

# THE ORIGINAL GORDON-BELOW-FRANKLIN DISPUTE: BEATTIE, BHP and the MARBLE CLIFFS

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## Abstract

In 1914, almost 70 years before Tasmania's Gordon-Below-Franklin Dam Blockade, people power stopped development of the lower Gordon River. The focus of the proposed development was karst—a limestone deposit known as the Marble Cliffs. Its principal defender was Hobart photographer and conservationist John Watt Beattie, who wanted a Gordon River national park. He was not only the most important figure in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Tasmanian tourism but an early champion of its karst and caves. This was recognised in 1918. In the same year that Beattie campaigned for protection of the Hastings Caves, he was appointed to a Caves Advisory Board to assist the government take over the King Solomons and Marakoopa tourist caves.

Tasmania's lower Gordon River has been saved twice. In the summer of 1982–83 a blockade was staged to protest and publicise the Tasmanian State Government's intention to dam the lower Gordon as part of a hydro-electric power development. The dam would have flooded not just kilometres of the Gordon River but much of the magnificent, wild Franklin River, inundating the Aboriginal heritage cave Kutikina and untold, undiscovered archaeological sites. It took a High Court ruling to stop the dam. The Federal Government enforced its right to legislate on any issue in order to fulfil its responsibilities under an international treaty, in this case, the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (Kiernan, 1989). Even 20 years later, in 2003, the overruled former Tasmanian Premier Robin Gray said he would still try to build the dam given his time again (Gray, 2003).

This was effectively a replay of an earlier conservation battle which had long been forgotten. Not only did people power triumph on the lower Gordon River almost 70 years before the Gordon-Below-Franklin Dam Blockade, but it did so by swaying a pro-development premier—a feat of which the Blockaders could only dream in the summer of 1982–83. The subject of the 1914 battle was karst—a 40-metre-high bank of limestone known as the Marble Cliffs (now Champ Cliff).

Limestone extends for up to 17 kilometres along the lower Gordon River (Kiernan, 1995). Convicts from the nearby Macquarie Harbour penal station based at Sarah Island were the first to quarry limestone in this area in the years 1822–33 (Maxwell-Stewart, 2008, pp.31–32). A convict-era kiln, later reused by a mining company (Beattie, 1908b), can still be found at Limekiln Reach. Caves were probably discovered in the limestone karst during lime burning or logging operations along the lower Gordon during the convict era.

The culling of Huon pine on the Gordon River and later the advent of mining in the Mount Lyell district gradually made the Gordon River accessible to would-be limestone quarriers. In 1886 there were efforts to sell Tasmanian 'marble' in London, where it was hoped it would compete with Sicilian marble. Two syndicates fought for possession of the Gordon River's Marble Cliffs about 25 kilometres upstream of the mouth of the Gordon River ('By Electric Telegraph', 1886). Four years later, polished samples of this limestone exhibited in the mineralogical exhibition at Crystal Palace in London were said to be especially suitable for use in churches, both for altar pieces and flooring ('A New Tasmanian Industry', 1890).

There was quality. Was there quantity? Government Geologist Alexander Montgomery said there was not enough 'marble' at the Marble Cliffs to make a quarry viable (Montgomery, 1890). More ominous was the interest of a Broken Hill Proprietary Ltd (BHP) director Daniel Griffith, who claimed that the Marble Cliffs represented 'one of the most admirable fluxes in existence' ('Mining Intelligence', 1891).



*This 1862 map of the lower Gordon River shows Sarah Island (extreme top left), lime kilns at Limekiln Reach (centre) and carries a notation (just below centre) that gangs falling timber operated as high up the river as Butlers Island, just beyond the Marble Cliffs. Pyramid Island (lower right) marks the confluence of the Franklin River with the Gordon.*

*Courtesy of State Library of Tasmania, Launceston.*



*Photographer John Watt (J.W.) Beattie on the Moores Pimple Track, West Coast of Tasmania, possibly in 1890. His wooden tripod is strapped to the rest of his photographic gear on the horse's back. Beattie's horse wears not only blinkers but puttees to ward off the mud. Courtesy of State Library of Tasmania, Launceston.*

It was at this time that the Hobart photographer John Watt (J.W.) Beattie (1859–1930) made his first trip to the West Coast (Haygarth, 2008, p.64). Beattie, the most important figure in 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Tasmanian tourism, was not one of those wilderness photographers who excluded people from his photos. He worked in the aesthetic of the Sublime, typically depicting a man awestruck or at least wonderstruck by God's immense creation, nature. Beattie was himself sometimes transfixed by nature, declaring that

I love the bush, and nothing gives me greater delight than to stand on top of some high land and look out on a wild array of our mountain giants. I am struck dumb, but oh, my soul sings (Beattie, 1930)!

While an unmemorable 1897 Beattie shot of Wet Cave is probably Tasmania's oldest surviving photo of a limestone karst, his interest in caves seems to have begun earlier with the rock shelter on Grummet Rock (Small Island) in Macquarie Harbour. During the years of the convict settlement, the rock had housed probationary prisoners and the prison hospital (Maxwell-Stewart, 2008, pp.20, 23–24). As a passionate amateur historian, Beattie celebrated and helped de-stigmatise Tasmania's convict past (Young, 1996). No other place suited Beattie quite like the West Coast, where frenetic enterprise, wondrous scenery and brutal penal history were fused.



*'Grummet Rock, Showing Entrance to the Prison Cave no. 481B' (1890?). J.W. Beattie photo. Courtesy of Ross Ellis.*

In the mid 1890s the Mount Lyell copper mine prompted the last 19<sup>th</sup>-century Australian mining boom. The mine, worth more than £4 million in 1897, was the powerhouse of the Tasmanian economy (Blainey, 1954, pp.79–80). As a result, by 1901 one in seven Tasmanians lived on the mining fields (Blainey, 1956, pp.71–73). Sensibly, the booming West Coast tried to diversify economically by placing tourism alongside mining. To this end, John Ware, in his 1908 tourist guidebook *Strahan: Macquarie Harbour* wrote a poem 'The Gordon', which described the river 'rippling on unruffled, past fairy grottoes and caves', in the fantasy mode fashionable at the time (Ware, 1908, p.9). The Marble Cliffs were said to be one of the three gems of the river, along with Sir John Falls and Butler Island. These featured in photos, postcards, lettercards and lantern slides which advertised Gordon River cruises. Most of these photos were taken by two superb landscape photographers, J.W. Beattie and Stephen Spurling III.



BUTLER ISLAND, GORDON R. SPURLING. 589.

*(Above) Butler Island; (below left) Sir John Falls; and (below) The Marble Cliffs, the three 'gems' of the lower Gordon River, probably taken 1907. Stephen Spurling III photos.*



SIR JOHN FALLS, GORDON R. SPURLING. 590.



THE MARBLE CLIFFS, GORDON R. SPURLING. 591.

It is easy to imagine that Beattie and Spurling's photos of the lower Gordon and King Rivers were influential in the creation of 100-metre-wide reserves along the banks of these rivers in 1908 ('Correspondence re Deputation', 1914). Beattie, a frequent lantern lecturer (that is, he gave public lectures in which he projected images on glass slides, using a device called a 'magic lantern'), campaigned to have the 1908 Gordon River Reserve extended. He recognised at this time that Tasmania was not yet ready to accept reservation of an area simply because of its intrinsic qualities, rather, that reservation needed to be justified on purely economic grounds. Beattie therefore asserted that the Gordon River was worthless to timber cutters, to miners, to farmers and to settlers. Attracting the tourist pound, he implied, was its only chance of redemption (Beattie, 1908a, p.35; Bonyhady, 2000, pp.102–12). The same rationale was used by other campaigners for two early Tasmanian national parks, those at Mount Field (Crooke, 1913; 'Suggested National Park', 1913) and Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair ('The Proposed New National Reserve', 1921).



*Proposed limestone lease at the Marble Cliffs, 1914.  
Courtesy of the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office.*

The Mount Lyell mine was inextricably linked to BHP. Geoffrey Blainey has described how Bowes Kelly and other BHP directors bought the Mount Lyell gold mine and turned it into a copper mine (Blainey, 1954, pp.57–58). In 1914, at a time when BHP planned to expand into steel manufacturing at Newcastle, Kelly, now a director of both companies, appears to have reminded BHP of the potential of the Marble Cliffs as a smelting flux. BHP applied to lease the site. The company believed that shipping from western Tasmania to Newcastle would be economical if a bar across the Gordon River was removed, the limestone being back loaded on vessels delivering coke and coal to Mount Lyell and other West Coast mines (Ross, 1915).

It was the advent of World War I, when the West Coast mines were being badly affected by the closure of the European metal markets. The plan to quarry limestone was therefore very popular on the West Coast, even though it threatened one of the three major attractions of Gordon River tourism ('Queenstown: Mount Lyell Tourist

Association', 1914; 'Queenstown Municipal Council', 1914). West Coast (Wilmot House of Assembly electorate) member Edward Mulcahy suggested that limestone could be hacked invisibly from the back of the Marble Cliffs deposit (Mulcahy, 1914). BHP's proposed lease, however, reached right to the water's edge, leaving no doubt of its intention to mine the cliffs' river-side face. John Ware, gusher of Gordon River poetry, now dismissed the Marble Cliffs as 'puny' and 'disinteresting', merely the turning-around point for cruise services (Ware, 1914). Some justified the scheme by its creation of jobs (Watkins, 1914) and on the 'more accessible' social justice argument: by providing accommodation, a small mining settlement at the Marble Cliffs would make Gordon River tourism cheaper, opening it to the masses ('OEW', 1914). Such justifications would become staples of development proposals in Tasmania.

Elsewhere in the State, the plan was greeted with horror. In Launceston, Weekly Courier editor Frederick Pritchard pleaded for the Gordon's preservation for future generations (Pritchard, 1914). In Hobart, Mercury editor William Henry Simmons expressed 'horror and anger' at the proposed 'Vandalism' (Simmons, 1914). One protestor offered June Cave limestone to the developers as a trade-off for the Marble Cliffs (Marriott, 1914). Beattie stepped out of the cover of economics for ever by attacking the mining scheme as 'unpatriotic' and 'the thin edge of utilitarianism'. He declared that the Gordon River should be a 'sacred reserve for all time', and blasted the 'ridiculous' existing riverbank reservation (Beattie, 1914). Beattie was a member of the Tasmanian Tourists' Association, which also implored the government to refuse the BHP exploration licence ('The Gordon River: Marble Cliffs Question', 1914).

The premier of the time, John Earle, was Tasmania's first working class leader. He had developed an interest in politics at 18 or 19 years old while working as a humble blacksmith at the remote Lucy Spur gold mine, above the middle reaches of the Pieman River on the West Coast (Ireland, c1913). Later, on the Zeehan silver field, Earle and his future minister for mines James Ogden were prominent figures in the Amalgamated Miners Association (Howard, 2006, pp.295–96).

Mining was in Earle's blood, and in the shadow of war his traditional supporters in mining communities expected government relief. Co-operative arrangements with miners enabled some work to continue at the Tasmania gold mine and the Mount Bischoff tin mine (Roberts, 2007, p.285; Mount Bischoff Tin Mining Company, 1914). The Earle Government established the Electrolytic Zinc plant in Hobart to save the zinc that was ending up on West Coast mine dumps (Townesley, 1991, p.268). The generation of hydro-electric power for this plant effectively marked the beginning of hydro-industrialisation, a dogmatic policy of Tasmanian governments up until the Gordon-Below-Franklin Dam Blockade of 1982–83.

Earle was a pro-development premier—but not a rapacious one. His Labor government in the years 1914–



*The middle Pieman River below the Lucy Spur mine, western Tasmania, 2010.  
Nic Haygarth photo.*

16 also took control of tourism, passed more effective conservation legislation (the Scenery Preservation Act, 1915) and established Tasmania's first national park at Mount Field. These measures reflected a growing appreciation of the environment in Tasmania. Perhaps those years of working in 'nature primeval' on the middle reaches of the beautiful Pieman, a river of similar grandeur to the Gordon, had worked on Earle's soul. Under pressure from tourist associations, newspaper editors, the high-profile Beattie and the general populace, Earle decided to refuse the BHP application. His explanation for the decision suggests that it was not politically convenient to admit that he had intervened in the name of nature preservation:

There was no indication that a genuine industry was likely to be established [at the Marble Cliffs]...he looked upon the scheme as a wild cat one. He considered it was doomed to failure, and would only result in the destruction of beautiful scenery ('Melrose lime deposits', 1915).

The logic of this statement seems to have been lost on Earle's own cabinet members: to accuse the highly capitalised BHP, of all companies, of a 'wild cat'

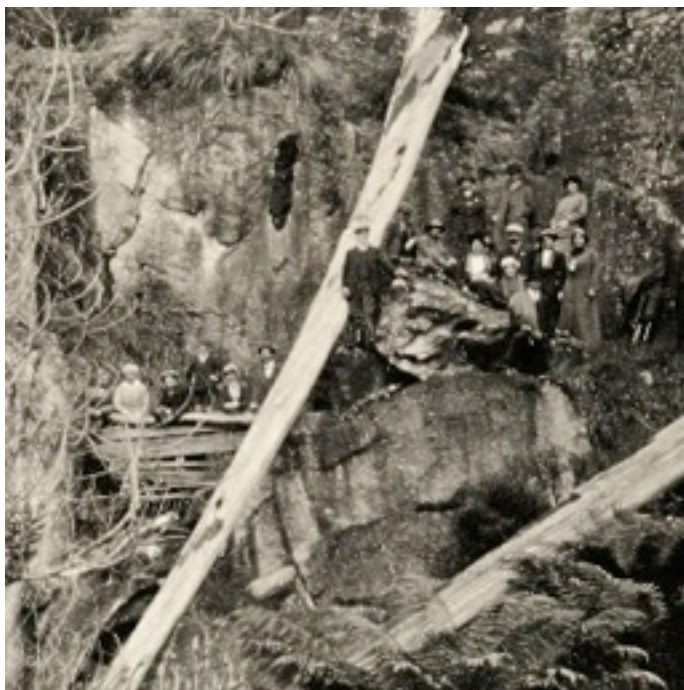
operation was bizarre. Moreover, why, after making that accusation, did he now endorse the same 'wild cat' BHP limestone quarry at a different location, Melrose, on Tasmania's north-west coast?

The West Coast took the news badly ('A Contrast in Policy' (editorial), 1915; Zeehan and Districts Development Committee, 1915). BHP, however, was not all phased by the decision, because the company was welcomed with open arms at Melrose. The Tasmanian Government bent over backwards to help get a railway built in order to bring BHP's smelting flux out to the wharf at Devonport ('Melrose lime deposits', 1915). Renouncing any interest in the Gordon, BHP operated its Melrose quarry from 1915 until 1947 (Gardam, 1996, pp. 68--70). BHP general manager Guillaume Delprat envisaged another practical use of the lower Gordon besides limestone extraction anyway. He pronounced the river ideal for hydro-electric power generation ('Queenstown: the Gordon River', 1914). Beattie's Gordon River national park (which would be called the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park) was still 67 years



*Above: Newdegate Caves 1918.  
Below: King George Cave.  
Photos: JW Beattie*





Waiting at Scott's Cave. Photo: JW Beattie

away—and its proclamation would not prevent a second Gordon below Franklin battle.

J.W. Beattie continued to play a significant role in the conservation of Tasmanian karst. Not for nothing is Beattie Cave at Hastings named after him. Newspaper reports of the discovery of what is now called Newdegate Cave near the then timber village of Hastings induced Beattie and E.T. Emmett, director of the Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau, to inspect the cave in February 1918. A local mineral prospector, David Inns,

then reported two other caves nearby. Inns dubbed what he believed the largest of the three discoveries The King George (later King George V) Cave, and the next biggest (the original find) The Newdegate Cave, after Sir Frances Newdegate, Tasmanian Governor 1917–20, thus sanctioning the proper regal and vice-regal relativity (Beattie, 1918b). Beattie was presumably satisfied to occupy third place on this honour roll when his name was applied to the smallest cave. Emmett immediately called for the area to be reserved (Emmett, 1918). Beattie's images helped sell his own and Emmett's descriptions of these caves as a fragile treasure in need of protection (Beattie, 1918a).

Later in 1918 Beattie's prominence as a tourism promoter and conservationist was recognised by his appointment to a Caves Advisory Board, to assist the government's takeover of caves at Mole Creek ('The Caves', 1920). The board backed Jenolan Caves caretaker Voss Wiburd's recommendation that the King Solomons and Marakoopa show caves join Baldocks as state possessions—which these caves did in 1920 and 1922 respectively ('The Caves', 1920; 'Mole Creek Caves', 1923).

There is an ironic postscript to the story of BHP's limestone quarrying at Melrose, or Eugenana, as the site was later called. Quarrying in the Ordovician Gordon Limestone led to the discovery of a small cave which contained what have become known as the Eugenana Beds, that is, a deposit of sandstone, carbonaceous sandstone and cave breccias with a spore content indicating Middle Devonian age (Banks and Burns, 1962; Kiernan, 1974). The beds were given Geological Monument status. The area is now part of a State Reserve. So something good came of a great deal of environmental destruction.

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