

## The Earth and Sea Furnishes Them

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December 2021 was a monumental and emotional time for the Woppaburra people. There was dancing, singing, smiles, tears and healing on Konomie, North Keppel Island, when a judge from the Federal Court of Australia made a native title announcement. Some two hundred and fifty years since Captain Cook sailed past the island group and named the bay and 120 since Queensland's Home Secretary J.F.G. Foxton ordered the removal of all Woppaburra people from their island homes, Australia returned to descendants their rights to possess, occupy, use and enjoy parts of the area to the exclusion of all others, through the Woppaburra Land Trust. ABC TV covered the story.

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My youngest sister had a new boyfriend, a bit of an action man with a runabout. 'Come up this Easter,' they invited. 'We've booked a campsite on Miall Island. It's a desert island in Keppel Bay. No-one else will be there. Just us and the kids.'

The year was 1997 but I don't remember the name of the train my seven-year-old son and I caught to Rockhampton. Spirit of Capricorn? Sunlander? Something more poetic than the current 'Tilt Train' at any rate. At over 600 kilometres, it was a long journey for a solo parent and a restless kid. We were travelling light but it was a mistake not to pack pillows along with the tent. Sleeplessness aside, it was an uneventful trip and the bus connection from Rockhampton station delivered us to Yeppoon without a hitch.

The next day was Easter Friday but Cyclone Justin had left Keppel Bay choppy. The children weren't too disappointed when my sister's boyfriend Lachlan postponed the departure – my son and his two cousins were besotted with one another and didn't mind where they were, as long as they could invent games and play.

On Easter Saturday Lachlan announced that we'd cross separately from Rosslyn Bay Harbour; he and my sister with the supplies and gear, while I chaperoned the kids on the *Reef Seeker*, the commercial catamaran that transported tourists *en masse* to the resort on Great Keppel Island.

'See you on Keppel!'

They shortened Great Keppel Island to 'Keppel', as everyone did. The hedonistic 'Get Wrecked on Great Keppel' advertising campaign was at its peak at the time, making me none too clear about the names or locations of any of the other 16 islands in the archipelago. I didn't

even know that North Keppel was entirely different from Great Keppel. For the record, all islands in Keppel Bay are continental in origin. They are part of the Southern Great Barrier Reef and UNESCO listed them as World Heritage in 1981. They straddle the mystical Tropic of Capricorn like a handful of jewels.

The invitation came during my second year of solo parenting when I was finding the going tough, but the 30 minute-trip from the mainland to Great Keppel Island transported me in more ways than one. Sea salt entered my lungs and the wind raked through my hair and shook my troubles free. The water was a clear light blue, sparkling and shimmering. The sky was Magritte blue, that is to say, *sky blue*, with fluffy white clouds. The mental quagmire that enslaved me, loosened.

When the catamaran moored at the wharf near the resort and the crowds disembarked, Lachlan angled in to collect us. Marine blue tropical waves. Suntanned sailor. Desert island destination. My life suddenly felt carefree. Glamourous.

At first sight, Miall Island looked forbidding. Wild geology. Red cliffs. Uplifts, folds and faults plunging darkly into the sea. But the inhospitable presentation relaxed into a lovely beach that faced the mainland. Our campsite announced itself with sheets of canvas slung between she-oaks. The official campsite directly in front of the beach that we'd hoped for was already occupied by a couple with a toddler.

Lachlan dropped anchor and the children splashed ashore.

'Land! Land!' the older girl exclaimed theatrically, falling to her knees and kissing the beach repeatedly, a routine immediately aped by the younger two. The children started digging a hole to China.

There was no communication from the neighboring camp beyond a nod of acknowledgment. Although Central Queenslanders are generally friendly, camping protocol favoured the fantasy of being triumphantly alone in a personal Paradise.

Lachlan was the 'rough-it' type. No table. No chairs, not even one to keep the plastic container of drinking water off the sand. The lighting of fires on the island was strictly forbidden so when he confessed to forgetting the gadget that converted the gas cannister from a light to a cooker, we knew we'd have to eat every meal cold and raw.

The privations didn't seem to matter – the water was crystal clear, the sun generous but not harsh, and the effervescent cousin trio worshipped all food as manna from Heaven.

I took a knife down to a cluster of rocks at the edge of the cove and selected an oyster to prise open. Rinsed off the shell grit, threw my head back, and let the salty delicacy slither down my throat. I easily ate a dozen. Oh, it truly was paradise.

My afternoon was even better. I headed off alone as far as I could go. Washed-up coral and pulverized shells crunched underfoot as I mooched along, foraging for treasures. A plethora of mismatched rubber thongs puzzled me until I realized that they'd served as yachtie footwear before being swept overboard. The multi-coloured sandals looked so bereft that I began to collect them too.

I chose a pandanus tree to sit under, and contemplated life. Before long, I was arranging shells, sea-washed pebbles, driftwood and weathered thongs into an assemblage. When I craned my neck, I could see a nest in the crown of a tree and osprey parents wheeling above it, delivering silvery slivers to their young.

On my sunset stroll back to camp, I found the bodies of two seagulls, their red feet and yellow beaks intact but their sodden feathers rotting. I saluted them with Dylan Thomas. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Oysters, art and self-help – my island routine. Nights? They were for sky appreciation. The mainland glowed with electricity but the waning moon and diamond-bright stars lit our island well enough.

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Keppel Bay's white settler origin story begins with James Cook, Royal Navy man, hero and adventurer – it was this explorer who named the bay on 23 May 1770. King George III had commissioned a mapping job along the east coast of the Great South Land and Cook duly documented many features in a flurry of naming – all of which he entered in his *HMS Endeavour* journal with pen and ink.

Some 640 nautical miles earlier, on 6 May, the *Endeavour* made landfall in a bay locally known as Kamay; Cook named it Botany. The great naming spree continued: Mount Warning, Point Danger, Point Lookout, the Glasshouse Mountains, and many other prominent East Coast landforms. He did not land on any of the Tropic of Capricorn islands but named them to honour fellow Royal Navy man, Rear Admiral Augustus Keppel (1725–1786). A portrait of Augustus Keppel can be found in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. James Cook noted people on one island of the archipelago and kept course.

On 22 August 1770, Cook reached the northern extremity of the whole eastern coast of the Great South Land, and took possession of it. Possession Island was entered in the journal; the place he made the proclamation is today marked by a white cairn.

When *en route* through Torres Strait to Batavia to reprovision, Cook wrote a reflection on 'the Natives' whose presence he regularly noted. He'd observed smoke from campfires,

people on headlands, canoes of many types, and had spent seven-weeks at close quarters in the Far North when the *Endeavour* underwent repairs after it had snagged on the Great Barrier Reef. He summarised:

They are far more happier than Europeans being wholly [sic] unacquainted not only with the Superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe; they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition ... The earth and Sea of their own accord furnishes them ... they covet not ...

Cook's observations led to King George's decision to establish a British colony at Botany Bay. The boats began arriving in 1788.

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The children loved camp life. They swam, teased hermit crabs from rock crevices, and worked on their excavation to China. My sister's husband had proven something of a vicious dud, like mine, so she was equally exhausted by solo parenting and chose to pass the time engrossed in a book about goddesses. Lachlan surveyed the horizon through binoculars and went snorkeling.

On Easter Sunday the children lounged about on the sand to eat their Easter eggs. We all registered a launch gunning across the morning blue at the same time. It was sleek and white. Everything about it seemed white. The white shirts, shorts, socks and shoes of the deckmen matched the white hull. One man stepped forward on the bow and called out, 'Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. Present your camping permits.' Lachlan and the other camper scrambled into their tents and returned with pieces of paper which they held up. Satisfied, the permit inspector signaled 'throttle back'. With a deadpan voice he called as the launch reversed,

'Death adders have been sighted on this island.'

The departing engine drowned out the sounds of the two campsites now joined in shrill indignation.

You coulda mentioned that on the phone when we booked!

We're in the middle of nowhere with kids and death adders?

Wankers!

On Easter Monday our benign world shattered with the sight of a grey fin cutting in to where the children were swimming. My sister and I jumped up from the shade of the she-oaks choking out,

‘Shark! Shark!’ our voices raspy with fear. Panicked, the trio set their tanned legs pumping. My sister and I choked out commands while sprinting over a stretch of sand to gather them in. Another fin appeared. And another. The cousins shrieked, lost their footing, recovered, and pumped their legs harder.

When united on the shore, we clung to each other, sobbing with relief as the fins veered out to deep water. We pieced the real story together when we understood that two of the fins belonged to bottlenose dolphins. A shark *had* been on its way to the kids but two dolphins intercepted it. They protected the little humans, buying them time to reach safety. We understood their true identities by their curvaceous, playful dances of goodbye.

The children ate cheese sandwiches then resumed tunnelling. We adults collapsed on the carpet of she-oak needles, humbled, awed. We’d witnessed something that bordered on the sacred. Something ancient, perhaps? A deal negotiated between humans and dolphins many generations ago? I considered the name ‘Miall’, surely a white settler name to denote sightings of tribal Aboriginals on the island? For the first time I gave the original inhabitants some real thought.

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The Indigenous people in the pristine area now mapped as Keppel Bay were the Woppaburra people (*woppa* meaning island and *burra* meaning people). Three days prior to bestowing an Englishman’s name to the bay, Cook had passed another island-dwelling, fishing people – the Badtjala of the sand island K’gari. Known from 1836 as Fraser Island, the island’s original name has been restored. They too enjoyed the life that Cook would summarise in his journal as furnished by ‘earth and Sea’ in a society characterised by equality, tranquillity and happiness.

Cook gave the name of Indian Head to the headland that the Badtjala knew as Tacky Waroo. The ‘Indians’ – the dark-skinned people who watched back from their vantage point – composed a song about the transaction. Unrecorded until 1923, it has recently become widely available thanks to Badtjala linguist Gemma Cronin. She performed her translation for *East Coast Encounter* (2014), a film by Jeff McMullen available on YouTube. The words of the song are printed in the book of the same name, edited by Lisa Chandler. Here is an excerpt, with omissions for brevity:

Strangers are travelling with a cloud ...

It has fire inside, must be a bad spirit.

It’s stupid maybe? ...

It is breathing smoke rhythmically from its rear, must be song men and sorcerers.

... The sea carries this ship here, why??

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On Miall Island, another Easter Monday drama erupted, this time in the neighbouring camp.

We saw the bloke chop his tomahawk into the sand, right in front of their tent.

‘Gotcha!’ he yelled. ‘Death adder.’

We gathered to look.

Its camouflage was perfect, barely distinguishable from the pale grey sand.

‘They’re the fastest strikers of all our snakes,’ he informed us. ‘They lie in wait under the creepers and catch lizards; for some reason, this one came out into the open. Right near my kid.’

As we gawked at the stumpy, decapitated body, he slid the axblade into the adder’s mouth and – like something out of a horror movie – the severed head bit down on the steel. Out spurted its highly toxic venom.

Had the government men-in-white conjured it to prove a point?

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The Woppaburra experienced first contact – their own ‘strangers travelling with a cloud’ – some 70 years after the voyage of *Endeavour*. HMS *Rattlesnake* commanded by Captain Owen Stanley arrived in 1847 with a Scot naturalist on board. By then, the Woppaburra had notched up at least 5000 years of custodianship – archaeologists have dated a midden site of that age. (It’s an interesting contrast with the rock art of Carnarvon Gorge, another popular Central Queensland tourist destination, carbon-dated to 3650 years.) John MacGillivray was the first white man to put foot on a Keppel Bay island when he came ashore to collect specimens.

The people hid that day but avoidance could not last because the colonial government of Queensland soon granted grazing rights to mainland farmers. Cattle, sheep and goats soon outnumbered people on the islands.

The Australian Museum in Sydney – Australia’s first public museum and the first to collect Keppel Island artefacts – describes the early settlers on its website as using ‘the Woppaburra people as unpaid labourers/slaves and subjected them to harsh and inhumane treatment’.

‘First contact’ changed to ‘frontier conflict’ which escalated to removal when the Queensland state government decreed in the earliest years of the twentieth century that all Aboriginal peoples must leave Country to live in designated missions and reserves under the

supervision of superintendents. In 1902 Mr J.F.G. Foxton, Home Secretary, ordered the removal of all Woppaburra through his Protectors of Aborigines, Mr Meston and Dr W.E. Roth.

Dr Roth, Protector for the Northern District, was also a prolific collector of Aboriginal artefacts which he usually sold to the Australian Museum. He sold the 27 artefacts he sourced from Woppaburra. For the descendants, these fishing implements (nets, basket, oyster knife and harpoon), ornaments and pigments are vital links to the past, and treasured.

Expanding its role as keeper of a nineteenth century collection, the Australian Museum in the twenty-first century has cultivated knowledge exchange with descendants, including Christine Doherty, chairperson of Woppaburra Land Trust. One result of the collaboration is that the Museum showcases Woppaburra culture on its website. It sourced 'Historical Photos' from John Oxley Library of the State Library Queensland to enhance this resource.

The images are illuminating. One depicts the last group to be removed. Men, women and children dressed in European clothes are gathered under the shade of pandanus trees on Wreck Beach on the eastern side of Great Keppel Island. As they spend their last minutes on homeland before being made to board a government boat bound for Emu Park across the bay, their misery is palpable. The date is 1902.

Another deeply affecting photograph is of a group who'd already been shipped to Emu Park. The date is 1897, five years earlier, when Queen Victoria's jubilee was being celebrated throughout the colonies. Clearly, young and old alike had been encouraged to 'dress up' for the occasion, to create the sort of tableau that would demonstrate to Her Majesty that her native 'Queen's land' subjects were being well-cared for as they stood barefoot on sand, clustered around a blackboard chalked with elegant cursive script: 'Keppel Island Aborigines Celebrating the Queen's Jubilee and Reign, Emu Park Queensland.'

Exactly what they might have to celebrate is not noted; the gloomy faces and awkward stances suggest they felt nothing but heart-break. The quality of the photograph is poor and it is not possible to know if the necklaces that adorn the women and girls were of their own making from Keppel Islands shells, or trinkets of the sort often distributed to Indigenous peoples of Australia at the time to entice them into going along with the plans the white strangers were making for them.

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On Easter Tuesday after my oyster breakfast and an amble, I bowed to the inevitable. Rolled up the thin yoga mats my sister had provided as bedding; packed up our tent. The kids and I splashed over to Lachlan's boat riding at anchor, and clambered in. From Great Keppel Island,

the *Reef Seeker* took us to the mainland while Lachlan returned to Miall Island to share a much-needed romantic night with my sister.

Them and the death adders! I worried, and dreamed that night of snakes. I woke with a start, convinced that my nieces were orphaned and that I now had three children to care for.

Instead of *that* happening, Lachlan caught a whopping great coral trout. That evening, before my sister drove us into Rockhampton to train back overnight, we ate barbequed reef fish.

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It's June 2022 and I'm visiting Rockhampton Museum of Art. I usually live near a bend of the Brisbane River (Maiwar) but I'm in Central Queensland on a Yeppoon house-sitting holiday. In the majestic new gallery on heritage-listed Quay Street above Fitzroy River (Tunuba), my eye is drawn to a large oil canvas. There are many great artists' works here in this stately location above a powerful river – works by Arthur Boyd, Sid Nolan, John Olsen, John Coburn, Vida Lahey, Margaret Olley, Charles Blackman, William Bustard, Sally Gabori. One in particular draws me like a magnet. Is it Great Keppel Island? Forest-green vegetation, brown headlands, yellow sandy beaches sprawled on roiling blue waves with white crests. I lean in: *Keppel Island* (1987) by William Yaxley, 1943 –.

A sinuous landform that looks to be conscious and even heaving with life is depicted from an aerial viewpoint. While some might see – in the much-larger island of Tasmania – an apple, Yaxley must see in Great Keppel an ancient, mysterious reptile! Its hills coil, sunning themselves. Its headlands drink air, like the scaly heads of marine turtles. Snuggled into one of the softer folds of the reptilian body are two huts that look like skulls – perhaps a reference to archaeological digs. A jagged decorative border suggests a yawning mouth studded with teeth. Swallowing the viewer, whole?

Leaning ever closer, I discern details. A freighter – to represent the industrial, global economy? A sailing ship approaching from the southern horizon – James Cook's *Endeavour*? The famous 'Get Wrecked' resort shrunk down. A busy catamaran; a speedboat towing a man attached to a red parachute; a helicopter departing; a light aircraft arriving. Modern activities that the stratospheric perspective lends a certain ridiculousness.

At the end of my visit, I spy a must-have catalogue in the bookshop. *The Adventures of William Yaxley* was compiled for a travelling exhibition in 2016. The cover picture is a self-portrait. Dressed only in underdaks, the artist is stretched out on the floor, blissfully unaware of a cockroach horde advancing on him. His *Listening to the Rolling Stones* painting, also dated

1987, is the perfect introduction to a book about the artist – in all his pseudo-naïve, shambolic, Rabelaisian glory.

That night I go online and book a one-day adventure tour, departing from Rosslyn Bay Harbour. It's been 25 years. I can barely afford the splurge, but the islands are calling me back.



Ingenious boat! It's an inflatable craft, a 'rubber duck', fitted with a canopy and two big outboard motors. There are 12 of us are preparing to set off. The captain guarantees a drenching and has provided spray jackets. Underneath these, we're dressed in snorkelling outfits, yellow-and-black shirt and shorts that fit snugly to ward off the winter chill. Later, should any of us stray, our 'uniform' will easily identify us – we're the ones who look like bumblebees. The owner of the inflatable is dressed in a neck-to-ankle wetsuit and shady hat, his face stripped with protective zinc cream, ochre white.

Keppel Bay Marina is a haven for the fishing fleet and pleasure crafts alike when cyclones arrive to thrash the Capricorn Coast – hard to imagine on a perfectly clear day like today. The captain gives an acknowledgement to Country as he steers through the arms of the rubble-rock breakwater, and informs us that the traditional owners are Woppaburra.

He yells 'Are you ready?' and at our enthusiastic 'Yes!' he charges into the blue bay. Within minutes we reach one of Great Keppel Island's many coves. He cuts the motors and the tourists – now in the grip of urgency – don flippers and slide overboard. I'm content to linger on the surface world.

I'm finding my companions a little stiff and distant. They're in couples or family groups except for the only other woman travelling solo who tells me she is nuts, absolutely nuts, about snorkelling. While they dive, I relax. Soothed by the gentle bobbing of the inflatable, my memories of Miall Island swirl about.

So long ago. A quarter of a century!

My sister and I aren't as close as we were. Kids? All gone their own way. Lachlan? No idea; I've not seen him since he served us barbequed coral trout before we bundled out to catch our train. I've seen a bit more of the world, though, I reflect: Italy, India, South Korea.

Comparisons drift to mind.

In Italy, sandy beaches are uncommon – they're mostly stony and often delineated as 'private'. As for a voyage offshore, only seriously wealthy Italians would have a friend who would run you out to an island and an adventure anything like this one would cost the tourist a small fortune.

India. I start to giggle, knowing how improper it would be to travel alone on a boat with a brother-in-law. To board a boat with a sailor clad only in shorts, cap and sunglasses, whose profuse curly blond hairs glisten on his bare chest in the sunlight and who wasn't even related through marriage – scandalous!

South Korea? Their oysters are farmed, processed and distributed on an *industrial* scale. No way could you choose a rock by the sea and shuck your own with a pocket knife. Pollution means they may not be safe to eat anyway.

The captain summons the snorkelers and my reverie ends with the knowledge that I'm incredibly privileged to live in a free, open and abundant society. My fellow-adventurers, dripping aquamarine, remove their mouthpieces and gush about turtles and fish and colourful coral. We're a team now, bonded by happiness.

'Are you ready?' the captain yells again. We're off across the crests, bracing ourselves against the impact. *Woomphf. Woomphf.* The spray showering us, we pass Middle Island.

Dramatic, iron-red cliffs soon tilt into view.

It's Miall Island. I've held it in my heart all this time. I know its Woppaburra name this time. Ma-ma-lon-bi.

'I've camped here,' I fling at the captain who is standing at the helm immediately behind me. I'm jubilant at the recognition and I also want him to know I'm on the right boat. The one that does *epic, secluded, going where no others go*. Despite my white hair, I'm not claiming the pensioner discount on the vessel that takes day-trippers *en masse* to Great Keppel. He beams his approval.

This time when the others dive in, I wade ashore. When last here I was emotionally paralysed because my marriage had ended. Now I see that phase of my life as a transition – from slavery to liberation. As essential as air.

Protection of island habitats has (rightly) tightened over the years. Strictly no removing anything. Not even dead coral and certainly none of the pretty shells in all their delicate glory. But I pick up precious things to spend at least a *little* time with them. I'm particularly taken with a grey stone that a thread of white quartz has illustrated with the infinity symbol.

And there it is, up high – an osprey nest. The nester is watched over by her mate, circling protectively. Birds do relationships so well.

A clanging sound fills the cove – time to go.

After Ma-ma-lon-bi, the schedule intensifies. At every stop, the captain shows respect for Country in many, many ways but enjoyment is the main game.

He lets us loose near a cave, the perfect backdrop for stunning photographs.

He distributes aluminium containers with rolls, cake, fruit and juice for lunch.

He indicates a lofty sand dune to ‘conquer’.

I squint up at the dune, figuring out a strategy.

Use the beaten path that the others are on? Or the pristine but longer route?

I opt for as much traction as I can get; plunge splayed fingers and toes into the pristine dune face, and raise myself, one paw at a time. My ex, I remember, liked to comment on my ability to pick up dropped objects with my toes.

‘Your prehensile feet,’ he observed whenever I retrieved a pencil from the floor without the need to bend down for it. Whatever his intention – veiled insult or scientific neutrality – prehensibility gets me to the summit.

I’m the last to join the party at the top. Around me, members of the snorkelling tribe leap into the air for photographs. I manage a modest lift-off and post the proof to Facebook: image of old lady dressed like a bee. Far below us is a man waist-deep in glittering sapphire blue, holding onto an orange inflatable. He looks remarkably like one of Bill Yaxley’s comic-strip figures.

Captain Bumblebee zooms us to yet another secluded place with a prediction of stupendous coral. My new friend tells me that coral is *circadian*.

‘What’s that?’ I ask. ‘In sync with day and night cycles. They’re not so different from humans – they eat and move. At night they hunt,’ she adds with a hint of wickedness before she goes over the edge.

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A few days later I will hear a story about the art scene on the Capricorn Coast in the 1980s and 1990s. It might have been about Bill Yaxley, or it might not. There were a few artists around, drinking a bit of booze, smoking a bit of dope, breeding babies with alacrity, doing a bit of farming and selling the produce to keep afloat. They made art in improvised studios in semi-derelict pineapple-packing sheds whose tin walls and roofs the cyclones toyed with on their annual visits. Bill Yaxley, or someone like him, was having an ‘I must spend the day naked so I understand how Aboriginal people lived’ sort of a day. An *experiential* day of ‘being one with landscape’. At some point, the naked artist convinced a comrade to drive him into Yeppoon to restock.

When the more sober of the pair pulled up near the bottle-o he spoke frankly to his passenger.

‘I’m all for experiment, mate; I’m all for being in the nudie and getting close to nature. But not everyone in town thinks like us. So *sit tight*. Don’t even *think* about opening the car door while I’m gone.’

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The adventure trip is not over yet. The rubber duck rounds a cliff and we’re instantly exposed to rough seas.

‘Hang on!’ the captain yells.

We look up into a chaos of waves with one giant hurling itself at us. It is like being caught in *Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Hokusai. Or threatened by the foaming, grasping fingers of *Awa Whirlpool* by Hiroshige.

Wasn’t Hamlet described by his mother as ‘mad as the sea’? Is the sea in our faces about to teach us exactly how mad it can get?

My brilliant adventure is on the cusp of becoming a clinging-desperately-to-duck-in-wintery-waters-waiting-for-a-rescue-helicopter scenario. But no, the bumblebees ride it out.

We head in, a fat gnat juddering on the surface of the great ocean until it reaches the marina.

When I peel off the gear, a tiny shell that I’d fallen in love with during the day falls out. And the infinity stone.

Shell. Stone. Beloved materials of the original people.

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After removing the last group to Emu Park in 1902, the government shipped the entire Woppaburra community to Bogimbah Aboriginal Mission on K’gari, then known as Fraser Island. Very few survived the series of displacements.

Luckily for Woppaburra descendants, the modest Roth collection in the Australian Museum is an invaluable, authentic, tangible and meaningful link to ancestors. Each object is a testament to an egalitarian, sustainable, tranquil and happy way of life that British colonialism shattered. According to elders who have collaborated with the Australian Museum, the centre of their world was one particular island.

‘Konomie, North Keppel Island,’ Christine Doherty is quoted on the website as saying, ‘is the start of our song lines and our creation place. It is our spiritual Motherland.’

Konomie was not on our whirlwind snorkelling tour. Aware that Education Queensland runs an Environmental Education Centre on the island which schoolchildren visit in droves, I asked the captain of the inflatable about it. I yearned to go there.

He gazed respectfully seawards again and said that Konomie was under the control of the Woppaburra people now, as it should be. There was enough going on there, without us. We don't have to have it all – that's wisdom.