Breaksea Island breaks up the huge south-easterly seas rolling towards King George Sound on the south coast of Western Australia. The island has been home to two lighthouses, the first built by the British in 1858. Now it is little more than a rusting plinth of riveted metal, overshadowed by its stoic successor. The island was also home to the lighthouse keepers and before and now a disparate group of people hailing from all parts of the world.

The only jetty on Breaksea Island faces north. It is not in good repair. A Department of Environment and Conservation sign cautions the public to not climb on, moor at or access the jetty but, even during mild weather, it is the only safe place to disembark.

“What are your intentions, exactly?”

I heard the regional manager’s intake of breath over the phone when I explained that I wanted to camp on Breaksea Island for a week. As part of my research history of the sealing gangs who lived there in 1826, I want to see how the island feels.

“It’s a registered nature reserve. You can day visit but we don’t normally let people camp out there. You’ll have to write a letter to DEC requesting permission to stay overnight on the island.”

The Department of Environment and Conservation classes most islands off the coast of Western Australia as nature reserves and this ‘asking permission’ applies to all of them. I decided to take the regional manager’s instructions literally; I wrote the letter, outlined my self sufficiency, attached some academic referees and dropped it into the local office. Then I left for the island.
Sea Rescue knew where I was going. I went to see them about the logistics and safety aspects of staying on the island. “Are you from DEC?” one of them had growled.

“No. Do you have to tell them I’m out there?” The old salt chuckled wheezily, denim Stubby shorts, wrinkled brown legs and thongs, a yellow pack of Champion Ruby sticking out his shirt pocket,

“Be delighted not to, love,” he said. “They treat the place like they own it. But they don’t, yer know. We all own it.”

“Don’t light a cooking fire,” my Dad advised. “There’s a bloke on the mainland with a telescope who watches the island. He reports anyone he sees on Breaksea. Rings up DEC.” Dad lent me a single burner cooking stove and wistfully wished me good luck.

The shark fisherman left once he had seen to my hauling water, swag, food and the rest of my gear the eight metres up to the landing. I watched his wake slew over the choppy seas of King George Sound before the bright autumn sun on water swallowed him. Then there was no one but rabbits, crows, seals, skinks, muttonbirds and me. Once I recovered from leaving my tobacco on the boat, I looked for a camping spot. Breaksea Island is a steep mountain. To access the lighthouse and keeper’s houses two kilometres east of the landing, a single track was carved into the edges of the island, zigzagging across the mountain’s warm north side. Other than the track itself, I did not find anywhere flat and sheltered. I did however find the bones of petrified forests that resembled ancient massacre sites. The fairy penguins burrowed to make their homes under this limestone. Their trident tracks poured out of the little caves in orderly, business-like rows.

On the south side where the island dropped away to the sudden ocean, the sand was scattered with real bones from the last calesivirus outbreak. Rabbit skulls rolled away from my feet into a wild sea. The survivors burst out of bushes and cotton tailed down the sandy path ahead of me, a picture of fecundity. After all my wanderings the jetty proved the best place to sleep. Anywhere more suitable was too far away to carry my gear.

That night was not gentle. I thought sleeping nights on a jetty would be filled with the halcyon sounds of water lapping against the pylons. How wrong I was, about the sounds and the sleeping bit. At dusk, the fairy penguins started a collective cry like distressed babies as they marched down to the water. Massive seas poured into the crevice eight metres below. Sucked back. Held its breath. I couldn’t see the waves but their sound filled the darkness and threatened to
annihilate me a thousand times in a night. I waited for the king wave. All night, a loose boulder klonked with every rush of water. I thought the sky began to lighten and that I could rise. Blinded by the Nokia. 1.30 am. Four hours until dawn. I headed for the hole in the jetty, a fistful of toilet paper and a bellyful of chilli beans. A strange melody in four notes began, the singing or whistling of a man ... a, f, b, a ... Over and over again. The relentless briny bashed stone. That trickster dawn glowed silver beyond the black beams of the jetty. I trod the rotten planks back to my swag and lay down. A sudden storm ripped across the sky, rubbing out the Southern Cross and wetting my exposed face. The sea felt bigger and bigger.

All night the muttonbirds called ... chee whip! Chee whip! Beside my head, a nesting muttonbird stood dodo-ish by her sandy burrow. I could have reached out from my swag and wrung her neck. “Run a wick through a muttonbird,” was a sailor's making do for a candle or slush lamp. Muttonbirds, so called by some for the fatty, gamey nature of their flesh. Some called them shearwaters for their hunting habit of shearing the waves with the tip of a wing and others called them moonbirds; homeless it is said - forever flying the oceans in search of their piece of the moon that created the Pacific Ocean when it fell from Earth.

A pilchard boat motored through the channel, its starboard light giving the gunwale a greenish tinge. Nearly dawn. Nearly time to rise. I kept my head lamp turned off until the boat was well out of sight.

A BOY’S OWN WEEKENDER

The next day, in a cigarette-deprived haze, I walked the track to the peak of the island and explored the old lighthouse dwellings. In the rubble of the original limestone house, the iron wreck of the first lighthouse dominated a Miss Havisham-like living room. Scrubby island flora carpeted the rooms. Rabbits had moved in. Orange lichen flared under the exposed roof beams. No paint was left on the sash window frames looking out to a still, grey sea. I found a penny. It must have slipped between the floorboards a century ago and now the floorboards were rotten and Queen Victoria lay there, verdegris against the white sand.

The lighthouse keeper's wife liked cotyledons, I thought, surveying the garden that had escaped into
the bush. The neat, green succulents thrived on the island, radiating further from the lighthouse year after year. One hundred years later, her need to cultivate some familiarity on the stony, lonely, windswept island had created concentric circles of weeds. Someone had recently begun pulling out the cotyledons and mulching them. But the small pile of garden refuse now sprouted its own lighthouse garden; juicy round leaves searching through sticks and earth and roots for sunlight. The weed had proved more resilient than the energy or the funding source used to eradicate it.

The newer buildings were granite and in the process of being renovated. Warning signs prohibited entry. Orange plastic safety fencing surrounded the perimeters. Rotting wood and asbestos lay about in messy heaps. Inside; four wheeler motorbikes, solar-powered lights, a functioning kitchen, plastic boxes of non-perishables, casks of red wine and a nice bottle of white, a visitors book; “Another day at work in paradise, March 5th.” Shit. They’d only been here five days ago. Recent newspaper articles were cut out and left on the table, about DEC’s intentions to turn Breaksea Island into a world class eco resort.

I wondered about this proposed eco resort and whether they would have to helicopter in the guests. Boat trips in these waters can be unpredictable, even dangerous. Booking berths would be about as reliable as booking childbirth. A holiday on Breaksea Island would only be available to those who could afford to pay. I suddenly understood the regional manager’s tone, when I had told him I wanted to camp here. DEC already had a program for ‘paying volunteers’ who wanted an authentic eco experience in the bush or on islands. Even nature has to earn her keep.

Exiles And Island Wives

Around the buildings and other signs of human industry, I felt alone, even lonely. Plus I found myself searching the ground outside the buildings for cigarette butts. I left civilisation where the pathways faded like misleading kangaroo trails. I crashed through waist high scrub on my way to the far eastern end of the island. The fisherman who dropped me off had told me often enough, “remember that the sea will come up as high as the rock is bald,” and here the southern ocean smashed into a mountain of streaked granite. Rough country it was, where the wife’s cotyledons paused to reconsider their colonisation. Red-berried bushes, westringias and pink rice flowers looked like pretty meadows in the distance, until I found myself tangled amongst them.
I worked my way down to the walls and bosses of stone and then began climbing towards the west until I was across the channel from Breaksea's sister island, Michaelmas. Here the swell was calmer and less unpredictable. I came across a crèche of seal pups lolling on a slimy ledge, with one mother lazily looking on.

Further to the west, halfway back to my jetty home, I stopped to look for crab berley and limpet bait. By then I was barefoot and carrying my elastic sided boots. I watched the flat, oily circle of water in front of me, thinking about those Chinaman limpets. She slid out of the sea and looked straight at me.

The British, American and Australian sealing gangs moved into Western Australian waters after decimating the seal population of the entire eastern coast of Australia. More than a million sealskins were officially accounted for by 1830. The skins were salted, stashed, sold and then sailed to a global market for British hats and shoes and the cloaks of Chinese Mandarins. British white women paid to wear sealskin. Seal oil lit up the streets and greased machinery. This economy created another trade - Aboriginal coastal women for the sealers' slaves and wives. The sealers then imprisoned the women on islands all along the southern coast, including Breaksea Island.

She stayed a while, this mother seal, diving and popping up, circling underwater, swirling, bottling and then rising with a mist of sea spray about her whiskers. She would become a friend if I stayed. I sang a song to her. I saw my reflection in her black eyes: a stranger in a red coat, holding my boots in one hand and a filleting knife in the other, mouth ovalled with song. Fishing was out of the question with her around.

Instead of fish for lunch, I walked back to the jetty and ate a big chunk of fruitcake. When the effects of the sugar wore off, I fell asleep in the lanolin-scented confines of my swag. I awoke later in the shade of the island, sun slipping away, my skin tightened, fingers swollen and my eyes a bit gooey. I wriggled out of the swag and sat on the rocks near the water, curled into myself, watched the water change.

Two sealing gangs from the Hunter and the Governor Brisbane brought Pallawah and South Australian women to Breaksea Island. They abducted a little Njunga girl from the Esperance area and two Menang women from the mainland of King George Sound. To make the abduction of the women possible, the sealers first enticed five Menang men into a whaleboat under the pretence of going muttonbirding. They shot one man dead on Green Island and took the remaining four out to Michaelmas Island, where they marooned them for eight weeks.
The north side of Breaksea where I sat and watched the water was the same place where Menang women would have watched the island Michaelmas for their kin, for their fires. Maybe they could have heard each other's cries, if the wind was right.

Pallawah women would have watched the water here too, watched for that glint of oars in water at night. They listened for the crunch of a keel against stone. Rare arrivals or departures could change the course of the fortunes of the little community. The sealers' employers had abandoned them; one had pirated the schooner and sailed it to Batavia, the other hit financial trouble and was busy trying to sell his ship in Mauritius.5

The captain of the French expeditionary ship Astrolabe met the Breaksea Islanders in King George Sound. He came upon a disgruntled community. Already abandoned, they were also the shell-shocked refuse from the Napoleonic Wars, from Te Rauparaha's nightmarish invasion of the South Island of New Zealand, from American slavery, from Port Arthur's Empire-sanctioned sadists and from the Black Line of Van Diemen's Land.6

Astrolabe's Captain d'Urville said of the Breaksea Islanders that he 'never tired of wondering at this strange gathering of these wretched mortals of such different origins and education that capricious chance had nonetheless gathered together in order to subject them to such a miserable and precarious existence ....'

I try to imagine what kind of people the Breaksea Islanders were. These were mysterious seas to Europeans, yet the sealers knew it more intimately than we ever will. No lighthouses steered them from harm, nor did buildings shelter them. They possessed no calendars or timekeeping devices, just the moon and the sun, a compass and Mathew Flinders' map.7

What kind of a man would I have been? Would I have led men to murder as easily as the boatsteerer John Everett? Would I have shot Aboriginal men at their fires, abducted and enslaved their women, as Tommy Tucker did? Or would I, as did the Maori sealer William Hook, have given evidence against them?

And the women - stolen from their land in that crucible of violence that was 1820's Van Diemen's Land and New Holland - what kind of a woman would I have been? Would I have survived the sealers? Would I have considered myself part of the crew? Would I have killed my babies or taken up arms against the white man as Walyer did, danced the Devil Dance, burned hot and bright with anger and hate, only to die of a common cold?
Time conventions began to lose their importance on the island. I listened to Radio National on my mobile phone, sent text messages to loved ones, wrote in my journal and watched the water. The wind and swell came from the east but rows of clouds, clotted like sheep’s wool began marching over northern skies. When the wind changed, it pushed up the waves and danced the creamy peaks. The light changed constantly across the skin of the water. It replaced my fire or television. At midday, gannets swooped over schools of pilchards, driven to the surface by salmon or bonito.

I began to sleep in the afternoons and spend nights in a state of vivid awareness. Nights were easier that way. I became used to the ghostly sounds. It was the living, during the day, which bothered me most. Invariably ‘the living’ was a pair of mates in a small boat, aimlessly following a fishfinder around the waters between Breaksea and Michaelmas Islands. I did not want anyone to report my presence or be worried enough to call the police or try to rescue me. My apprehension was more than that though. Being alone on an island demanded an adjustment to my own ideals of the social contract.

“If you don’t rape and rob me, then I won’t break into your house to steal the DVD player,” is a dud deal on a deserted island. It is difficult to calculate the intentions of an interloper until you can see the whites of their eyes and hear the shhhting! of their cutlass. I was a lone female and thinking a lot about rapacious sealers. These men could easily have landed at the jetty where I spent those days and nights. Yes, my paranoia was evident to myself and sometimes I felt silly. But I still hid wherever I could on the bald face of the island when a boat hovered around. I took off my red coat and, dressed in black, crouched out of sight until they left.

A Safe Place
I lugged the swag two kilometres up the hill to spend my last island night in the renovated lighthouse keeper’s house. As evening drew in, the muttonbirds returned to their burrows and the pinkening sky thickened with their dark, angular silhouettes. Thousands of birds flew in arcs around the island, chee-whipping. Their immensity was almost overwhelming. They seemed to crown the island like a swarm of bees. When I stood outside, the birds flew around me, too close to me, sometimes nearly shearing my clothing, the edges of my body.

Later as the sky grew dark, car lights loomed on Nanarup Beach across the Sound. The sky was big up here. The warm yellow light blinked all night. A loose piece of tin flapped. The wind howled and clattered at the corrugated plastic that improvised as windows. Inside it was warm and dry and the surging of the sea was so far below me I could hardly hear it.
Someone told me that after the lighthouse was automated and the keepers moved back to the mainland, the windows of the keepers' houses broke and, during big storms, furniture blew around inside the rooms until their corners wore away. I imagined the chests of drawers, sideboards and chairs all spinning in a mad dance around this room, their gracious walnut veneers bouncing off the granite walls, dancing to a southern dirge of ghosts, whirling muttonbirds and the wind.

In the morning, after six days on the island, the fisherman came to pick me up. The 90 horsepower Quintrex ploughed over the chop and swell of the Sound. As we approached land, I felt new cravings for a cigarette. We drove up the main street, boat trailer clanking over speed humps. I looked out at all the people, commerce and cars. I felt removed from land people, my own people. A returning sailor, having seen a thing or two, my skin and hair was crusty with salt. I'd hardly changed my clothes at all on Breaksea so I smelt a bit ripe. But most of all I felt smug at having gotten away with 'trespass' on the island.

Four weeks later, I received a letter from DEC, denying me permission to camp on Breaksea. The muttonbirds need protecting from the public, apparently. Whilst reading the letter, I couldn't help but remember the old salt’s conviction when he told me, “They treat the place like they own it. But they don’t, yer know. We all own it.” Did any of the sealers' children claim birthright over offshore islands I wonder? Who does own the islands and who should have right of access?

ENDNOTES:


2 The Landscape expeditions were "an excellent model of ecotourism in its purest form" but have been cancelled in 2010 to "reduce expenditure and operate effectively at a time of financial restraint." LANDSCOPE Expeditions charged clients between two and three thousand dollars for a week of fieldwork with DEC workers. http://www.naturebase.net/content/view/28/1179 Accessed 24/08/10.


KEVIN DENSLEY

**Mum's Map Of Tassie**

seen by all the family,
in bathroom,
bedroom,
fleetingly, down the hallway
before the start of everything,
before the beginning of the world.