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Tasmania and Marquette County

John S. Heywood

Tasmania, a rugged island lying south of Australia's mainland, contains some of the world's most improbable plants and animals, the cleanest air on the planet and a population largely descended from convicts. At a distance of twelve thousand miles, Tasmania would hardly be expected to share a title with Marquette County, Wisconsin. Yet, a recent visit convinced me that in our increasingly interconnected world, Tasmania owes a debt to Marquette County, one of which Tasmanians are fully aware.

As with many remote and beautiful places, Tasmania depends on extractive industries, including mining and the logging of old growth forests. In the 1970s Tasmania's Gordon River Valley became the center of international attention as environmentalists sought to stop the construction of a massive dam and hydro-electric project that would have stopped the mighty, free-flowing river and flooded huge ancient forests. The protests succeeded in halting the project and transformed Australian attitudes toward the unpopulated southwestern quarter of the island. Now a national park and a United Nations world natural heritage center, it stands as a tribute to the conservation movement and a reserve to be enjoyed for generations to come.

Driving back from a joyous few days of hiking in the region, I came across one last roadside trail. I couldn't help myself and so off I went on a leisurely forty-five minute walk to the top of a single hill set in a huge valley of temperate rainforests and rivers. The reward was the ability to simultaneously look down around the valley of green and then up to the crags of white rock and the sharp peaks that define the valley. I was alone except for three plaques placed by the park authorities to remind visitors of those whose vision came before and made such conservation possible.

All three plaques quote citizens of the United States, and two of those citizens had very close ties to central Wisconsin. Thoreau's Walden represented the Transcendentalists of New England and the famous pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Aldo Leopold and John Muir represented central Wisconsin. Marquette County and the Sand Country helped create a worldwide movement that still changes attitudes toward nature and helps preserve as "unimproved" the world's most valuable landscapes. Those of us living and vacationing in Marquette County do well to recall that ours, too, is a geography of inspiration.

From Frenchman's Cap Overlook in Southwest Tasmania:

"Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language."

Aldo Leopold, *Sand Country Almanac*

"Nevermore, however weary, should one faint by the way who gains the blessings of one mountain day; whatever his fate, long life or short, stormy or clam, he is forever rich."

John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

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