cheques for fifty guineas a time.

Like Flinders and Bass, he circumnavigated the whole coast of the Island. He was the Official Government Photographer and his pictures were reaping such a harvest in tourist traffic that every facility to speed his work was immediately granted. His pictures of the bays and capes and headlands, particularly around Tasman Peninsula, are probably his best. I've always had the idea that when Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island* he took inspiration from the map of Tasmania, for here are some of the titles of John's famous pictures of some of Tasmania's most romantic and historic haunts: Wine-glass Bay, Adventure Bay, Pirates' Bay, Skeleton Bay, Grindstone Bay, Storm Bay, Cape Grim, Savage River, Black Charlie's Gap, Blackman's Bay, Crater Lake, The Hazards, Eaglehawk Neck, Styx River, The Devil's Kitchen, Hell's Gates, Isle of the Dead.

How the history of this place must have seeped into John's bones as he explored these bays and caves and blowholes, or sat waiting for the storm, the sun, the rain, or whatever mood of nature he wanted; while the ghosts of Tasman, Cook, La Perouse, Bligh, Furneaux, Flinders and Bass, haunted his Celtic imagination and walked again the sands of these same beaches.

There was no detail of any convict settlement which missed the eye of his camera. He made up six different albums of the Port Arthur convict settlement. Just as Kerry brought back mineral specimens in his camera bag, so John always returned with some leg-irons, manacles, hand-cuffs, an original cat o' nine tails (for males or females), a batch of ticket of leave documents, a "hue and cry" poster for an absconder, some magistrate's orders for floggings, or a collection of pewter stamped with the brand of the broad arrow. His museum was growing—and it was becoming important.

The Beattie Museum soon became also an Art Gallery. William Moore's *Story of Australian Art* lists 13 pages in his index, on the Beattie collection. John collected every

print, drawing, and painting that he could find on early Tasmania, and his gallery became a storehouse of works of our early artists. Moore says: "With the aid of the camera he preserved records of the old landmarks, some of which have fallen to ruin, and apart from his collection of pictures, compiled facts regarding the lives of the early painters."

The collection soon contained magnificent specimens of antique furniture and objects of art brought out by the first governors and administrators. The collection was one of the sights of Hobart for the tourists. When the big liners entered port in the apple season to load hundreds of thousands of cases for Britain, a stream of people poured into John's premises to turn over his albums and buy many hundreds of his pictures of the harbour, the mountains, the lakes, and waterfalls, and rivers, and also of these convict records. Then they passed up the stairs to the Museum at a shilling a time.

When the collection was becoming bloated, and John had so much more shut away in storage, he sold this collection to the City of Launceston for £4,000. A special annexe was built for it at the City Museum and there the first Beattie collection is treasured in its entirety.

Then John started another which was later sold to the City of Hobart. It was John who rediscovered Wainewright, the convict artist, whose life was written by Oscar Wilde in *Pen, Pencil, and Poison*. I believe that at one time he had twelve of Wainewright's pictures.

One day he said to me: "I'll be away for a couple of days, I think I've got on to some more Wainewrights." Next day he returned with two large water colour drawings of a pioneer grazier and his wife. He stood them on a table against a wall. They were beautiful, in perfect condition, and two of Wainewright's best. There was no spate of words from John, but his thrill and delight were simply bursting out of him. It was impossible for him to keep still, he walked up and down the room like a caged lion, afraid to express himself lest he become ridiculous. We were all excited. I remember running from room to room exclaiming: "The boss has found some more Wainewrights!"

John was now the leading authority on Tasmanian history. In 1901 the Royal Society of Tasmania conferred on him their Fellowship. His closest friend was Bishop Montgomery, who had a young son named Bernard playing in the gardens at Bishops court, never dreaming that one day he would be Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery, victor of Alamein. The Bishop suggested that they found a Historical section of the Royal Society. Montgomery became President and John Vice-President.

At Bishops court, John met the Right Rev. Dr. Wilson, Bishop of Melanesia, who invited him to come on a five months' tour in the mission steamer *Southern Cross*. They sailed up to Norfolk Island and on to the New Hebrides, to Loyalty Island, Bank Island, Torres Island, Santa Cruz Island, Queen Charlotte Island; then to Malaita, Isobel, Guadalcanal, Ranro, Bougainville, and all the islands of the Solomons. Here John made a complete coverage of the scenery and the savages in all those South Sea islands adjacent to Australia that were not visited by John Lindt. John exposed 1,300 plates. Amongst a hundred or so of his signed lantern slides preserved in the offices of the Foreign Missions at St. Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, are pictures of the natives' tribal life and their dances; others show a fleet of their great war canoes in New Georgia; a walled village in Malaita; and a palisaded

one in Nova Terra for protection against cannibals; the bamboo rafts of Torres Island; the smaller canoes of Santa Cruz; the fine huts made out of reeds plaited into strange patterns and designs; a church made out of coral; many pictures of their great mountains, rivers, waterfalls and beautiful bays, and numbers showing the most picturesque palms reflected in lovely lagoons.

An album of these Melanesian pictures is still at Norfolk Island; an extensive collection in the Auckland Museum; and many more in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and in the National Library at Canberra.

John was ill for a long time after this journey. He caught the same skin diseases that affected Jack London, and he also contracted those terrible yaws, the sores that are so difficult to heal. However, because he was strong and healthy, and unlike Jack London, a teetotaler, he was well again in a year's time.

The sales from these negatives certainly surprised him. Lantern slides of them were shown in practically every church hall in the world for John had taken the Mission Stations of all denominations. They went also to every scientific body in the world, and the Russians bought them in vast quantities—they told of an unknown world to them.

John never lost interest in his native city, and the *Weekly Free Press* of Aberdeen constantly refers to the lantern slides and advice on processing, sent to the Aberdeen Amateur Photographic Society. The same paper (9th September, 1905) says: "John Beattie gave the two official lectures on the history of the Colony at the Centenary Celebrations of Tasmania in 1904, and the same year gave the lecture on Tasmania to the Conference of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science. Recently he had a fire in his premises that did minor damage, but it was made the occasion for an outburst of sympathy and an expression of the people's high regard for him. He was lured to the museum with his camera under the impression that he was to take a photograph, only to find a large gathering headed by the Hon. John Evans, Premier of the Island, who handed him a cheque for £80. Many high tributes were paid to his personal worth, his untiring efficient and self-sacrificing service on behalf of the Colony. The testimonial given so heartily and with such cordial good wishes is one of which Mr. Beattie might well be proud . . . as are his friends in Aberdeen, etc."

John was a founder of the Tourist Association formed to promote interest in the State, and I dare say this next item was inspired by him. In 1899, his photographs were used for a unique purpose—for use on the first full set of landscape postage stamps ever issued. They were beautifully engraved and printed by De La Rue and Co. of London. All the school-boys and philatelists of the world collected them, and their advertising value must have been tremendous. They were so popular, and were bought and hoarded in such vast quantities, that in 50 years they have advanced little in intrinsic value.

John and his wife and two daughters, Jean and Muriel, lived in a large house on a steep hillside in North Hobart, from the home they had a magnificent view of mountains and valleys and waterways, at their back was Mt. Wellington, below them lay the city, and beyond was a view right down the glorious harbour to the Tasman Sea.

One morning in 1911, John saw from his balcony a strange ship lying out in the stream.

THE STORY OF THE CAMERA IN AUSTRALIA

As was usual with people who live in a seaport, its identity was discussed as they went to work on the trams.

John's curiosity was soon satisfied when he arrived at his studio and found his private office occupied by five sailors sitting around a small chest which apparently held some great treasure.

"I," said the leader, "am Roald Amundsen, and here are all the plates taken on our expedition. I want you yourself, sir, to develop all these hundreds of plates. I want to stay with you and see it done, and I want my men to guard them here tonight."

"Then they are very important?" enquired John. "That you will know from your newspaper tomorrow" replied Amundsen, "at present our doctor is at the post office cabling our story to Europe, but today it is a secret. If anyone steals it we are ruined, for the copyright fees will pay all the costs of our journey."

Next day every paper in the world carried the headline—

AMUNDSEN REACHES SOUTH POLE.

I do not know how long it took John to develop the plates, but Jean Beattie writes me: "I remember father coming home at night and saying how glad he was that it was all over successfully."

There was not a plate broken, not a faulty exposure, nor an unprintable negative amongst them.

Imagine the drama and the tension as those two men stood there in the dark, their faces dimly lit by the deep ruby lamp above the sink—Amundsen with his hooked nose and pointed beard must have looked a perfect stage Mephisto. John's head was over the great trough that was filled with dishes and bottles as he hurried the plates with the images he could faintly see, from dish to dish . . . a little more pyrogallic acid to force strength into this negative . . . some potassium bromide to restrain the development of another . . . a dash of soda carbonate to bring detail into a heavy shadow in one of the sledges . . . and all these thin glass plates to be handled and treasured as though they were more precious than diamonds—as they certainly were.

He made a perfect job of these most difficult subjects. There had been no sun during the dash to the Pole, to sparkle the wastes of snow and ice; wrongly handled those negatives could have been featureless, but John got every subtle sheen and glimmer that gave modelling and form to the endless world of snow.

As he bent over his dishes, John was the first man in the world to see a picture of the South Pole . . . the tent, the flag, the records left in that barren waste which Captain Scott and his brave men discovered a few weeks later—only to lose their lives on the return journey, and by all the romance and heroism of their tragic story condition a generation of boys to heroics.

Captain Scott did not come to Hobart, but his ship the *Terra Nova* with many of his men, had anchored in the Derwent. Tasmanians felt they were closely linked with this epic story of men who had walked their streets and lived amongst them. Four years later John photographed these youngsters of the heroic tradition as they went into camp at

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Claremont. He took them again as they marched the city roads down to transports which bore them to a far war.

There were not many of them, but they won 694 decorations, including eleven Victoria Crosses.

After those plates of Amundsen's were developed the staff had to turn to and print thousands of copies. The *Fram* stayed thirteen days in the harbour, and then sailed to South America. The fabric of our history is a closely woven thing. Here in this little island, Sir John Franklin once lived and governed. In 1845 he set out to navigate the North West Passage in the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, and somewhere in the Arctic Sea he and his whole party perished. Now to this same place came Amundsen the conqueror of the Antarctic, and the first man to navigate the North West Passage.

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John Beattie's publications include: *Historical Photographs relating to Tasmania; An Excursion to Port Arthur*, 1845; *Glimpses of the Life and Times of the Early Governors of Tasmania*. There are six booklets of Lectures sold with his sets of lantern slides. Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4 are of "Northern", "Southern", "Eastern", and "Western Tasmania"; No. 5 "The Lake Country of Tasmania"; and No. 6 "Port Arthur and Tasman's Peninsula illustrating the Convict Days of Van Diemen's Land".

In 1933, John's studio was completely destroyed by fire. A few singed prints were all that could be rescued, but not one negative was saved. Many libraries have albums of his pictures, and the files of *The Tasmanian Mail*, Hobart, and *The Weekly Courier*, Launceston—together with their Illustrated Annuals—contain many beautiful reproductions of his work.

John and my father were lifelong friends. They both retired about the same time and visited each other several times a week. It was John's turn to come to our home on 24th June, 1930. After talking to my father for an hour he left to meet his wife at a relative's home in Sandy Bay. Soon after arriving there he collapsed in a chair and expired in his wife's arms.

John Watt Beattie was a fine man. Next day the *Hobart Mercury* published a column and a half obituary notice recording his great services to Tasmania. He was seventy-one years of age.