

PLOD ESSAY: ‘Let’s Go Out to the Wreck’ by Joe & Lyn Chambers

Every year about this time, I re-visit the book Out to the Wreck by Joe & Lyn Chambers. Joe supplied the memories and Lyn the research. Lyn could tell history very well, but it was Joe who had a way with language that was authentic and wonderful.

The first chapter called “Let’s Go Out to the Wreck” is a beloved piece because it shows the children of the miners living confidently in an environment they knew and loved.

Lyn Chambers was my introduction to the Historical Society. She had me sit next to her in the front row when I began attending meetings. She had strong political views and guided my thinking about the history of Wonthaggi. When she died, I felt at sea and didn’t know where to sit when I came into the Museum at 7:30 on the third Thursday of each the month.

Here is a bit of the Chambers’ essay, an appropriate piece for this time of year:

“Let’s go to the Wreck!” was a hot weather call. Any time after Guy Fawkes Day and the winner of the Melbourne Cup was old-hat, the cry would be raised, “Let’s go out the Wreck!”

It was less that 3 miles (5kms) due south from Three-Acre Blocks, where my family lived, to the sand dunes and breakers of Bass Strait. Cameron Street’s bumpy, rutted blue-stone and clay ended at the cemetery and from the top of the hill, the Wreck Track – or tracks – led through bogs, lagoons, and stretches of sand to where Coal Creek reached the sea.

The biggest, stickiest, deepest bog on the track was the worst one where Don’s Road meets Harmer’s Haven Road today (1980s) and this made the track impassable for any of the dozen or so cars that Wonthaggi possessed in the 20s. Jinkers or spring carts could get through with difficulty; horseback was better, and booted pedestrians could walk the bottom wire of the fence, but the fastest traveller of all was a bare-footed boy. We travelled at a shuffling trot that allowed for no stops (apart from a snake or a blue-tongue). If anyone wanted to rest or time to get a thistle out of his toe, he had to sprint ahead for one-hundred yards till the bunch caught up with him.

The huge knarled corner-post Joes Dean’s farm fence, which was a masterpiece of twisted, tapering posts and wires strained with capstan –like iron cotton reels, was counted as the half-way mark to the beach. From there on, there were no fences, but the track full of detours made by jinkers and carts looking for

higher ground to avoid the lagoons, some of which were two for three feet deep and one-hundred yards long, continued on. Barefoot travellers scorned all deviations and followed the straightest track possible, urged on by tantalizing glimpses of the sea and the every increasing roar of the surf.

At last the track dropped down the steep, loose sand of the ancient beachhead and skirted along a green edged swamp. A narrow path through a tall thicket of melaleuca, it-tree and banksia ended abruptly at a steep, bare drop of golden dune. Here at last was the glorious recompense for the long hot sand and sometimes muddy journey. Within seconds the slope was scattered with shirts, pants and gunny bags and we were savouring again the greenish glow, rusty smell and the unforgettable brackish amalgam of rain and sea that was Wreck Creek.

Sixty years ago that part of the creek was an open sunny pool four or five feet deep and perhaps, twenty or thirty yards long. It was sheltered by dunes from the sea-breeze and with a clean peaty bottom. The eastern bank was a level reedy earth plateau a couple of feet above the water line. The other bank was sandy and gently sloping. At the seaward end, where the creek broke through to the beach was very old ti-tree, sanded in on the south side and with a thick canopy of creeper and dead leaves. This formed a natural tent or hut with a floor of warm dry sand. This is where we slept when we camped therefor the night.

We set a night-line on time, staked into the sand and with a tin of pebbles to warn us of a ‘bite’. In the small hours the tine rattled and the little beach became a welter of excited boys trying to dispose of a big, writhing, wriggling eel, with a blunt old kitchen knife. We had no light and it took a long time to sort out the tangle of bran-bag, blankets and wet shirts.

The water in the pool was too brackish to drink. We had to walk about half a mile eastwards along the beach to a “soak” in the cliff. It took an hour or two for the kero tin to fill, but we always whiled away the wait with shell gathering on the rock shelf or sliding down the dunes.

We never swam in the open sea at the wreck. Because of the steep beach it was considered very dangerous and we had to promise our parents to confine our swimming to the creek. In 1923, a family friend of ours was drowned at the Backbeach towards Kilcunda and the memory of this kept us out of the surf at the Wreck.

The northerly facing dune above the creek was well covered with bushes, but there were some small open patches where, on sea-breeze days, we would wriggle a soft patch in the hot sand and alternate between frizzle and shiver as the great white clouds swept in off the sea. One school holiday, we were all stark naked in the pool when we heard women's voices at the top of the hill. There was no time to grab our scattered clothes; we were straight up the dune to the friendly shelter of the bushes where we lay there in silence while the unseen ladies made their way to the beach. Suddenly we heard a very familiar voice – Miss Malloch, an American exchange teacher from the Tech! Her strong southern tones echoed off the water: "I guess someone must own all these clothes!" We kept our heads down and like Brer Rabbit, "Lay low and said nothing."

This refuge halfway up the dune was also our favourite spot for the endless discussion, arguments and wrangles and enlivened the long days. A constant topic of conversation was the possibility of damming the creek and so deepening the swimming-hole by blowing up the sand dune on the seaward side of the mouth of the creek. We often blocked the flow of the water with driftwood and sand, but this only raised the water level by a few inches and the work always had to be done again on our next visit.

Gelignite, detonators and fuse were familiar items in a mining ton and although there were strict regulations on the use of explosives in the mine and its storage in the powder magazines, the plugs of "Jelly" and little square tins of detonators were familiar to most boys.

One Saturday morning I had chores to do, but I was going to join my younger brothers and their friends at the Wreck in the afternoon. I wasn't aware, but it soon became known – due to very young brother Neil McLaren dobbing to his mother – that the boys were going to meet Ronny Dean who was armed with plugs, detonators, fuses and a 'little' of his father's explosive powder, and blow-up the Wreck Creek.

The parents were a boil of excitement. They sent my older brother set out on his bike. He managed to overtake the party within one-hundred yard of the creek. And so it was that the first big beach development at the Wreck was thwarted, and the creek was to trickly its quiet way to the ocean.

The sand dunes were for rolling and sliding and though the shell-patches in the sheltered spots were common and the large mutton fish [abalone] shells were often dug out of the soft drifts, we had little

curiosity as to how they came there. Our formal schooling had given us many stories of the brave settler explorers who *found* Australia. The significance of the shell-patches right under our noses was never mentioned.

That was a lightly edited version of chapter one of the Chambers' book. Chapter Two is called "Their Own Land". It begins:

It is less than two-hundred years since the surf, cliffs, and dunes of the Wreck Beach were first scanned by European eyes. The dark eyes that had possibly followed the slow progress of George Bass' whaleboat as he charted the coastline had behind them an accumulated knowledge of the land that stretched back at least 10,000 years.

Millions of high tides had smoothed the footprints of these people as they moved from rock shelves and pools to the shelter of the dunes and the shores of the small creek...

There is evidence to suggest that the ground from Anderson to Inverloch had been heathland for a very long time. Possums would have been plentiful in the large coastal banksias near the dunes; Koalas would have lived in the stands of eucalypts that crowned the low hills within mile or two of the Wreck campsite. Even in the 1920s there were koalas in the trees to the south of Wonthaggi. The roots of the rushes, flags and yams, thistle stalks, the soft pulpy growth just under the leaves of the grass tree, gum from wattle trees sometimes melted in water, mushrooms and other fungi, fruits of wild cherry, wild raspberry, a drink from blossoms of banksia and box pounded and mixed with water, the larvae of ants, and insects, honey from the long hedges of ti-tree, melaleuca, banksia and wattle and, of course, snakes and lizards. All of this would have been available within a mile or two of the Wreck Creek

How lucky the children of Wonthaggi were to have fathers whose work as coal miners landed them in such a wondrous playground...

When you go down to the beach today, you can tell the kids who aren't tourists. They are the ones taking care of themselves and each other, investigating the rocks and pools, just as their fathers and grandfathers did. They are never wandering aimlessly. They are the ones who know where they are.

We should all re-read this book at least once a year.

