

# HELEN TRESTON

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## An Interview with Percy Trezise

*(Recorded at his Studio in Whitfield, Cairns, 14 July 1991 by Helen Treston, Cairns)*

H.T. People who have lived in North Queensland for a long time have heard of Percy Trezise as a painter, a writer, an anthropologist and ...

P.T. ... an airline pilot

H.T. To divide up our interview, I thought we could talk about each of these in turn.

What inspired you to begin painting?

P.T. I am entirely self-taught, of course, and began painting when I was very young. I just always wanted to paint. During the War, when I was training to be a fighter pilot, I used to whip into the Art Gallery of New South Wales and look at all the McCubbins. Frederick McCubbin was my hero, along with Tom Roberts and all the rest of that crew. I think that the forest paintings of Frederick McCubbin, (the forest paintings, remember those?) inspired my forest paintings — mine are rainforests, his are sclerophyll forests. Two or three years ago Ken Done was asked to select twenty artists from the last two hundred years for the UNICEF Christmas cards, and he chose people like McCubbin, Tom Roberts, and he also chose that one, (pointing), a painting 6 foot long by 4 foot high. It was in a 1988 exhibition we had in Sydney, "The Peopling of Australia" series. It sold for \$9,000, and he chose that for the Christmas cards. So there I was, my picture standing up beside McCubbin's. That was one of the nicest things that ever happened to me — to be selected to be in company like that.

H.T. Would you call that a typical Trezise picture?

P.T. Yes, well that's typical rainforest and that's the typical outback. It's about the Kennedy expedition. Dick Roughsey and I did a series on the Kennedy expedition, and that one shows Jackie Jackie bringing up the straggler horses that got left behind during the day.

H.T. You very often have a strong sunrise or sunset in your paintings.

P.T. Yes, I specialise in skies, as you can see from this triptych with its three backgrounds. My coloured skies come from the Cape York sunsets which are spectacular.

Once we had a bunch of mining blokes up there prospecting for Utah. They came into the Laura pub where some of my paintings were, and looked at them and said "Great paintings. We don't believe your skies, though."

I just said "Well, hang about."

They told me that a few months later they were going through the bush when one of them called out "Look! Stop! Pull up! There's a Percy! And they called them Percies from then on.

H.T. Your rainforest pictures are very dark. They are very different to your open-plain pictures, aren't they?

P.T. Yes, my open-plain pictures often have water-birds and open sky in them.

H.T. The writer Bianca McCullough suggests that you are a "border-line 'naive' painter." What do you think of that term?

P.T. I prefer the term "primitive", however it is a fact that I am no longer a "naive" or "primitive" painter, although some of that flavour still remains.

H.T. What is the extra ingredient that your painting now has?

P.T. Simply painting it as it is, not in the idealistic way of a true "naive" or "primitive" painter. The real "primitive" always takes the aerial view of his subject. Dick Roughsey was a true "primitive", he looked down on his landscape.

H.T. Do you believe that your paintings are all from eye level?

P.T. Yes, I pay particular attention to perspective. My perspective is pretty right, and this is another way in which I differ from the "primitive".

H.T. I've been looking at your paintings for the twenty years I have been in Cairns, and to me your style has not changed a lot in that time. Will there always be a distinctive Trezise style?

P.T. Oh yes, no one else attempts to paint a rainforest like I do. Ray Crooke says that if he were going to do it, he would paint a few leaves with sun shining on the trunk of a tree, and that would be rainforest. For me, being self-taught, I do the lot. I put everything in.

H.T. And for you, is the rainforest dark and forbidding?

P.T. I go for a run every morning up the Whitfield Range. I was up there one morning, looking at the rainforest and realised "No one has ever painted it, and you can't photograph the bloody thing, so I'll have a go

at it." It took me twelve years to get it to the stage I have it now, which is about all you can do with it, I think.

H.T. So for you it is a pleasant dark?

P.T. Yes, I love rainforests. And they nail me (especially the French) as another Rousseau. I'm meeting a French film-crew on Tuesday, so they'll be on the Rousseau bandwagon again.

H.T. You've done a lot of exhibits?

P.T. Yes, Dick and I have had many exhibitions in every state of Australia. We've also had them in Johannesburg and the west coast of America.

H.T. Are you painting much at present?

P.T. No, I haven't done much at all since '88, when I completed "The Peopling of Australia" series. I've been writing a book, *Dream Road*, since then, and my paintings have been mainly 4 foot by 6 foot. It took me two years of intensive effort to do 33 huge paintings. Here's "Battle Camp".

H.T. That's up near Cooktown? That's the right panel.

P.T. And this is the middle panel, which is 12 foot long by 6 foot high. It took me about 30 days of intensive work. There's round about 500 black guys there.

H.T. It reminds me of one of the old paintings of a European battleground.

P.T. The Art Gallery of NSW almost bought this, but then they ran out of money.

H.T. So who's got it now?

P.T. [laughs] I've got it.

H.T. That's a very interesting looking man with white hair standing on the side in the picture.

P.T. He's the director of operations. Those blokes probably organised that attack.

H.T. That painting over there is an Aboriginal-style painting of a kangaroo.

P.T. It is very stylised. It doesn't have to be standing up — it is as though the kangaroo is lying on the ground.

This painting symbolises the coming of the first people, the "robust" people. They had big eyebrow ridges. They were in the time of the volcanoes, and that is a rain-making dance. That is based on Mornington Island culture.

And that's the Rainbow Serpent. There was only one mountain in the world, and he tore it to pieces and scattered it around and made all the

mountains and hills of today, and all the animals came out of it. There were only people who came down from the stars at the start — no animals, no insects, no trees — only the ancestral beings. And they were so frightened of the Rainbow Serpent that they jumped into the air and got wings and flew away. Some jumped into the sea and became fish, some went to the ground and became trees, yams and every other kind of plant. Every living species of life on earth was once human. That is their concept of Genesis.

That dark painting also shows rainforest. It depicts the forward scouting group of the Kennedy expedition being surprised by rain-forest Aborigines somewhere near Innisfail. They were attacked, and they shot their way out of it.

One of those big rainforest paintings was hanging in Keating's former office in Parliament House. It is called "The Fatal Fleet" (people from Indonesia who landed on the north-west shelf many thousands of years ago) as opposed to "The First Fleet". "The First Fleet" was painted by Mary Haginakitas. It's a triptych 6 foot high.

H.T. Is Mary still painting and living in Cairns? I remember her name as co-writer and co-illustrator with you in the story-book my children have *Black Duck and Water Rat*.

P.T. Yes, she's still here. We've just finished another joint book, *Nungadin and Willijen*, but it won't be out until about May next year. And I've got one on the big goanna, *Mungoon-Gali, the Giant Goanna*.

That painting is of an ancient Aboriginal village in western Victoria. You can see stone walls for farming fish and eels.

H.T. These activities look very civilised, and the people have warm clothing.

P.T. Well, they were civilised. That's all been swept under the carpet, you know, deliberately. They didn't want people to believe they were really human. Bodies of over a thousand people have been excavated in villages like this, and you can't have a thousand people without government.

H.T. Do you like to see your art on things like those Christmas cards?

P.T. Yes. That series was a donation to UNICEF, like my donation to the Flying Doctor.

H.T. Joanne Hook who paints scenes of this area was trained as a commercial artist, and now paints and sells on a commercial basis. Do you paint for yourself or your market?

P.T. Well, I only paint my way. I know that my paintings will never sell to the Japanese. They want those orderly, constructed paintings, like

Joanne Hook does, that fit into any modern home. Mine would just look wrong. That doesn't bother me at all.

H.T. Do you paint from a photo?

P.T. No, no, all from memory. Like Gauguin said: "Paint from memory and the soul triumphs". I always work on at least half a dozen paintings at the same time too.

H.T. So you don't ever paint a scene on the spot?

P.T. No, I only paint my feelings about a place. I will see a scene, and mightn't paint it for a year or two. But some one who has been there with me will say: "Oh, there's so and so".

H.T. In the children's books that you have done with Dick Roughsey, I am never sure whether it is your picture or whether it is Dick's. Did you do the pictures or did he?

P.T. I did the landscapes; that's the thing that seems to have tossed everybody. Reviewers used to say: "Roughsey's usual glowing skies." And of course they were not. They were mine. I did the landscape, and Dick put the figures in.

H.T. I was puzzled also about who wrote the story.

P.T. Dick and I gathered that mythology together. He was the interpreter for it. I realised I wasn't understanding properly what the Mornington Islanders were saying in their broken English, and I got Dick to cross-examine them about it. We decided to do the series on the mythology when the old blokes were saying they were very sad that it was all going to die with them. We said: "Well give it to us. We'll publish it and preserve it." So we started off doing it through the children's picture books we did together before Dick died.

I'm changing it now to take in pre-history. I realised that kids know nothing about the mega-fauna of the Ice Age, so I set *Lasca and Her Pups* back in the Ice Age, because the dingo has been here probably at least 40,000 years. I put a foreword in there to explain that Sir Thomas Mitchell found the bones of mega-fauna back in 1831, and among them were the dingo bones.

H.T. Tell me about how you started to write *Quinkan Country*.

P.T. It was the first book I wrote. The reason I wrote it was because Dick wanted to write a book. He'd seen that book by a journalist, Lockwood, *I, the Aborigine*, — the story of one of the Roberts. Dick knew him. I said "Yeah, by God, I'll help you write that book, and it will be your book not under your name — your copyright and you'll get all the money." And I sat down with Dick and realised he didn't know how to write a book. So I thought I had better write one myself first — about something I know. So I wrote *Quinkan Country* which is mainly

mythology. I was completely unaware that most manuscripts that are sent to publishers are rejected. I sent mine to Reeds and they said: "Yeah, beauty, we'll publish it." And I thought "Well, that's easy." So then I helped Dick organise his book — on similar lines, I guess. He did some very good investigative journalism, interviewing the old people about the killing of the Reverend Hall: they chopped him up with a tomahawk. Dick did an excellent writing job, and I sort of edited it for him, and William Collins published *Moon and Rainbow*.

After that I wrote *Rock Art of South-East York*, and then I did *Last Days of a Wilderness* about the history of Cape York.

H.T. I have seen *The Rock Art of South-East Cape York*. It is a very technical book with scale drawings and tracings of many of the cave paintings.

P.T. I took about five or six years to do all that. I showed Dick all those tables and everything, and he said "What does it all mean? It doesn't mean a bloody thing. It's all bullshit", which it was. I decided I wouldn't write anything else till I bloody well knew what I was talking about. In 1986 we found a large very clear painting of a diprotodont, a marsupial as large as a bullock, which has been extinct for at least 15,000 years. Then I understood. The day I sat under that rock painting, I had the same experience as Isaac Newton must have had when he sat underneath the apple-tree and the bloody apple fell on his head. He understood gravity and I understood the prehistory of Australia. There had been two populations of people here. That panel of paintings had been done by a totally different kind of people who had done the engravings on the other side.

That's a full-scale copy of that painted animal.

H.T. So you copied it off the rock onto a stencil and then onto a piece of canvas?

P.T. Yes. Some of the academics are trying to turn it into a horse and some say it is a pig. This is a very, very old painting, done long before pigs and horses were domesticated anywhere in the world. It's more than 20,000 years old. At first I thought there were spears in the picture, but as you can see, they are actually ropes that go right over the body. They were doing something with the diprotodonts, probably exercising some kind of animal husbandry during the droughts to save them. The extermination of diprotodonts deprived us of beautiful animals, sometimes called the gentle giants of Dreamtime. Those huge animals would have been just like big tame wombats. They would have been easy to tame, because, like wombats, and other marsupials, they have a divided brain. You can catch a wallaby or wombat in the same trap day after day, because they never learn.

H.T. Was your life as airline pilot cum explorer, two different roles?

- P.T. No, they're fairly together really. When I came to Cairns in 1956 it was a three year posting with ANA. When I started flying over Cape York Peninsula, there were no roads. I wondered what traces of man might be left there. Then I heard in 1959 that they'd discovered a remarkable series of rock-art galleries near Laura, when the first road builders went through. So, I went up there with Xavier Herbert in 1960 to have a look at them, and I was riveted by the whole thing. I realised it was too sophisticated to be an isolated occurrence. It had to be a part of a body of art traditional to the region. I commenced to look over the side of the DC3 looking for similar sorts of places, and then going up and investigating them on foot. So, we started finding them 31 years ago and are still finding them.
- H.T. Do you think there's more rock-art to be found up there?
- P.T. Oh, lots more. There's huge areas we haven't looked at yet. We don't need to look too hard at all. We found eleven new sites last year.
- H.T. The people in that Laura area would have been a different type of people to the Mornington Islander, Dick Roughsey, type of people?
- P.T. Oh yes, they were quite different. The Mornington Islanders were different to everybody else because they're the only people in Australia who were not invaded and humiliated. They have always walked tall. They weren't taught that they were inferior to us. All that happened was the missionaries came along and told them to stop their heathen practices and ceremonies, whereas the Laura people had the hell shot out of them. They were murdered and there were attempts at genocide.
- H.T. And your interest in anthropology?
- P.T. I've been interested in Aborigines ever since I won a book prize in high school. The book I got was *The Red Centre*, and that really turned me on. Down there you never saw a dark skin and, when I was a kid down there running around in the bush in the Upper Murray, I always had a feeling for the Aboriginal people who once must have been there. And we heard talk occasionally of the Maraccan blacks on the Upper Murray, and I thought "Well what happened to them?" They died of small-pox and all the other white man's diseases.
- H.T. So there weren't Aborigines in Victoria?
- P.T. Only a few. Then, when I went with Air Beef in 1955, I found fullblood Aborigines refuelling aeroplanes in the Kimberleys. It rekindled my interest again and it was also my first experience of winter in the tropics. I thought "How long has this been going on for?" So I went back to Melbourne and lobbied for a year for the first vacancy — in Cairns. I came up here and used the airline aeroplane, and I was also with the Aerial Ambulance for ten years, to find most of the rock art sites. I never could have done it without aeroplanes.

- H.T. It was at that time, about twenty years ago that I first heard of you in the media — as a pilot discovering rock art from the air.
- P.T. We used to have exciting finds every year, and it was very much promoted. About that time I had a big barney with the bureaucrats. I wouldn't tell them where the sites were. I said "I have no right to tell you where they are. They belong to the Aborigines. People will put them at risk." That's when we had the big "Quinkan affair". And after the Churchill Fellowship in 1972, I set out to buy nearly 400 square miles of Crocodile Station to turn into reserves. That was really stepping on the bureaucrats' corns, and they took to me with a big stick. I couldn't get registered in the Justice Department, and finally I tricked them by pretending to hand over \$20,000 of illegally-collected public monies. I had my photo published in *The Cairns Post* — they thought it must be true. (Chuckles) And they really fell for it hook, line and sinker. That's where we got them into a legal situation and, of course, beat the pants off them there. And when the ministers found out that they had been misled by the bureaucrats, that was the end of it. Where they were sackable, they sacked them, and I got my reserve. But they still, for fifteen years, managed to keep the black fellas out of it. But with the Goss government, they are getting their entitlements.
- H.T. So what's going to happen to the area over the next 20 or 30 years?
- P.T. Those people are really excited about it; they are all walking tall. They are land holders around the place. As well as the Quinkan reserves, there is about 150 acres of freehold land in Laura. It had a cafe on it, now there is a caravan park on it. They are now actually running the caravan park, and within a year will take over the cafe and learn to run that. They own half the land-holdings in town.
- H.T. Are Aborigines rangers and do they take people up to the caves and the surrounding areas?
- P.T. They will be; that's going to happen next year. They have to give the tour operators a year's notice, so they can bring out brochures with the built-in costs to take people into reserves. It's got to pay for itself. If people pay say \$2 to see the Quinkan art, it will pay for the cost of the rangers.

## Update with Percy Trezise, March 1993

P.T. *Dream Road* is finished, and will be published by Allen and Unwin in September this year. I will be launching it at an art exhibition at Holdsworth Galleries in Sydney.

When I was editing it, I realised that it was a book ahead of its time. The geomorphological evidence of a vast antiquity was everywhere in the rock art sites of Cape York Peninsula, but most archaeologists were still insisting that all of the art styles were contained within the last 10,000 years of the Holocene, even those covered by thick silica skins. They would burn me and my book at the stake.

Then last year significant dates began to emerge. We had already dated a hafted stone axe excavated from our Sandy Creek dig in 1969 at more than 32,000 years old. The axe had been at 3 metres deep, but we had not found any charcoal to date it. Mike Morwood, from the University of New England, had excavated alongside our dig and dated artefacts above the axe level at 32,000 years B.P.

In April '92, Prof Peter Davies of Sydney Uni, and Dr Peter Kershaw of Monash Uni announced the oldest dates yet for human occupation of Australia. Off-shore drilling of ancient corallite rock had yielded charcoal and pollen, which they present as sure evidence that people were burning a conifer-dominated rainforest behind Cairns 150,000 years ago.

In September of last year Dr Alan Watchman announced that osculates covering a layer of ochre paint at Sandy Creek had been carbon-dated to 24,000 B.P.

This was followed by Dr Rhys Jones, who had used a new technique, thermoluminescence, to date a layer containing utilised ochre paint material to 56,000 B.P. in Arnhem Land.

New evidence coming forward from many disciplines indicates that even the oldest dates may yet be doubled or trebled.