

PLOD ESSAY: Tom Gannon's Obsession

On 1 December 1955, the frenzy over "Wonthaggi's mystery" began to mount, and it was on that day that Tom Gannon, editor of the *Powlett Express*, began writing articles about claims of sightings of a strange animal by those living or passing through the area surrounding Wonthaggi.

There had always been sightings of mysterious creatures over the years: The Yarram Elephant has been part of folklore since the mid 1800s; the Gunyah Lion had been seen near Morwell in the 30s, the Warragul Panther apparently prowled the dairy farms of West Gippsland for years, although no one ever saw it close-up, nor were cattle maimed by such a creature.

Tom Gannon kept the articles he wrote about the claims he investigated over the years. He taped them into a makeshift scrapbook, a Shell Exercise Book with THE MONSTER written where a student's name should be and "38 McKenzie Street, Wonthaggi" where the child's grade should have been recorded. The first article in the scrapbook was published in the just five years after Gannon took the running of the *Express* over from his father, Tom Senior, who had died suddenly and left his 22-year-old son in charge. To a young journalist trying to fill his father's shoes, a story about a Monster seemed too good to pass up.

This first article was called WHAT'S UP THAT TREE? Being a trained journalist, Gannon interviewed the two people who saw the creature, and, clearly feeling a bit sceptical, he also interviewed an 'expert', and even contacted a circus that had recently passed through the area to find out if any of their animals had gone missing. Here is the article in full:

"A strange animal with a blood-curdling yell, startled Fred Rollinson of Inverloch Rd Wonthaggi and his employee, Mrs Sturgess, at 7:30 am Monday morning, 'And I hadn't been drinking,' laughed Mrs Sturgess. 'It was up a tree, big as a dog, with large claws, large head, furry body, striped like a zebra with a long tail. When I heard the yell, I thought it was children looking for a lost calf. When it saw me, it sprang 15 ft. to the ground and disappeared. I've seen goannas, frill-necked lizards, wild cats and foxes, but it was none of them.'

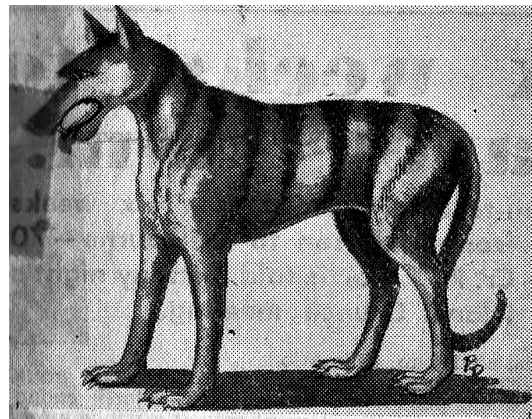
"A circus passing through Wonthaggi last month did not report and missing animals.

"Mr Crosbie Morrison said last night, 'Apart from the fact that the animal is described as having stripes, it sounds like a Greater Possum Glider. This is a rather rare animal now and normally comes out only at night, but this one probably went to bed late. The possum glider does not have stripes. However, the shadows of

branched of the tree might quite easily look as if it had stripes. If Mrs Sturgess insists that the animal really had stripes, then it may be a domestic cat gone wild.'"

This article stirred up public and by 8th December Gannon wrote, "The Monster's got us! Not since the 1937 mine disaster has Wonthaggi been so stirred. Nobody is talking about anything except the Animal. The Monster some call it. Shop assistants are quizzed. If the customer doesn't raise the subject, shop assistants do. One hotel notice board reads: IT HASN'T BEEN CAUGHT YET"

An article in the same edition of the *Express* said, "Searchers will gather at 18 Shaft, Inverloch Road on Sunday afternoon to a all-out drive to locate Wonthaggi's mystery." This was after Mr Ern Featherstone and others saw it "loping along the Inverloch Road on Tuesday morning."



Ern Featherston's impression of The Monster.

By December 21, four days before Christmas, a headline read, EVERYBODY IS SEEING IT NOW! But it soon became invisible as the holidays took over everyone's focus. In February the Headline was, "OUR" Monster gone Walkabout?" after someone reported that it had been seen at Mirboo North. By June 1956, it was back again. This time it ate a sheep. The Melbourne broadsheet, *The Argus*, got wind of it and sent a reporter and a photographer to the area. They had a "veteran hunting" dog with them, which tracked down the monster in the ti-tree after an all-day search through 10 miles of scrub country. But it escaped with no photograph taken, "Only the dog got a good look..."

Gannon taped that article in his scrapbook, possibly, as he did so, chuckling at the incompetence of the city journalists and the exaggerated portrayal of the 'search'.

Over the years, traps were set; footprints were seen on Honey's farm; reports came in of dogs and foxes being eaten. Finally, a bloodhound, "one of only

five pure-bred bloodhounds in Australia” was brought in and the plan was that as soon as he found the Monster, a pack of Scottish deerhounds would be released to chase it down. No luck. But it made great headlines.

Gannon, who did his cadetship at the *Truth Newspaper*, as did many of Victoria’s best journalists in the 30s and 40s, knew how to keep a story going with banner headlines offering rewards, poems sprinkled through editions, publication of fan letters written to the monster. So much of the publicity was tongue-in-cheek. One small article read: “Wonthaggi’s shopping centre buzzed with rumour last Friday that the monster had been shot...but it was not a monster; it was a 320lb wild pig, which was felled by a fusillade of .303 bullets as it was feeding by moonlight in Kongwak butter factory’s whey dam.”

In 1957, to keep things going and papers selling, *The Powlett Express* regularly published a page devoted to “Stories we would like to write.” A headline on this page was, CROWDS FLOCK TO SEE THE MONSTER. It is a delightful fantasy about the monster being caught bare-handed by the milkman, called The Flying Milko, and how it was displayed at the Melbourne Town Hall after being sent to a taxidermist and then returned to Wonthaggi where it opened “an era of unprecedented prosperity for the Council” even being feature on TV. This was one year after TV came to Australia, after all.

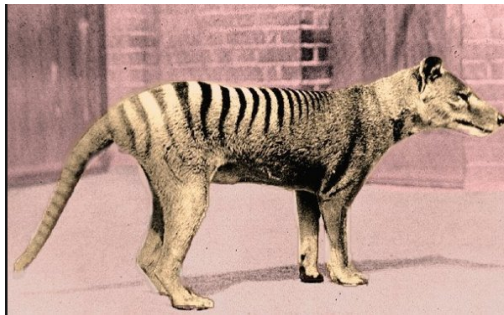
Articles in this vein went on for years but in September, 1965, Gannon reported the possible death of the Monster, when the body of a dog-like animal was found by a woman while she and a friend were walking along the beach six miles east of Inverloch. “There looked like there was a gash in its stomach, which appears to have caused its death.” Gannon concluded the article, “The Wonthaggi ‘Monster’ was well authenticated. A total of 52 people have reported having seen it around the district over the past few years.”

Gannon was mostly having fun with the Monster stories. Some said that if he were ever short of a story in his paper, he would add something about the monster to get things going, but the tone of the articles began to change in the late 1960s when Gannon began to declare his seriousness about the existence of the monster. He referred to it as a Tasmanian Tiger like animal as, “light fawn coloured, short-haired and striped on its back and hindquarters...” In the 70s

people began talking seriously about Tasmanian Tigers or Thylacine, as they are more commonly known now.

Thylacinus cynocephalus had become extremely rare or extinct on the Australian mainland before British settlement of the continent, but it survived on the island of Tasmania along with several other endemic species, including the Tasmanian devil. Intensive hunting encouraged by bounties is generally blamed for its extinction, but other contributing factors may have been disease, the introduction of dogs, and human encroachment into its habitat. Despite its official classification as extinct, sightings are still reported, though none has been conclusively proven.

Proven or not, newspapers throughout Gippsland were reporting sightings of the Thylacine without any of the hysteria that accompanied earlier sightings. Mostly people were excited and impressed with what they had seen. Gannon continued to be inundated with information about sightings. Usually, it was people seeing it cross a road in an uninhabited section along the



coast. Many sightings occurred near Bass/Grantville area. In fact, one of our esteemed members is absolutely positive he saw an animal he was sure was a Thylacine just outside of Bass. Although it was a fleeting experience, he has never forgotten it.

Another esteemed member of the Historical Society, who is a locally renowned bird-watcher had a much more controlled and lingering look at the animal she knows to be a Thylacine. Nola Thorpe, was with a group of bushwalkers, several of them teachers, whom, the *Cowes Advertiser* called practical, down-to-earth Gippslanders, heading towards the Bald Hills Wetland Reserve between Tarwin Lower and Walkerville, when they saw it. It crossed the road and disappeared into a patch of ti-tree. Three of the group followed and found it in a clearing about 300 metres away. Being birders, they had binoculars, so they could look closely without alarming the animal. Nola knew she was looking at a Thylacine. Being a librarian she later researched the animal and found the scientific descriptions were exactly as she and her companions had seen.

The last article taped in Tom Gannon’s scrapbook is dated 29, August 1989. It is a full-page feature article that he wrote about the Tasmanian Tiger based on his long history of reporting, science and his own belief. Thanks for sticking with it, Mr Gannon. It’s been a wonderful ride.

- c r landon