

By DAVID LESER

They arrest angels in Tasmania.

They don't just clip their wings. They haul them out of trees, march them off to court, then charge them for being just that. Angels. Then they sue the lovers of these angels, even when they're dying.

Down here at the bottom of the world, on the edge of the Great Southern Ocean, in this place of great beauty and slaughter, they do things that tip over into the realms of myth. They arrest angels, kill giants, bring down monarchs, poison the earth and sea. They even threaten grandmothers.

But let's start with the angels. This one's name is Allana Beltran and two years ago she walked into the lower Weld Valley in Tasmania's southern forests and experienced what can only be described as a life-changing epiphany. In front of her was a wilderness of ancient, towering trees, deep gorges and waterfalls, and a wild river flowing through it. On an adjacent ridge there was a different scene. It was the blackened ruins of a recently clearfelled tract of native forest.

"It was the most horrific devastation of land I had ever seen in my life," the visual artist from Sydney told Vanity Fair recently. "And from that moment on my heart was with the people who were standing up for places like this."

Allana Beltran decided to stay in these forests and join the group of protesters trying to save it from further logging. That's when she met Ben Morrow, the man who would soon become her partner. He'd been in the valley for six months, much of it spent 50 to 60 metres up in a grey-trunked eucalypt, in what's called a 'tree-sit,' on the lookout for loggers.

"Our camp was in the middle of the road that changed from clearfell to wilderness," Beltran says now from her home in the Tasmanian capital of Hobart. "There was 100 ha of clearfelling and they wanted to bulldoze a road another two and a half kilometres in so they could access 2000 ha. This was all old growth forest surrounded by World Heritage Area."

In November 2006 the camp was raided by police as the logging company moved into build the new stretch of road. Twenty-five protesters were arrested. By March, the beginning of the Australian autumn, the blockade had virtually collapsed with only three protesters left standing between the chainsaws and the forests.

Although not exactly standing. One man was locked onto the gate at one of the entrances to the forest. Another man, Ben Morrow, was hanging in a sling off the bridge over the Weld River. Seven kilometres from him, Alanna Beltran was attached to a giant tripod at a second entrance to the forest. She had a long white curtain wrapped around her waist, white body paint on her face and was wearing wings of white cockatoo feathers that she'd scavenged from the shorelines and forest floor. She'd become the "Weld Angel," the "Angel of the Forest," and her haunting image was about to enter Tasmanian folklore.

"I did it because I thought it would look beautiful," she says now matter-of-factly, "and if I was going to be arrested as a visual artist, I wanted to make a visual statement."

Beltran sat in her forest aerie for nine and a half hours listening through headphones to Tibetan monk music, as the police ordered her down through megaphones. "I was praying for the forests and for people to realise what they are doing. I was ready to sacrifice myself to this cause. I was ready to stand up for these ancient forests."

This is a story for our times. It may be unfolding in one of the remotest parts of the globe – the sixth and smallest state of Australia - but it is a story that has resonance

everywhere. It is about the power that monopoly companies can – and do - wield over governments and people. It is about democracy and ethics and about the value people place on the things they love. It is about old ways of doing business and new ways of paying respect to the land.

In this case it is about the forests of Tasmania and the battle to save them from destruction. On an island roughly the size of the Netherlands and Belgium combined there is an average of 15,000 ha of native forest being logged each year, according to the Wilderness Society, although the Tasmanian Government insists the figure has fallen to 11,000. Either way, at the very least, that's 30 football fields every day. And these are not just any forests. These are, in some instances, the tallest hardwood trees in the world, the last of the mighty Mountain Ash, or *Eucalyptus regnans*, which are found in the Styx Valley – or Valley of the Giants - two hours drive west of Hobart.

There are trees in here as high as 97 metres, as old as 400 years; and where the fall of one can send a shudder through the earth and provide enough timber to build a hamlet of homes. They are nesting places for the rare and endangered wedgetailed eagle, white goshawks and pink rainforest robins. They are a link to adjoining World Heritage Areas and a vital carbon sink for a world threatened by global warming. And yet in Tasmania nearly 90 per cent of these eucalypt kings are believed to have been destroyed, much of it sold by the Tasmanian Government to a company called Gunns Limited - the largest logging company in Australia. Gunns buys the trees for between A\$12 and \$15 (7 and 9 euros) a tonne, and then on-sells this as woodchip to Japanese paper companies for ten times that amount.

What is left behind from these rare ecosystems is often a wasteland of smoking ash caused by the practice of clearfelling, which involves levelling the forest with bulldozers, chainsaws and cable-logging rigs, torching the earth with incendiary devices dropped from helicopters, and then, in most cases, turning the land over to monocultural plantations.

And this is happening all over the island, much to the horror of many Tasmanians and, judging by the opinion polls, the majority of Australians, although Forestry Tasmania, the government-run business enterprise that manages forests and contracts the loggers, disputes this. "Forty-four per cent of the total land in Tasmania is reserved," says Ken Jeffreys, the organisation's general manager of corporate relations. "And on (state-owned) land we have 1.5 million ha - 250,000 ha of which is old growth forest that is reserved forever."

Environmentalists counter that a large amount of this reserved area is commercially useless to the forestry industry and that what *is* commercially valuable is inadequately protected. "Less than half the original forests are left," the Tasmanian Green Party's Senator Bob Brown tells Vanity Fair in an interview in Hobart. "And they are going at a rate unprecedented in history. These are world heritage valued forests being chainsawed off the face of the earth, never to return."

Dr Bob Brown is a hero to the Australian environment movement, and has been for the past 30 years. It would be fair to say there is no one remotely like him in Australian politics, nor probably in any other Western democracy. Son of a policeman Brown is the first openly gay politician in Australian national politics.

More like a prophet-saint figure than a doctor-turned politician, in 1976 he staged a one-man hunger strike for more than a week on the icy slopes of Mt Wellington, overlooking Hobart, to protest the arrival of an American nuclear-armed warship into the harbour. In the early 1980s, as head of the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, he spent 19 days in prison for trying to stop – peacefully – the Tasmanian Government's

plans to dam the mighty Franklin River in central Tasmania. (Three years earlier his book on this ancient river system had been launched by the world famous violinist and conductor, Sir Yehudi Menuhin.)

The day after Brown's release from prison he was elected to the Tasmanian parliament as an independent. Thirteen years later he was elected to the national Senate, as a representative of the Tasmanian Green Party, an offshoot of the United Tasmania Group which, in the early 1970s, became the world's first Green political party.

Bob Brown is as crazy-brave and passionate as they come in political life. In October 2003 he made international headlines when he interrupted a speech to a joint sitting of the parliament by US President George W. Bush. Brown wanted to draw attention to the incarceration of two Australians being held without charge at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. He also wanted to make the point that international law was being violated in Iraq. "Respect the laws of the world and the world will respect you," he admonished the American president, causing widespread commotion and, later, ostracism by many of his fellow parliamentarians..

Political stunts aside, though, it was – and is - the forests of Tasmania that have always been closest to Bob Brown's heart. During the past 25 years he has been arrested, abused, threatened, beaten, shot at by logging vigilantes incensed over his efforts to save Tasmania's wilderness areas. He has also had his mailbox destroyed on at least 17 occasions, sometimes filled with dead possums and rabbit guts.

In 2004 Brown, together with 19 others, received a 216 page, 3.8 million euro claim from Gunns charging him with conspiring to destroy the company's profits – estimated at nearly 50 million euros last year. (Brown has since been dropped from the action.)

Among those being sued – they've become known as the Gunns 20 - was a penniless grandmother protesting the logging of her valley, a doctor who'd been raising public health awareness about woodchip piles, the country's leading wilderness organisation, a film-maker and several protesters, including Ben Morrow, who was arrested earlier in the year for climbing aboard a woodchip loader as a Japanese ship was being filled with shredded forest.

"The perversity of the (legal) action was staggering," wrote "Richard Flanagan, the internationally-acclaimed Tasmanian author, in an article published first in London's Daily Telegraph. "With the immense fortune it had made out of destroying Tasmania's forests, Gunns had launched an action that would, if successful, have redefined the practice of democracy as the crime of conspiracy.

"An Australian would not have been able to criticise, question or campaign against a corporation, for risk of being bankrupted in legal proceedings brought against them by the richest and most powerful in their society, claiming damage to their corporate interest. No matter how a corporation made its money, be it from tobacco or asbestos or chemicals, all of its actions would have effectively been removed from the realm of public life."

Richard Flanagan is considered by many to be the social and political conscience of his island home. A man who speaks like a bush poet and writes like a dream, he is, in the red-neck world of Tasmanian politics, Enemy Number One. In April 2004 the then Minister for Forests, Bryan Green, famously described Flanagan as a traitor for daring to question the cosy relationship that had existed previously between the late Premier of Tasmania, Jim Bacon, and the logging giant, Gunns Limited. Bacon's successor as Tasmanian leader, Paul Lennon later remarked that neither Flanagan nor his writings were welcome "in the New Tasmania."

Flanagan didn't win any further favour when he told his international audience – a fact already known to his fellow Australians - that Lennon was seeing to fast track approval for a Gunns pulp mill at the very time he was using a wholly-owned subsidiary of Gunns to renovate his colonial home. And this when the company was not normally involved in the business of home renovation.

“This is a third world story – like the United Fruit Company (in Guatemala in the 1950s),” he tells Vanity Fair, “where there is one company run for greed, that now gives the appearance of owning everything that matters on this island, including – it seems to many Tasmanians - the politicians. And no one will take them on.”

Tasmania has long been a land of conflict and sorrow - to both the white man and black. A one-time jail for petty thieves and misbegotten souls shipped from England, Ireland and Scotland in the early 19th century, it also became a place of annihilation for the island's original inhabitants.

Estimated at between 5 and 10,000 at the time of British settlement in 1803, by 1850 Tasmania's indigenous people had come close to being wiped out by what was described at the time as a “war of extermination.” The last full-blooded Aborigine, Truganini, was immortalised more than a century later in a song by one of Australia's most famous rock bands, Midnight Oil.

I hear much support for the monarchy

I hear the Union Jack's to remain

I see Namatjira in custody

I see Truganini's in chains

The singer of this political anthem was the hulking, bald-headed figure of Peter Garrett, now the Australian Minister for the Environment. Having been appointed to the position after the crushing November 2007 defeat of the conservative Howard government, Garrett found himself charged with deciding what to do about Gunns' proposal for one of the largest pulp mills in the world.

Two days after issuing its law suit against the so-called “Gunns 20” the company announced plans for an 850 million euro pulp mill in the pristine Tamar Valley in the north of the island - just 36 kilometres from Launceston, the second city of Tasmania. The proposal caused a firestorm in Australian politics. The Tamar Valley has a population of around 100,000 and is a slice of Arcadia on the edge of the world. It is filled with dairy farms, vineyards, beautiful beaches, a languid river and flanked by snow-capped mountains. According to one study the effects of the pulp mill - on the tourism, wine and organic food industry alone – would be in the order of 1.8 billion euros. And that's not taking into account the further destruction of forests to the north and north-west of the valley.

“They are going to stick the world's biggest pulp mill in here,” says Bob Brown, “one that will exude millions of tonnes of greenhouse gas into the air, with a sewer pipe running into the ocean creating cancer-causing dioxins which will eventually end up in penguins in Antarctica.

“And the forests being targetted to be fed into the pulp mill will create profits for the Sydney Stock Exchange and not Tasmania, because neither the pulp nor the profits will stay in Tasmania.”

And therein lies another cautionary tale. While Gunns' profits have soared in recent years to record levels, they have done so at the expense of the taxpayer. Despite owning 85 per cent of the state's logging industry, Gunns has paid only limited

royalties to Forestry Tasmania, the government-run enterprise charged with obtaining commercial returns on publicly-owned native forests.

Furthermore, the company has been granted massive tax concessions on private land - land that was once native forest and has been clearfelled for plantation timber. And this coupled with the loss of an estimated 1200 jobs in the Tasmanian forestry industry in the past 10 years.

In a woodchip-flooded market, old growth logging is estimated to employ – according to the Forestry Industry’s own 2004 report - 1345 people on an island of half a million. And that figure was published before a wave of further job losses.

“This is an industry as driven by ideological bailouts and hidden subsidies as a Soviet-era pig-iron foundry,” says Flanagan. “Worse still, at the moment when Tasmania is acquiring a global reputation as an island of exceptional beauty, the forces that would destroy much of the island’s unique nature have been unleashed.” Tasmanian poet and essayist, Dr Peter Hay, echoes these sentiments. In an interview with Vanity Fair overlooking the entrance to Hobart’s polar blue harbour, he says: “The heart and soul of this island lives in the forests. When you go into a clearfell you can’t even conceive of anyone wanting to visit such brutality on the land. To rip such a complex fabric apart shows a profound contempt and disrespect.”

In 1817 the French writer Stendahl entered Florence for the first time and became so overwhelmed with the cultural richness of the city, particularly the beauty of Giotto’s famous frescoes, that he almost fainted.

I now know how he felt. On a mild Australian summer’s morning in early 2008 I entered the Styx Valley in southern Tasmania for the first time with my guide, Vica Bayley, from the Wilderness Society. I, too, nearly fell over with wonderment. Here was a prehistoric wilderness of *eucalyptus regnans*, the tallest hardwood trees in the world, towering above a forest floor blanketed in bracken and soft ferns. In front of me, the mighty “Gandalf’s Staff,” soaring 84.5 metres into the sky, with a girth roughly the size of a cliff face.

Throughout 2003-4 this patch of pristine rainforest was the scene of a remarkable international protest. Having been earmarked for destruction, activists had gathered from around the world to establish the “Global Rescue Station” – a treesit suspended 65 metres off the ground attached to Gandalf’s Staff. Ben Morrow was one of the protesters taking part. “It was a beautiful place to live,” he recalls now. “I was there for about eight months and at one time I slept on a platform 75 metres off the ground. (At the time the tallest tree-sit in the world.). I had black cockatoos flying around me.”

The campaign to save this wilderness area proved successful, but in valley after valley throughout Tasmania’s south-western wilderness, indeed throughout the island – in the north and north-east, over in the west - the logging of ancient forests of world heritage value has continued at feverish pace.

Not far from Gandalf’s Staff - and the aptly-named “Tolkien Track” - Vanity Fair witnessed a landscape of charred and limbless trees stretching in every direction – the result of a recent clearfelling operation. Scenes of devastation like this are to be found all over the island.

In fact as you read this, the blue autumnal skies will soon be turning to grime as clearfelling operations resume. In the Upper Florentine Valley, just north of the Styx, a mosaic of ancient rainforest – giant eucalypts, myrtles and sassafras - stands under sentence of death. Activists remain on red-alert. “We’re not leaving here until we’ve

saved this place,” one of them told me after having climbed down from his 50 metre-high sentry-watch.

Meanwhile families turn in on each other as the cancer eats into the fabric of society. In the town of Maydena, 60 kms north-west of Hobart, Prudence Barratt, explains how the logging of the valleys – once the home of the Tasmanian Tiger - has divided her family. For four generations the Barratt men were employed in forestry, as surveyors, tree-fellers, carpenter-builders. Now Prudence has decided no more. She wants to dedicate her life to saving the trees, despite what her brother thinks.

“He came here and abused me. ‘You stinking, fucking, greenie,’ he said. So I’ve kind of walked away from that relationship.”

Prudence has been threatened on a number of occasions, once by a man wielding a machete, another by a man pointing a .22 rifle at her. It is not uncommon for loggers to drive by her house, yelling: “Greenie bitch. Greenie slut.”

Last year she was allegedly assaulted by police and taken to hospital because of her injuries. Next month (March) she will appear in the Supreme Court on charges of trespassing. She remains undeterred. “These forests mean the world to me. They are part of my heritage.”

Six months after being arrested as an angel in the Weld Valley, Allana Beltran was handed a claim for nearly A\$10,000 (more than 6000 euros) by Tasmanian Police and Forestry Tasmania. Part of the claim was for lost police wages during the time she’d been protesting, and for the cost of their lunches and coffee.

Beltran had earlier in the year pleaded guilty to committing a nuisance and failing to obey a police instruction, a plea for which she’d been placed on a 12 month good behaviour bond and told not to re-enter the Weld Valley.

Here, now, was another penalty, this time financial, for the crime of peaceful protest. There was uproar in Tasmanian politics. “Forestry Tasmania should leave the Weld Angel alone,” said the Tasmanian Green’s Opposite Leader, Peg Putt. “It undermines our democracy to specifically target one group in society for additional penalties because of their political views.”

The police eventually backed down after legal advice found their claim “not well founded in law.” However Forestry Tasmania has vowed to continue its claim, while reducing the amount to A\$2000 (1200 euros).

“Alanna Beltran wasn’t protesting the logging of old growth forests,” Forestry Tasmania’s Ken Jeffreys tells Vanity Fair. “She was on a road leading to one of our major tourist attractions, surrounded by re-growth forest. She was stopping people from entering a major tourist attraction. Besides which, not one cent will come out of her pocket. It will all be paid by the environmental group she belongs to.”

In September last year, one week after police had issued their claim against Beltran, her partner, Ben Morrow, was diagnosed with bowel cancer. Doctors informed him the cancer was at an advanced stage and had spread throughout his abdomen.

At the time of writing the managing director of Gunns Limited, John Gay, was showing no signs of withdrawing the company’s claim for damages against Morrow – despite his illness - nor of answering questions Vanity Fair wanted to put to him.

“Mr Gay is not doing interviews at the moment with any media,” said his personal assistant.

Asked why that was, his assistant replied: “Because he doesn’t want to. And that’s his prerogative.”

Nor was the Premier of Tasmania, Paul Lennon, available - when asked at short notice - to comment for this article.

In November last year, a new Labor government was swept into power in Australia after 11 years of conservative rule, a period which saw Australia seemingly frozen in time on the question of climate change. One of the newly-elected government's first pledges was to reverse the country's long-standing refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol and to embrace a carbon trading system along with binding emission reductions.

At the United Nations-led climate change conference in Bali a month later the Australian delegation received rapturous applause when it announced that, finally, the country was at one with the international community on its efforts to combat global warming.

Now the real test is being applied at home in relation to the forests of Tasmania.

"What is Kevin Rudd (the new Australian Prime Minister) going to do about this?"

Bob Brown demands. "Here are the biggest carbon banks in the world being demolished in a world facing climate change catastrophe. Peter Garrett (his Environment Minister) should immediately block the pulp mill and end the logging of native forests across Australia.

"It is very, very tough to think that if, in Tasmania, we can't stop this calamity and violation of the earth, then we can't ask people in Brazil and Indonesia and Equatorial Africa to do it. We are done for if we don't stand up to it."

And that's the question many Australians are now asking themselves. Who amongst us is on the side of the angels?

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