

## **NORMAN LAIRD (1915–1978): PIONEERING TASMANIAN FILMMAKER, WRITER AND NATURALIST**

by Benjamin J Richardson

(with 11 plates)

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Norman Laird was a pioneering Tasmanian advocate for nature conservation through documentary filmmaking and writing in an era before environmental activism was well known, yet his achievements have since been overlooked. Through the camera and pen, Laird was a seminal influence on public discourse about Tasmanian nature in the mid-twentieth century, and, being in the vanguard of environmental thinking, he was at the forefront of the campaign to save Lake Pedder in the early 1970s. His story is particularly fascinating because Laird's long career with the Tasmanian Government Film Unit potentially conflicted him in making government-sponsored cinema that celebrated hydro-dams, forestry and other environmentally impactful activities. How Laird navigated that tension and how the Film Unit itself evolved amidst the environmental activism of the 1970s provokes wider reflections on the role of environmental documentaries in mediating social change.

**Key Words:** documentary films, environmental activism, Norman Laird, government filmmaking, Lake Pedder, Tasmania nature conservation, photography.

### INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of Tasmania's iconic twentieth-century environmentalists who campaigned with the camera, Olegas Truchanas (1923–1972) and Peter Dombrowskis (1945–1996) readily come to mind. They fought to save Lake Pedder and the Franklin River respectively with their sublime images. Another pioneer in this vein, whose achievements have curiously faded from public consciousness, is cinematographer Norman Laird. Laird produced numerous documentary films, along with evocative writings, photographs and other creative achievements that honour the natural world. His omission from the public spotlight is perplexing. One might debate whether it is because his career was established before hydro-dams or other imposts on Tasmania's landscapes aroused much controversy. Yet, that wouldn't be an entirely satisfactory explanation given that the even earlier John Watt Beattie (1859–1930) and Frank Hurley (1885–1962) have accrued much recognition for their pioneering, nature-related camera work (Hore 2017, McGregor 2019). Another possible explanation might be that Laird's 30-year career with the Tasmanian Government Film Unit obscured his contribution given that government-sponsored films of his era typically glorified rather than questioned exploitation of natural heritage. That, too, is also unconvincing not only because of what Laird achieved on the government payroll but due to his extensive extra-curricular endeavours.

This paper not only provides the first scholarly distillation of Norman Laird's career but investigates two issues of wider significance. Firstly, it reflects on how Laird reconciled working for a government filmmaking agency whose

agenda at times seemingly clashed with his values. It's a similar predicament Truchanas navigated as an employee of the behemoth Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC), and no doubt the quandary of some other Tasmanian environmentalists working in conflicted roles in the potentially cloistered communities of Australia's smallest state. Secondly, and relatedly, the paper aims to unveil the subtle activism of environmentalists before the more confrontational protest unleashed in the 1970s. Film was one means, along with nature writing and photography, for such subtle activism by Laird, and his example helps refute any assumption that prior to the 1970s conservationists were timid or taciturn. Analysis of his career thus contributes to broader literature on how environmental documentary films can shape public discourse (Duvall 2017) and an understanding of their historical antecedents in Tasmania specifically (Smaill in press).

As Laird died in 1978, and none of his relevant professional peers remain alive or are available to interview, this research has relied on detailed records at the national and state archives, along with analysis of Laird's celluloid outputs and published writings. The remainder of the paper distils Laird's life to put his career progression into broader context including his nature writing and community engagement. This helps to understand Laird's career in the Tasmanian Government Film Unit and how documentary films dealt with environmental issues, and hereafter, Laird's turn to more overt activism, associated with the Lake Pedder controversy, and the impact of this upheaval on the Film Unit. The paper concludes by acknowledging the significance of Laird's career and the Film Unit for understanding Tasmania's environmental history in the last century.



Plate 2 – Laird (right), holding a seabird egg while interviewed in Hobart by a reporter from radio station 7HO about his trip to Macquarie Island; Jack Thwaites, another environmentalist, who worked with Laird at the Film Unit, is on the left (*The Mercury*, 7 May 1949, p. 4).

at least the early twentieth century, when the state's first national parks were established in 1916, conservation gains tended to be limited to what geographer Colin Michael Hall called 'worthless lands' – places perceived to be unfit for agriculture, settlement or other 'productive' uses (Hall 1998, pp. 441–458). In Laird's era this attitude persisted.

A major turning point for Laird was when he was selected as the Tasmanian representative and official photographer for the 1948–1949 Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) to Macquarie Island, a 128 km<sup>2</sup> exposed oceanic crust populated by numerous seals and penguins, some 1,500 km southeast of Tasmania. It was an opportunity over 13 months for Laird to intimately study wildlife and with his camera record for posterity the activities of the pioneering expedition (pl. 3). The Tasmanian press reported enthusiastically on his adventure (*The Advocate*, 22 Oct. 1947, p. 2). Back home in April 1949, Laird soon gave a lecture to the Royal Society of Tasmania where he condemned the island's history of 'many privations and cruelties' against its wildlife (Royal Society of Tasmania 1949, p. 285, *The Advocate*, 8 June 1949, p. 5), and shared his valuable botanical collection with universities and London's Kew Herbarium.

Laird was also enamoured by Tasmania's landscapes and wildlife, and a leading voice for the island's bushwalking and nature conservation fraternity. He was a member of the Hobart Walking Club and the Tasmanian Field Naturalists' Club, and occasionally hiked with the renowned Jack Thwaites, who worked with Laird at the Film Unit (pl. 4). Laird sometimes represented these groups in public forums,

such as the 1949 Australian Fauna Conference held in Hobart where he voiced the need to control indiscriminate use of wildlife traps that wreaked much collateral damage (Tasmania, Animals and Birds Protection Board, 1949, pp. 10–11), and appealed for game hunting to be halted until completion of scientific surveys of wildlife populations (*The Mercury*, 9 December 1949, p. 22). Laird's respect among his peers is further reflected in his appointment as the inaugural chair of Tasmania's Fauna and Flora Conservation Committee, a confederate of conservation-minded groups established in 1950 in the wake of their dismay at the excision of about 1,600 ha of the Mount Field National Park for a concession to a paper and pulp mill – Laird himself publicly spoke out against the park's annexation (*Examiner*, 7 July 1949, p. 5). The committee became a lobbyist for improved conservation governance, such as seeking greater representation of scientists on the state's Animals and Birds Protection Board (*The Mercury*, 28 February 1953, p. 6), and it (including Laird personally) was influential in rallying public opposition to defeat a proposal in 1959 to allow resumption of sealing on Macquarie Island (Guiler 1999, pp. 56–58).

Laird's environmental advocacy reached a national, and occasionally international, audience through his prolific writings in nature magazines and the press. Immediately after the war Laird began publishing in *Wild Life* and *Walkabout* – among Australia's leading nature magazines of the era – where he went beyond sharing anecdotes about curious fauna or flora to advocating their conservation. He admired not only nature's charismatic or scenic beauty but

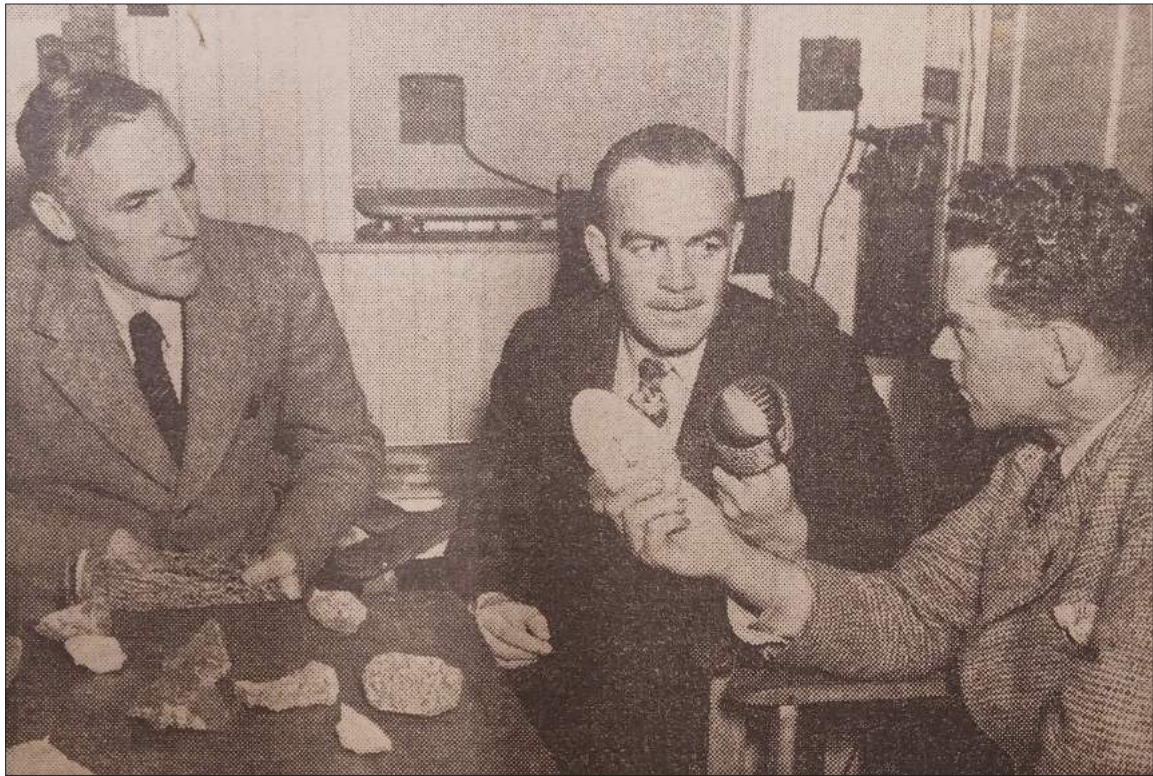


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Plate 3a – **A** The Macquarie Island camp site, photograph by Laird, 1948, National Library of Australia, Item 3765887, **B** Gentoo penguins on Macquarie Island, ANARE expedition, photograph by Laird, 1948. State Archives of Tasmania, Item AA193/1/972.



Plate 4 – Laird (left), Sheila Boyle and Jack Thwaites outside the hut on the Adamsfield Track, circa mid-1940s. State Archives of Tasmania, Item NS3251/1/1122.



Plate 5 – Frilled-neck lizard, cover of *Walkabout* (November 1945), photo by Laird. National Library of Australia. (Nq 919.4 WAL identifier <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-566923190>)

wrote about the relatively mundane or unpopular, such as his article on Tasmanian snakes, which he encouraged bushwalkers to respect (Laird 1946a). His essays were often accompanied by exquisite photography, such as his close-up of a locust-eating, frilled-neck lizard *Chlamydosaurus kingii*, adorning the front cover of the November 1945 edition of *Walkabout* (pl. 5). Other specialist photography magazines also hosted Laird's talents, such as his lavish portfolio of images of plants and animals published in the *Australasian Photo-Review* (Laird 1952).

Complementing his photographic skills, Laird's writing abounded in poetic imagination, such as: 'Gentoo penguins glisten like painted idols in the sun. They stand in statuesque attitudes for hours at a time with only a luxurious stretch

of their cardboard wings or a deft preen of their lustrous shirts to relieve the monotony of the round of winter habits' (Laird 1948, p. 10). And another about Macquarie Island: 'By morning, desolation had descended from the Plateau. Like TS Elliot's yellow fog, it rubbed its back against the sides of the cliffs, vapoured along the sea-front while in and out of its planed watchful petrels, posted skuas, and cormorants in clumsy flight' (Laird 1949, p. 7). Such evocative accounts fortified Laird's conservation message. Inspired by his wartime posting to the Top End, Laird fretted about the plight of a variety of species he had personally seen persecuted; the goanna is one. 'For at least one hundred years goannas have been meeting harsh treatment at our hands – it is time it stopped.



Plate 6 – The last known thylacine at Beaumaris Zoo, Hobart 1936; a species Laird investigated via the Thylacine Research Group. State Archives of Tasmania, Item NS4371/1/1063.

There has sprung up the fallacious belief that the reptile is venomous’ (Laird 1946b, p. 7). The Tasmanian press also featured his essays and letters where he called for greater environmental protection. One missive published in *The Mercury* attacked the purveyors of marsupial furs ‘in the past three decades, snaring has depleted fauna to the point of exhaustion – far exceeding their primitive and hazardous rate of reproduction’ (Laird 1947, p. 3).

One of Laird’s favourite extra-curricular interests was the thylacine *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, which he investigated via the Thylacine Research Group he managed. The Tasmanian State Archives contain voluminous correspondence, research papers, press clippings and photographs amassed by Laird about the famed marsupial carnivore. He personally wrote to numerous museums and zoos abroad enquiring about the existence of any thylacine specimens or other memorabilia in their collections. In response to an enquiry in 1957 from *Life* magazine in the United States, Laird estimated the market value of a new photograph of living thylacine as US\$3,000 (about AUD\$120,000 in 2023 money) (Tasmania, Surveyor-General and Secretary of Lands 1957). He evidently believed the thylacine survived the last confirmed specimen in Hobart’s Beaumaris Zoo in 1936 (pl. 6), for in the early 1960s the London-based Fauna Preservation Society (1962, p. 207) with which he corresponded on the latest sightings, reported that Laird ‘says that the thylacine undoubtedly survives in small numbers in widely separate districts but adds there is no room for optimism about the species increasing’. But it’s clear he wished to see the species left unmolested, as Laird admonished those who might make it a spectacle again, caged in a zoo (Laird 1968). It’s unclear from the Tasmanian Government Film Unit records whether Laird was formally involved in the short documentary *The Tasmanian Tiger* (1964) it made, but its production certainly would have immensely interested him and likely he assisted informally.

In challenging the settler-colonial perceptions of Tasmania’s original landscapes and their wildlife as unruly or malevolent, Laird contributed to an emerging environmental sensitivity that reversed the focus to how humankind threatens nature rather than how nature

threatens people (Haynes 2006, Stadler 2012). Whilst some of these literary and cinematic representations of nature have been rebuked for mythologising an unpeopled ‘wilderness’, without Aboriginal history (Smail in press), Laird was also a pioneer here in acknowledging some of that history. His most extensive encounters with Aboriginal people were in the Northern Territory during the war, and he occasionally pointed to their environmental ethos as an example for others. Illustratively, he began an article on goannas with remarks about their place in Aboriginal art and diet, observing that ‘nor are any people less wasteful of the country’s wildlife than these people’ (Laird 1946c, p. 7). He was attuned to the wider social injustices they endured. His ‘Aborigine Girl’ essay rebuked the ‘national apathy’ about the plight of her people, and condemned the racism they endure: ‘Perhaps, when this comes about, these people whom the past has treated little better than cattle may be spared the doom commonly predicted for them’ (Laird 1946c, p. 21).

A man of cosmopolitan interests, Laird also was fascinated by Tasmania’s colonial architecture and history. He made at least three films about this subject – *Georgian Bothwell* (1964), *Angels and Acorns* (1965) and *Ross Bridge* (1977) – and co-authored a beautiful book on the exquisite sculptures of Ross Bridge, erected in 1836 in the town of Ross in the Tasmanian Midlands. Laird’s enthusiasm for the subject is evident from his claim that ‘the art of Ross Bridge is possibly the richest achievement of the earlier colonial period, if not the most significant sculptures on any edifice in the Commonwealth’ (Greener & Laird 1971, p. 118). He was thus well-suited to the diverse subject portfolio of his employer’s filmmaking.

#### A CAREER IN TASMANIA’S GOVERNMENT FILM UNIT, 1946–1977

Laird’s career is inseparable from Tasmania’s Government Film Unit, renamed the Department of Film Production in 1960 (hereafter both abbreviated as TGFU except where a distinction matters). He was instrumental in creating the

TGFU in 1946 and worked there throughout its history (pl. 7). Tasmania became a national exemplar of institutionalised filmmaking, being an early mover in government-run film units, and the TGFU's peak staff of around 40 made it the second largest in the nation, after the Commonwealth Film Unit (O'Donnell 2005, pp. 236–7). Laird was effectively the TGFU's foreman until 1960, after which it was managed by Lindo Taylor until 1967 and finally by Raymond Barnes until September 1977 when the TGFU closed.

The TGFU produced 'documentary films', the definition of which stirs scholarly debate given the diverse genres of such films and that they can involve creative manipulation of factual information (Nichols 1990, pp. 21–41); here, we can simply define it as a film that seeks to understand and convey real events or places using visual evidence and testimony, as well as account for the fact that the films' sponsor explicitly conceived itself as a maker of documentaries. Like its state and federal counterparts, along with that created in many countries, the TGFU flourished in an era where authorities saw documentary films as valuable means of public relations and education. As TGFU manager Lindo Taylor put it, 'The film, with its live visual and auditory impact remains one of the most effective ways of telling a story or selling a product' (Taylor 1962, p. 20). An international movement in documentary films emerged from the late 1920s, and one of its leading advocates was Scottish film producer and theorist John Grierson (1898–1972) who saw film's potential as a new kind of public communication to help with nation-building, promoting civic-mindedness and conveying the problems and concerns of ordinary citizens (Swann 1989). Making films for Britain's Empire Marketing Board and later its General Post Office, Grierson developed the model 'film infrastructure' dedicated to the production and dissemination of documentary films, a template he would later seek to export to other countries including Australia, which he visited in 1940 although government film units in Australia including Tasmania sought to develop their own agenda (Williams 2014). As government-sponsored films in this era might also be associated with the virulent propaganda of Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany (Taylor 1998), the emergence of film units in Tasmania and other liberal societies was conceptually distinguished around utilitarian and virtuous 'public relations' aiding post-war reconstruction and community education (Taylor 1959).

As film theorist Thomas Elsaesser explains, we should analyse films not just as text but as an 'event' in which 'the actual film is only one' element to consider, along with how it is made, viewed and discussed (Elsaesser 2009, p. 32). Decisions about commissioning and approving films involved the TGFU's advisory body of government representatives, although occasionally final approvals were made by the responsible Minister or even the State Premier, depending on the subject matter. Similar to the manner by which the Tasmanian Government was generally run in this era, there was little public consultation although production of some films required consulting outside bodies or experts, and private clients themselves (usually corporate) had input where they commissioned films. The



Plate 7 – Norman Laird, c. 1960, with the TGFU. State Archives of Tasmania, Item AD572/1/1.

TGFU films, however, were widely publicly circulated. The unit's 1961–1962 annual report explained: 'Since the value of a Public Relations or Tourist Promotion film lies entirely in the number of people who see it, a considerable part of the Department's efforts are now being devoted to distribution, and avenues throughout the world are being explored to this end' (Tasmania, Department of Film Production 1962, p. 3, pl. 8). Some films were submitted to prestigious international film festivals such as in Berlin and Edinburgh, as well as circulated via Australian Immigration offices and Trade Commissioner posts. Some international releases were even dubbed in foreign languages. Many films were also made available to cinemas and shown through community libraries and schools, which were especially important before the advent of television to Tasmanian households in 1960. Reflective of the high esteem in which the TGFU's work was held, occasionally its films premiered in special sessions in the Tasmanian Parliament (*The Mercury*, 23 June 1950, p. 21). By such dissemination, documentary films materially contributed to the evolving public discourse in Tasmania about how their subject matter was understood and debated.

Many TGFU films depicted forestry, mining and hydro-dams, often pitched to attract investment and immigration to Tasmania, such as the blatantly entitled 1957 film *Calling All Investors*. Some movies were also made for business clients, such as paper and pulp companies, and occasionally the TGFU even solicited for commissions, such as in 1965 when two companies were approached to sponsor a film 'on their industries to assist in export

promotion' (Tasmania, Advisory Film Board 1965). Its films were typically 10 to 20 minutes' duration, with an anonymous voice-over narration guiding the viewer through imagery (increasingly in colour from the mid-1950s) of dams, logging, mining, apple orchards, factories and other signs of an economically progressive society. Examples, some of which Laird worked on, are *Timber Makes News* (1947), *Burnie Mill* (1953), *Logging for Newsprint* (1956), *Power in the Mountain* (1956), *Industrial Journey* (1962), *Tasmania's Road West* (1970) and *Water is the Key* (1974) (State Archives of Tasmania 1946–1977).

Whilst the TGFU also filmed national parks and wildlife subjects, it did so narrowly from the standpoint of tourism rather than conveying serious scientific research, and certainly not questioning potential threats from economic development – which periodically happened, most egregiously in 1950 when 1,600 ha of the Mount Field National Park were excised to support a paper and pulp mill (Quarmby 2006, pp. 136–139). Indeed, the TGFU's managers tended to see engineered landscapes such as hydro-lakes as an aesthetic gain; its 1961–1962 film program declared 'The HEC lakes, power stations, and roads have come to constitute one of our most valuable tourist assets' (Tasmania, Department of Film Production 1961, p. 4).

The foregoing account provokes the intriguing question of how a nature conservationist reconciled himself to working on some of these films. And Laird was not the only one with this predicament. Jack Thwaites, a pioneering outdoors enthusiast and nature photographer with lengthy service on Tasmanian national parks boards, was from 1946 to 1958 the TGFU's principal administrative officer and secretary to its advisory committee (Kleinig 2008,

pp. 114–116). The archival records of the TGFU provide sparse guidance to answer this conundrum but there are several possible explanations.

Firstly, prior to the Lake Pedder controversy that erupted in the late 1960s, there was a tendency among nature conservationists in Tasmania, as elsewhere in Australia, to see their cause as advanceable through discrete interventions such as expanding national parks and controlling wildlife hunting (Young 1996, Richardson 2023). The broader, systemic environmental threats from consumerism and industrialisation that became explicit leitmotifs from the 1970s previously received little acknowledgement. Some of Laird's extra-curricular writings testify to his preoccupation with the narrower, less controversial agenda. His essay on the filled-neck lizard explained, 'it is to be emphasized that our society is still guilty of signal crimes against harmless native creatures, which could be prevented by rigorous national educational policy' (Laird 1945, p. 7). It's also clear from some of his writings, and film work, that Laird could be enamoured with the bucolic Tasmanian scenery fashioned by colonial settlers, such as his affectionate observations for the Derwent Valley in his article suggestively entitled 'This Other England' (Laird 1951b), followed up in 1958 with a film he produced, the *Valley of the Derwent*. Thus, by this explanation, Laird might not have seen films on forestry and farms as incompatible with his view of nature conservation. Relevantly, in the production guidance he wrote for the TGFU film *Tomorrow's Trees*, commissioned by the Forestry Commission, Laird explained 'the film will show the importance of forests to human civilization, the results that follow in the wake of their unplanned destruction and non-conservation' (Laird c. 1950a, p. 1). Such a sentiment, endorsing the benefits of orderly



Plate 8 – Staff of Tasmania's Department of Film Production, c. late 1960s/early 1970s. Norman Laird is at left end of middle row; State Archives of Tasmania, Item AD572/1/2.

forestry management, may have been quite plausible before industrial wood chipping came to Tasmania in the 1970s.

The foregoing explanation, however, isn't entirely convincing as some of Laird's early work showed awareness of the larger, systemic threats. In 1950 in *Wild Life* he condemned the 'commercialised, mechanised and urbanised way of life which has exploited the earth on a vast scale for two generations or more – for commercial profit' and that 'humanity ... has failed to integrate the true relationship of Nature to human existence' (Laird 1950b, p. 137). More relevantly to the role of film here, Laird continued 'the chief fault may be laid at the door of those political administrations which have made no worthwhile attempts to supply society with a pattern of thought and feeling with which to approach the flood of material with which it is bombarded from so many sources' (Laird 1950b, p. 137). An essay he published the following year on the value of Tasmania's national parks describes them as sanctuaries 'far removed from the cannibalism of industry and commerce' (Laird 1951a, p. 6). It seems doubtful therefore that Laird was naïve to the bigger adversities facing the natural world.

A second reason Laird might have reconciled himself with the TGFU's agenda is that for much of its history its documentary films were likely considered by their sponsors and audiences as of a mundane, utilitarian character, serving to inform and educate the public about Tasmania's economic and social progress without any conscious ideological or political agenda. For John Grierson, the doyen of the documentary movement in the British Commonwealth, the term 'documentary' was associated with utilitarian, pedagogic and pragmatic purposes (Hardy 1947). This interpretation has some plausibility for the TGFU's filmmaking before the 1970s, before environmental issues became so politically astringent in Tasmania as to have made the TGFU's sponsors more conscious of the narrative they wished to spin. Of course, there's always an ideological undercurrent of some type to any documentary film, especially one sponsored by government, and in the case of the TGFU it was established in an era where nature was widely understood uncontroversially as an object to be tamed, rationalised and exploited. In this guise, the TGFU's films cultivated understandings of the limits, uses and values of the natural environment, and contributed to what political theorist Benedict Anderson (1991) would term an 'imagined community', which for Tasmanian society has, since its convict era, been increasingly its relationship with the island's abundant natural resources and distinct geography. It's only when that community openly fractured with the divisions over Lake Pedder, and later industrial forestry, that the TGFU's seemingly apolitical approach to documentary film became less convincing. As the TGFU's films shifted into more controversial territory, it's plausible that Laird deliberately sought to exclude himself (or was excluded by his superiors) from films celebrating hydrodams or industrial forestry.

A third explanation might be that Laird saw his TGFU filmmaking as furnishing opportunities to deftly challenge or question the government-authorised view of nature. A major study of Canada's National Film Board in a similar

era highlighted 'the agency of individual filmmakers and their willingness to produce alternate visions of the natural world' associated with non-exploitative or non-instrumental values (Clemens 2018, p. 11). Laird was involved in many films about nature conservation (though it's sometimes unclear from the film credits or archives which ones he produced or directed). Some were created for Tasmania's Scenery Preservation Board, the predecessor to the National Parks and Wildlife Service created in 1970, and as early as 1947 the Superintendent of Scenic Reserves wrote to Laird requesting a documentary film 'to make our scenic reserves better known' (Sharland 1947).

One example of such cooperation is *Mountain Sanctuary* (c. mid-1960s), a 14-minute, colour film of splendid scenery from the beach of Lake Pedder to towering old-growth forests, as well as footage of endemic wildlife. Much of the footage is at Cradle Mountain, showcasing the area for prospective bushwalkers and other visitors. Editorial guidance from Laird on its production sheds some interesting light on his expectations: 'the unspoiled land is inspiring of the unity of life upon which doubt and dogma have done much to destroy. The unity of life in a protected community or environment is of considerable importance, and an expression of the viewpoint has a place somewhere in the structure of the film, if not throughout its entire substance' (Laird c.1960, p. 1). *Mountain Sanctuary* richly conveys the beauty and grandeur of Tasmanian nature, although omits reference to any development threats. The archival record of the making of *Mountain Sanctuary*, however, hints at some tension across the different arms of the Tasmanian Government regarding priorities attached to nature conservation and exploitation (Tasmania, Department of Film Production, undated, p. 1).

Apart from dedicated nature films, several films Laird produced on seemingly unrelated subjects suggest he sought to interpolate awareness of wildlife and nature conservation into them. One example is *Georgian Bothwell* (1964), for which Laird also wrote the script. For a film devoted to the historic architecture of the town of Bothwell, it's curious to find midway through it some footage of an echidna *Tachyglossus setosus* and a blue-tongued lizard *Tiliqua nigrolutea* wandering across the landscape with the accompanying narration of the 'ancient inhabitants of the earth'.

Finally, we might look to a more mundane but important reason for Laird's career with the TGFU. It gave him long-term job security in an era where opportunities for filmmaking in Tasmania's private sector, as elsewhere in Australia, were relatively limited owing to the technological barriers and limited public money for independent filmmaking (FitzSimons *et al.* 2011, Zubrycki 2018). One independent documentary maker was United Documentary Films, which made the pro-forestry film *Timber Makes News* (1947), a subject that Laird may have not sympathised with. Another company operating in Tasmania was Island Films, making several environment-themed films from the late 1950s until the early 1980s; its *Five South West* (1959) offers a beautiful visual story of Thwaites and fellow bushwalkers hiking from Lake Pedder to the southwest



coast. Freelance filmmaking, and photography, however, would likely have been less financially rewarding and more precarious in this era, as Laird would have known from his freelance stints with the *Dominion* and *The Mercury* newspapers in the early 1940s.

### FROM SUBTLE TO STRIDENT ACTIVISM: LAKE PEDDER

By the early 1970s any pretence that documentary cinema in Tasmania could be neutral, objective conveyors of public information on environmental subjects was fracturing. Film was now being conscripted to shape public opinion in an increasingly divided society. When the HEC coveted Lake Pedder, its opponents turned to film, photography and other media as campaigning tools. So too, the HEC and other government instrumentalities turned to these visual channels to bolster their social licence. Joining the acrimonious campaign to save Lake Pedder, Laird was directly mired in this seismic shift towards a more aestheticised politics, as was the TGFU itself.

The struggle over Lake Pedder began to brew in the early 1960s. The South-West Committee was formed in 1962, comprising representatives of various groups to promote conservation of the wilderness country. By 1964 the committee was liaising with the TGFU to urge it to make a film for raising awareness of the region's natural values (South-West Committee 1964a). That year it also convened a sub-committee to organise public slide shows 'to publicise the beauties of Lake Pedder and demonstrate the possible ill effects from damming of lakes' (South-West Committee 1964b, p. 2), building on a precedent established in 1956 when the Hobart Walking Club began public shows of colour slides of the scenic attractions of the south-west (pl. 9), and the earlier efforts of bushwalker and photographer Frederick Smithies who was staging similar public shows in northern Tasmania from the 1920s (Smith 1988)

When the HEC in 1967 formally announced plans to 'modify' Lake Pedder, a more activist entity to challenge it was formed — the Save Lake Pedder National Park Committee (SLPNP). It, too, sought the TGFU's assistance 'to enable us to continue with our public lectures on the South-West' (Sims 1967). Unfortunately for the committee, the following year the TGFU released a film, *Look on the Wild Side*, which lauded the economic benefits of hydro-power in supporting Tasmania's industries and the film closes with aerial footage of Lake Pedder itself with voice-over commentary of 'an area of unique scenic beauty with great hydro-electric potential'.

Laird's involvement came into the public spotlight when he joined the United Tasmania Group (UTG), the world's first green values party, and a forerunner to the Tasmanian/Australian Greens (Manning 2019). On 23 March 1972, the UTG was inaugurated at a meeting at Hobart Town Hall (pl. 10), with its chief goal being to save Lake Pedder from its watery grave when the two dominant political parties shared a similar commitment to resource exploitation



Plate 9 – Auster Aircraft of Southern Tasmania Aero Club on the beach at Lake Pedder, 1955; by Jack Thwaites and family; State Archives of Tasmania, Item NS3195/1/1217.



Plate 10 – Rally at Hobart Town Hall to form the United Tasmania Group; Richard Jones (foreground) and Laird behind on far right, March 1972. State Archives of Tasmania, Item NS6449/1/12.



Plate 11 – At Lake Pedder in 1971 to make a film for the Tasmanian Government's Film Unit (left to right Lynne Weidendorfer, Patricia Giles, Olegas Truchanas, Harry Buckie, Ray Barnes, Frank Bolt, Max and Thedda Angus, Beverley Dunn). State Archives of Tasmania, Item NS6449/1/1.

(Crowley 2008). Contesting Tasmania's Legislative Assembly election in April, the UTG unveiled its radical 'New Ethic' manifesto, which included an undertaking 'to regulate our individual and communal needs for resources, both living and non-living, while preventing the wholesale extraction of our non-replenishable resources for the satisfaction of the desire for profit' (UTG 1972a, p. 2).

Laird was selected by the UTG as one of its candidates in the seat of Denison (central Hobart) in the 1972 state election. His candidacy biography describes Laird as having 'valuable knowledge of governmental activities and requirements' plus having done 'extensive scientific surveys of plants birds and mammals' along with membership of the Australian Conservation Foundation (UTG 1972b). Of the dozen UTG candidates, Laird scored the second highest number of votes, close to winning a seat. He stayed with the UTG for a few more years and, although he did not contest any further elections, he occasionally attended party branch meetings in Hobart. The minutes of one meeting on 3 March 1974 record Laird advising 'we should not lose sight of bread-and-butter issues – employment etc', suggesting that he was keen to broaden the UTG's policy agenda to maximise its electoral appeal (UTG 1974).

The Pedder saga also directly involved the TGFU, although apparently not Laird formally in this realm. The TGFU was tasked in early 1971, at the apparent request of the Minister for Lands and Works, to film and photograph Lake Pedder for archival purposes 'before it disappears to make way for the greater Lake Pedder' (Tasmania, Department of Film Production 1971). The film was made by TGFU manager Raymond Barnes, but according to the biographer of participating artist Patricia Giles, 'the film unit sent the wrong gear (sabotage was feared, from either dislike of Ray or his cause) and the result was not very successful' (Alexander 2019, p. 111). Featuring known anti-dam artists including Olegas Truchanas and Max Angus (pl. 11), the film risked arousing controversy. Although carefully scripted to avoid taking a stance on the dam, the film would prove valuable in being repurposed by those campaigning to save, and later restore, Lake Pedder.

The situation in late 1971 became politically contentious when Barnes, who in his leisure time had occasionally joined Giles, Angus and others for *plein air* painting on the shores of Lake Pedder, took the initiative to propose using the aforementioned artworks for a public exhibition at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The proposal troubled the State Premier, who advised his Minister that 'it would seem to be a needless aggravation of the present situation' (Tasmania, State Premier 1971), and approval was given only after the state cabinet considered the matter with the proviso to 'ensure that the publicity for the Exhibition, especially involving the Government, is kept to a minimum' (Tasmania, Minister for Lands and Works 1971). Incongruously, however, the government had no problem in the lead-up to the state election condoning the HEC's expenditure on a massive, pro-dam advertising campaign. The 1971 Pedder photographs, film and paintings would later become valuable tools for the campaign to restore

the lake, which began as soon as 1973 when the TGFU's film was sought by the Commonwealth's public inquiry into the controversy (Barnes 1973).

After Truchanas tragically died in a canoeing accident on 6 January 1972 on the Gordon River, just before Pedder's inundation, Laird co-edited an illustrated book memorialising the gifted photographer's plea for wilderness conservation. In his editorial preface, Laird closes with comments that implicitly acknowledge his own approach to what he calls 'the emergent conservation ethic': 'protective attitudes to our existing wilderness need to be intensified and fortified by concentrated studies likely to influence public opinion. In these senses, this work is a most valuable addition to the literature of conservation, exploration and the art of photography' (Angus & Laird 1975, p. 7).

Without what they perceived to be suitable films from the TGFU, campaigners for saving Lake Pedder decided to create their own, making among the very first, independent environmental activist films in Australia. Peter Sims, who was secretary to the SLPNPAC, made a pioneering documentary *Tasmanian Wilderness* (Sims 1972), which follows a party of bushwalkers exploring the lake that the narrator describes as 'the jewel of the south-west'. Extensive footage of Pedder's quartzite sand dunes, flanking mountains and inquisitive wildlife is accompanied by evocative commentary such as the 'intangible values of this wilderness area' with explicit reference to the threat of the dam. The third segment of Sims' film is particularly striking, being devoted to Tasmania's Aboriginal history, and whilst not acknowledging their *living* culture it at least affirms, as Laird had done, that Tasmania was not an unpeopled wilderness. The film closes with the poignant injunction, 'the study of this past race could influence our survival'. The film was shown widely to Tasmanian and mainland audiences, with over 12,000 viewers in Tasmanian schools and towns in 1972–1973 (Sims 2012, p. 145). A second independently made film with a more overtly political stance, entitled *Struggle for Pedder*, made in 1974 shortly after the inundation, was produced by Peter Dodds and Ross Matthews who wished to highlight not only Pedder's scenic beauty but its scientific values.

In the wake of the Pedder controversy, the TGFU came under unprecedented pressure to make films publicising hydro-dams and other developments. It wouldn't, however, be the first time that documentaries were exploited to promote such an agenda. For example, *Timber Makes News* (1947) made by United Documentary Films on behalf of the Australian Newsprint Mills to showcase its Tasmanian newsprint mill – at the time this company was controversially seeking to excise part of Mount Field National Park for its expanded operations. In the wake of the Pedder polemic, a TGFU example is *Gordon Power* (1978), one of the last TGFU films ever made, which was produced for the HEC to marvel, according to the narrator, at the 'improved' Lake Pedder as a 'new, vital energy source' with the 'added bonus of a sporting and recreational playground'. This film was designed not only to help the HEC maintain public support after the Pedder

controversy but to help assuage public opinion about the HEC's recently announced plans to impound the Franklin River. Draft iterations of the film script show that the HEC's publicity officer removed pro-environmental language such as 'wilderness' that had been introduced by the TGFU, likely to deflect public attention from the environmental losses of the Pedder dam (Tasmania, Department of Film Production 1977). The archival files and the film credits do not suggest Laird was personally involved in *Gordon Power*.

Another, more subtle, example of this shift in the TGFU's films is *Tasmanian Wild Life*, released in 1973 shortly after the flooding of Lake Pedder. It, too, was commissioned by the HEC with the aim to depict it as environmentally responsible. The brief from the HEC to the TGFU explained that the film should not merely reveal the wildlife of Tasmania but, to quote, 'show what the HEC does in this regard. Some examples that could be mentioned include: 1) No dogs or cats allowed in HEC construction towns; 2) water levels in lakes is (sic) kept fairly constant, therefore fish and birds do not have to contend with changing diet etc.; 3) no air pollution; 4) no spoiling of rural areas (coal mines); 5) HEC work with Parks and Wildlife and similar institutions' (Hydro-Electricity Commission 1972). The final version of the 25-minute film contains several nods to the HEC's interests, including the opening scene of boaters on a hydro-lake with the accompanying narration 'this high and rugged section has abundant rainfall and provides ideal locations for hydro-electric developments'. It goes on to congratulate the HEC for patrolling its hydro-lakes to rescue 'any wildlife becoming trapped by rising waters'. Laird is not listed in the film's credits.

Forestry was becoming equally controversial in the 1970s, especially due to the advent of industrial wood chipping, along with site-specific disputes including a proposal in 1972 to log Precipitous Bluff and the government's revocation in 1976 of extensive forested land in the Hartz Mountains National Park (Gee 2001, p. 187). Although most associated with its stance on Lake Pedder, the UTG also rallied against forestry, and earlier, in 1970, Truchanas himself successfully fought to create the Denison River Huon Pine Scenic Reserve (Gee 2001, p. 8). As with hydro-dams, the TGFU was tasked by the government to make a pro-forestry film to help placate public unease. The resulting *Forester's Island* (1973) is a sales pitch, with the narrator declaring 'today, the forest is the story of management and conservation, of man and his environment'. The 17-minute film boasts of the benefits of wood chipping in converting 'large areas of decadent, lower quality forests' into \$30M of annual export income for Tasmania and the opportunity 'to fully utilise these poorer trees and replace them with vigorous, new forests'. The disingenuous movie ignores the non-economic values of forests apart from the closing scenes of families enjoying the recreational benefits of visiting the bush.

## CONCLUSION

In the history of nature conservation and conflict we sometimes lose sight of the importance of individuals. Norman Laird's career matters not merely because of his achievements in filmmaking and other creative outputs but because his life raises larger issues about how environmentalists in conflicted positions can pursue their cause. Laird's career is inseparable from the history of the TGFU that operated from 1946 to 1977, and the role of documentary films in mediating and conveying understandings of the natural environment. Like Truchanas, who had to subtly campaign with the camera against his employer's plans to dam a lake, Laird had to adroitly reconcile his personal values with his professional responsibilities. Until the late 1960s, this reconciliation could be sustained for Laird for a combination of several possible reasons, including that he could quarantine his extra-curricular activities from his government film work; the assumption that such films (once) had an apolitical, utilitarian character; and thirdly, that nature conservation could be promoted through films that celebrated Tasmania's scenic beauty and unique wildlife.

By the late 1960s Tasmanian society was becoming more environmentally aware and divided over the fate of its natural heritage, a shift occurring elsewhere in Australia (Richardson 2023, pp. 64–81). In this context, government-sponsored documentary films for the HEC, Forestry Commission and other resource exploiters to bolster their 'social licence' (Lester 2016) became less easily framed as unbiased, public information. Conversely, environmentalists increasingly realised visual marketing could publicise their counter story. Whilst the campaign to save Tasmania's Franklin River is most strongly associated with this shift, such as the use made of Dombrowskis' famous photo *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend* (1979), along with several documentary films including *The Last Wild River* (1978), *Franklin River Journey* (1980) and *Huon Cry* (1983), we should recognise this shift began earlier with the Lake Pedder campaign, such as with Sims' film *Tasmanian Wilderness* (1972). Indeed, arguably the seeds were planted even earlier in bushwalking films such as *Five South West* (1959).

The demise of the TGFU, which was replaced in September 1977 with the short-lived Tasmanian Film Corporation with an explicit commercial mandate beyond documentary films, was caused by many factors. It had been chronically under-resourced for some years, with its manager Raymond Barnes once bemoaning, 'We are trying to fulfil 1975 orders and requests with 1950 technology, equipment and ideas' (Barnes 1975). The State Premier came to prefer a model, based on South Australia's Film Corporation, that would foster greater collaboration with the private sector. The institutional change coincided with the end of Laird's career; he died shortly afterwards, at age 63 on 21 June 1978. Perhaps fittingly for his personal passions, the last ever government film Laird worked on was *Waiting for a Shearwater* (1978), a sensitive look at the work of national park rangers on Tasmania's Furneaux Islands.

This paper will hopefully help to improve awareness of the subtle, and later not so subtle, environmental activism of one of Tasmania's premier filmmakers and authors. Laird's career, and the work of the TGFU, illustrate the salience of visual storytelling for public discourse on environmental issues. Fittingly, the longest and most detailed documentary film on Tasmania's history, *As Time Goes By – A Hundred Years of Life in Tasmania* (Peter Richman Productions 1993), features a closeup of Laird, armed with his movie-camera, on the DVD cover (the same image as plate 7).

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