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Thousands of millions of years ago, before the continents moved, before fire and ice, the elements weathered away an ancient landmass, washing its sandy sediments, layer on layer, into a shallow, lifeless sea. Crushed under unimaginable pressure by the movements of the young Earth, the grains of sand recrystallised. A new rock was formed-dense, hard and white. Much later, but still six hundred million years in the past, at the spot on the globe that would become South West Tasmania, the new quartzite was thrust upwards. The bed of the old sea reared into the sky. Over long ages, the crust cracked. Continents drifted on the surface of the Earth. The land was folded and fractured. Rock sheared and twisted. The new mountains speared upwards, and were crumbled down by frost, wind and rain. The hard white rock became sand again. In one special place, two ranges were pushed into a crescent, overlooking a wide, flat plain. Grain by grain, their quartzite peaks washed down to the valley.

Much later, the glaciers came. For two million years, they advanced and retreated. Fingers of ice scraped at the mountains, then melted, washing debris onto the plain, covering its floor with a mantle of quartzite sand, slowing and finally damming the flow of a winding river. Behind fans of glacial outwash, a shallow lake formed, three kilometres long and three kilometres wide, its broad rippled beach and pink-white bed made of hard, clean sand from ancient other-country mountains. The lake was a cradle of life. When the southern supercontinent Gondwana broke up and drifted apart, this corner of the planet became an oasis of unique plant and animal species. In and around the lake there were creatures found nowhere else on Earth-shrimps, insects, snails, a freshwater lobster, a rare fish. Buttongrass clothed the valley floor, its roots in the peat that coloured the lake water honey-amber. Rainforests of myrtle, sassafras, leatherwood and laurel swept down from the northern crags to the lake. Peppermints, banksias, ti-trees and melaleucas mantled the dunes. Tiny plants found nowhere else grew on the beach, flowering each summer as the sand dried under the sun. Animals and birds lived within the mosaic of lake and dune -quolls, wombats, possums, devils, marsupial mice, wallabies, black swans, platypuses, rare ground-dwelling parrots and the emu wren.

Aboriginals must have camped and hunted there, but they left little trace of their quiet presence. For thousands of years, almost unobserved by man, lake water reflected only the mountains and the changing southern skies. Then one afternoon in 1835, field surveyor John Wedge reached the crest of a mountain range and looked down into the valley.

He named the lake Pedder.

After John Wedge's expedition, other parties of explorers and prospectors made the journey to Lake Pedder, and reported what they had seen in words that were echoed a hundred years and more afterwards:

*"The stillness of this secluded spot is remarkable...the most careless observer cannot behold Lake Pedder with the hundred peaks of the Frankland Range without admiration and almost amazement."* James Calder, surveyor, 1837.

*"I have seen many beautiful places in my time, but there is some special quality about Lake Pedder which makes it different."* Clive Sansom, poet and Pedder campaigner, 1972.

In 1874, Romantic painter William Piguénit sketched and painted at Lake Pedder. Ninety eight years afterwards, other Tasmanian artists including Max Angus and Elspeth Vaughan set up their easels on the beach to record Pedder's last days.

Pioneer photographer H.M. Nicholls took the first photographs of the lake in 1896, and in the following year, wrote in *The Tasmanian Mail*: "I do not know whether our Tourist Association has ever considered the possibility afforded by Lake Pedder as a means of attracting tourists to our shores, but if such is not the case, I think it is time that this comparatively unknown beauty spot was brought under their notice." Among a later generation of photographers, Olegas Truchanas and Ralph Hope-Johnstone were two who used their art and skill to show others the beauty that lay beyond the summit crest of the Coronets. Lake Pedder was always remote-that's the nature of wilderness.

Until late last century, trips to the lake were often epics of survival. Early explorers experienced relentless scrub, hazardous river crossings, forced marches, retreats, even near-starvation. Then in 1898 a walking track was cut from Fitzgerald to Port Davey, with a side track to Lake Pedder. Visiting the lake was still a week-long journey of over 50 km, but was now within the reach of adventurous travellers. In 1946, the first light plane landed on the hard beach sands. Paying tourists began to make regular trips, and over the next two decades, Lake Pedder was the base for many journeys into more remote areas of the South West wilderness, and became the heart of the new South West National Park.

But Tasmania's program of hydro-industrialisation was hungry for electricity. From the early 1950s, the Hydro-Electric Commission's flow meters had been measuring the Gordon, Huon and Serpentine Rivers. And although in 1955 public pressure had resulted in 24,000 hectares surrounding Lake Pedder being declared a National Park, Tasmanian Premier Eric Reece later announced that the proposed Gordon Power Scheme would result in "some modification" of the Park. He meant that Lake Pedder was to be flooded, becoming part of an enormous impoundment to top up another artificial reservoir, Lake Gordon.

The HEC pushed a fine scenic tourist route into the heart of the South West to reach its construction village of Strathgordon. Lake Pedder was a short day's walk from the Gordon Road. At the same moment that the lake became easily accessible to many thousands of people, its fate was sealed.

The Gordon Power Scheme advanced. There was widespread public protest, and eventually the Federal Government offered to fund modifications that could have saved the lake at a relatively small cost in terms of the overall scheme. But the Tasmanian Government refused the offer, and the dams were built. In 1972, Lake Pedder disappeared beneath the waters of the Huon-Serpentine impoundment.

Twenty years after the drowning, there is a new debate-should Lake Pedder be restored? The scheme would involve opening the diversion tunnels at two of the four damsites on the scheme; Serpentine and Scotts Peak. Lake Gordon, behind the massive curved wall of the Gordon Dam, would remain, and the Edgar levee would dry as the waters recede. Draining the impoundment would reduce the State's power generation potential by about 5%-the present lake provides 40% of the stream flow of the Gordon Power Scheme, which in turn generates 13% of Tasmania's total energy. The peak power output of the Gordon Power Station would be unchanged, because no electricity is generated on the Pedder impoundment-it is a diversion lake, supplementing Lake Gordon through the McPartlan Pass canal.

But what is left down there, beneath the dark water? Recent explorations by a team from Deakin University proved that 15m below the surface, the features of the original lake are unchanged, covered by a couple of millimetres of silt. The rapid filling of the impoundment meant that there was little erosion from wave action. A scoop brought up quartzite sand and Pedder Pennies, the curious ferro-manganese concretions that are found nowhere else. Sonar sweeps identified the line of the dunes, the winding course of the Serpentine River, and the unique megaripples of the broad beach. If the original lake were exposed, the extraordinary resilience of nature would reclothe the drowned valley. Winter storms would scour silt from the beach and dunes. Modern land rehabilitation techniques, many of which have been developed and applied with great success by the HEC on later power schemes, would speed the process.

So, Lake Pedder could be restored. But should it be? Today, Tasmania has a large surplus of hydro-electric energy capacity. But our future power needs are not easily predicted. The Tasmanian Government puts a price on the water in HEC storages-when used to generate electricity that can be sold, water has a specific value. And although eco-tourism continues to grow strongly across the world, it is still less easy to define the value of unique scenery. The clash of idealism and pragmatism characterised the dispute of two decades ago, and the new debate has begun in similar vein. But things may proceed differently. This time, there is no construction-imposed deadline-nothing irrevocable is happening while people are forming opinions and exchanging new ideas.

In 1974, after the waters had closed over the last trees on the dunes behind the beach, Edward St John QC, member of the Australian Government's Lake Pedder Committee of Enquiry, said: "The day will come when our

children will undo what we so foolishly have done." A generation has passed. Shrouded in cold depths beneath a dark mirror of upside-down crags and clouds, the pink beach of other-country mountains waits.

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