Perth Circa 1955

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Increase of Salt in Soil and Streams following the Destruction of the Native Vegetation, by W.E. Wood, Inspecting Engineer, Railway Department

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For many years I have been interested in the fact that in certain districts in the southern portion of Australia where destruction of the native vegetation has taken place rapidly, there has followed a very noticeable increase in salinity in the streams draining that area.
Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
the saddest are these:
it might have been.

John Greenleaf Whittier

Perth Circa 1955

- I hear he’s a grumpy old bastard.

Matt slouched in the passenger seat, surreptitiously picking at a pimple near his left ear and wondering how his new lady boss would react to the cheeky language.

Linda grunted noncommittally, and concentrated on keeping control of the steering wheel. Some of the corrugations were axle deep, and in places the vegetation obscured what was left of the track. Matt had just been a kid during the war. So he was secretly thrilled when the Department bought the brand spanking new CJ5 – the first Jeep made for Civvy Street. Like Matt, this one had never been closer than King’s Park to the real bush before. Luckily, Linda had grown up on a farm and knew what she was about.

- I mean, what’s an eighty-three year old doing way out here on his own, anyway?

A city boy through and through, she decided. Matt plucked up the sharp crease on one Terylene-covered thigh, while his fingers drummed out a few bars of “Rock around the Clock” on the other. For a minute or two he affected a petulant James Dean look at the wing mirror. Then his face suddenly brightened and he glanced slyly at Linda.

- I hear he brews his own. Think he’ll offer us a drink?

Linda rolled her eyes. Matt knew as well as she did, whatever they were offered in that line, neither of them could accept. They were on Government Business. Capital G, capital B. As if to underline her unspoken reply, a particularly bone-rattling run of ruts shook the Jeep until a file fell off the dash and papers spilled out over Matt’s shiny shoes.

- Shit! Oops, sorry Mrs. C.

As if Linda hadn’t heard all sorts growing up on the farm. There’d been plenty of cursing when it came time to kill the kangaroos, that’s for sure. It was boring how the young always thought they’d invented rebellion and profanity. She knew how she must look to Matt – a plump, middle-aged (she was thirty-five!) woman in a neat suit with a pleated skirt. Very proper.
Matt was looking down at the last paper as he slipped it back into the file. It was an article from The Royal Society of Western Australia dated 1924, twelve years before he was born. It might as well have been the dark ages. 

- Why now?

And what’s the big deal with it anyway? I mean I know the old codger has to be alive and all, but . . .

Nineteen twenty-four had marked the end of the worst era, as far as Linda was concerned. But those hard times were well within the living memory of her family. Last century, decades before she was born, the Great Southern Railroad went through from Beverley to Albany. Her mob came from around Wagin, the emu’s watering place. The coming of the railway and all that went with it left both the emus and her people on a sticky wicket. And sweet watering places got a lot harder to find.

- It’s more of a big deal than you could ever imagine, Matt. Which is your good luck.

Well, thanks a lot, he thought. Stupid cow. What would she know, anyway? He rolled down his window. As the hot air blew through the Jeep Matt began to think he was paying too high a price for the privilege of skipping out of office duties for a couple of days. Low branches brushed past, filling the Jeep with the scent of bruised eucalyptus and, after a glance from Linda, he wound the window up again. Even the dubious pleasure of being there for the big moment had lost its appeal. Now he just felt fed up and bored. And he didn’t trouble to hide it. Linda finally spoke.

- Oh cheer up, we’re getting close to the river.

And they were. Matt glanced at the map he’d taken from the glove box. But when, ten minutes later, they finally crested the last rise and saw the flowing waters below, something was missing from the picture. The bridge was down.

- What’ll we do now?

Linda was taken aback to hear the note of anxiety in Matt’s voice. Poor little bugger. Suddenly he seemed much younger than nineteen. For answer she switched off the engine, reached down and took off her sensible flat shoes, and felt around behind the seat for her bag. From this she pulled out a pair of old sandshoes. If she had pulled a rabbit out of that matronly handbag Matt could not have been more surprised. Linda put on the sandshoes, jumped out of the Jeep, rolled up the waistband of her pleated skirt (making her look fatter than ever) and ran down the slope to the water’s edge and waded straight into the cold Collie River.

(Her legs were pretty good for an old duck!)
Linda bent over and her expert hands felt around the remains of the wooden pylons and along the riverbank. Grinning, she stood up and waved two huge, black-feelered monsters at the boy in the car. Marron! City pen-pusher he may have been, but Matt had eaten often enough in Indigene Cuisine, King’s Park’s premier restaurant. He whooped his approval, grabbed the Esky from the back seat and took it down to the water’s edge. He made room among the emu patty sandwiches and quandong pie, while she calmly unrolled her waistband and smoothed her pleats.

His lady boss had suddenly become a whole lot more interesting. She put the marron on ice, then went and got the file from the dash and put it in her handbag, then locked the Jeep. Matt stood there staring gormlessly. It was already past mid-afternoon. After his initial shock, he’d assumed the missing bridge meant they’d be driving straight back to the Collie Pub, staying the night and ringing the Department for further instructions in the morning.

- Well, get a move on. It’s only a couple of miles upriver, and he’s got a dinghy. Bring the Esky. We can have the marron for tea. Make sure of our welcome with the old bloke.

She vanished into the dense bush along the river’s edge, startling a whole flock of Carnaby’s Black Cockatoos into noisy retreat. Matt followed promptly, scared he’d lose her completely. He thought he overheard her muttering, “Who the hell was Carnaby, anyway?” But he couldn’t swear to it, because those larrikin birds were making such a ruckus. Their black crests were more than a match for Matt’s modest quiff. His Teddy Boy pretensions had to be balanced against his public service ambitions. The Cockatoos had no such limitations.

By the time they reached a clearing on the bank opposite the camp, their arrival had been announced by a series of short barks. Otherwise, the old man may have been amazed at the sudden appearance of an immaculately groomed woman in sandshoes and a dishevelled lad who was beginning to lose his life-long faith in the preserving powers of Brylcreem and Nugget.

But Bob the floppy-eared dog was an infallible early warning system and the old man had made good use of the ten minutes to douse his fire and slip into the tree line a couple of hundred yards further upriver where there was a good vantage point for seeing and not being seen. If the infamous brewery smell gave away his campsite, well that didn’t mean he was obliged to talk to anyone who wanted to poke their nose in his business. He’d sent the last do-gooder away with a proper flea in his ear, but today he just didn’t want to be bothered at all.

He wasn’t counting on Linda. She sat with quiet composure on a fallen log. She was so still its resident goanna felt quite safe to emerge after a few minutes. Matt, meantime, was
leaning against a tree trunk a few yards away, trying to get his breathing and his thoughts to calm down. After a while the peace of the river brought him to some kind of harmony, a harmony that was not spoiled when Linda stood up and called out in a soft voice. Her words carried clearly across the river.

- **Nidja Noongar Boodjar Noonook Nyininy**.

There was precious little that would have drawn the old man out into the open among strangers. But those familiar words, learned long ago, were not the words of a stranger. This is Noongar Country you are sitting in. After a long moment’s silence, he replied, speaking the little language he knew, hesitant, croaky, but the phrases were fitting. Mind made up, he picked his way carefully down to where his dinghy was hidden in the overhanging bushes. The quiet was broken only by the oars dipping as the old man crossed the river.

To Matt’s surprise, nobody spoke when the old man drew up to the clearing. Linda just got in behind him, and looked up expecting Matt to follow. Right, he thought, two can play at this game. He slicked back his hair and handed the old man the Esky to stash in the bow, then stepped in and sat next to Linda in silence. He supposed they’d get to the paperwork soon enough.

Once on the other bank and off the dinghy, Matt judged it was time to set the ball rolling and assert the dignity of his official identity. He thrust his hand out.

- **Good afternoon, I’m Matt O’Neill from the Premier’s Department**.

The old man didn’t take his hand, just waved him away vaguely, saying, I’m Walter Ernest Wood, newcomer around these parts. You can call me W.E. Then he busied himself resurrecting his fire and putting the billy on.

Matt was completely out of his depth. Linda, though, looked just as at home in this rough bush camp as she did in the boardroom. She smiled gratefully for the tea, and, opening the Esky brought forth her gift of marron. They cooked and then ate them with leftover damper, not talking much, just listening to the lizards rustling through the leaf litter. At least Matt hoped they were lizards. He was not keen on snakes. W.E. waved a marron leg in the air and muttered through a full mouth.

- **Bloody good!**

- **Yeh, when I was really little, Mum and my uncles still ran aquaculture on the farm, but they gave it up once the trees got going and the rivers were righted. We always preferred the wild ones, anyway.**

W.E. poured more tea, and Linda shared out the quandong pie.
Mum sent us up half a case from the farm. They’re doing well this year. I spent all last weekend baking and freezing pies.

Her handbag remained firmly closed as the afternoon light faded. Bob the dog lolled at W.E.’s feet, his snout just as closed. His barking duties were strictly for stray humans: W.E. brooked no barking at the wildlife. Besides, Bob was used to the evening skitterers: bold bandicoots out for their nightly forage, numbats nosing home to bed down in logs, fleeting phascogales spiralling up the jarrah.

Replete with good bush food, wild and farmed, the odd trio sat together in the peaceful twilight watching the skimmers and bats over the water and listening to the birds call the evening to a close up and down the river. Linda spoke softly.

- It’s good to have ’em back.

W.E. just nodded.

The stars sharpened as the blue faded to black. The forest exhaled a different scent on the cool evening air. Matt ceased to worry about his Government Business, and started to worry about sleeping arrangements. He was past being surprised when Linda rummaged in her handbag and brought out a silk swag.

- Goodnight, boys.

She drifted off among the shadowy trees. W.E. threw Matt an old grey blanket and gestured that he should bed down by the embers. It wasn’t cold exactly, but it is always dampish in a river valley at night, and it took the boy a long time to fall asleep. He lay there looking as Orion danced slowly across the sky, appearing and disappearing through the tree tops. Sharp shrieks and scuffles kept him on edge, yet when he finally slept he went deep. He never saw the possum that pinched his socks for its hollow nest.

Linda had swum in the river and was dressed again before Matt stirred the next morning. Her honey brown skin glowed, and for the first time Matt saw that she was actually a beautiful woman. Beautiful as well as powerful.

After breakfast she judged it was time to talk business. Out came the file. W.E. groaned when Linda pulled out the Royal Society paper.

- Not that old thing, that’s ancient history.

Its title was clear in the morning light: “Increase of Salt in Soil and Streams following the Destruction of the Native Vegetation”. Linda smiled gently.
- Now, W.E., you of all people should know better than to talk to me about ancient history.

- Well, sure, exactly. That’s my point. Your lot knew way before that was published. You witnessed it all . . . the loss of the trees, the wildlife, the water . . . salt in the wound.

- Yeh, but it was you the Government listened to, you who spoke the language they could hear. If it wasn’t for this paper, we wouldn’t have had the Reafforestation Act of 1928. And if we hadn’t had that, then the whole Bush Tucker revolution couldn’t have happened. And without that the Wadjellas might not have got around to respecting our knowledge and learning to work with us and the country. So, that’s why . . .

Matt was suddenly glad he had come. He could hardly wait for the climactic moment.

Linda drew out the Official Document with its Norwegian proforma, and spoke in her boardroom voice.

- W.E. Wood, on behalf of the Premier and Cabinet, I’m pleased to inform you that we have selected you as a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize.

This was the lady boss Matt was familiar with, the public service world and language that made sense to him. This was the high point of the story that he was looking forward to boasting about to his unborn children. He turned, eagerly awaiting W.E.’s response.

- I thank you, Madam, said the old man with formal dignity. It’s a great honour I have been given. But (he hesitated, choosing his words with care) you know the peace I prize is what I have found right here in Noongar Boodjar.

It was Linda who had first mooted the idea of nominating W.E. Wood, and she had worked hard to get it through all the right committees. It would puzzle Matt for years that she didn’t seem in the least perturbed when W.E. took the paper, tossed it on the fire and boiled up another cup of tea.

Liana Joy Christensen (together with Margaret Bryant) created the national W.E. Wood Award for outstanding research in dryland salinity, which was first awarded in 1999. I remain fascinated with Wood’s story.