

SIXTH DECADE

DE LASZLO EXPEDITION



Lucy, William and Robert

In 1988 Damon and Sandra (Sam) commissioned me to sculpt their three children, Lucy, aged 12, Robert 10 and William 8. Damon asked me about the Outback and I showed him the film that I had taken of my trip to Kimberley with Peter in 1981. He was so intrigued he asked me to organise a trip for his family for the following year to Mt Agnes. My first task was to look for a Bushman to help me, as there was no way I could take the responsibility on my own of organising a trip into the Outback with three young children.

Charles McCubbin is a famous naturalist painter and a long-time friend of Margie's family. He had walked across one of the great deserts of Central Australia with a friend, each pulling a cart full of water. I thought that he would be the ideal companion if he could come with us. We were friends and I knew him to be as steady as a rock. I also knew the de Laszlo family would enjoy his company, especially William, who was fanatical about bugs. Charles is Australia's leading expert on butterflies so they would get on very well. I wrote to Charles and asked if he would consider such a trip.

To cut a long story short Charles said he would agree to come if he could bring his wife, Pat. Margie was dying to come, so there would be six adults and three children. Damon put the finances in place and the next thing I knew we were gathered in Australia at Darwin Airport about to fly to Kununurra. We landed soon after lunch and by dinner had three brand-new Toyota trucks, supplies, water, swags, mosquito nets, all due to Charles's superb organisation. The following morning we set off on the Gibb River road.

The surface of the road from Kununurra to Mt Elizabeth Station had been greatly improved and the trucks were also superior to the ones we had had eight years earlier. They each had four seats in two rows so we only had three people in each truck leaving plenty of room to move about. They also had air conditioning, which meant that we drove along in a lovely cool cabin with closed windows shutting out the dust. It was like chalk and cheese! We covered twice the miles on the first day and reached the 1981's second

campsite by nightfall. We used the trucks and ropes in the same way as before for the nets, setting up camp beside a billabong.



My main concern about the trip was my memory! I wondered if I would recognise the landmarks when we left the track at Mt Jameson. It had been a long interval and things would have changed to add to my confusion. I hoped the scenery would jerk my memory alive.

We were away early and reached Mt Elizabeth Station by midday. Charles had been in touch with Peter Lacey so he was expecting us. They gave us a cautious welcome and then told us where to find the key to the gate that guarded the entrance to the track out to Mt Jameson, a sign of how things had changed. They told us that they were having a lot of trouble with smugglers landing drugs on the unguarded coast of North Australia, as well as hippies growing cannabis in the Outback.

We reached the Hann River well before dark, crossed over, and made camp on the far side. That evening we all bathed in a rock pool and after a meal sat around the campfire listening to a tape I had brought of Bush ballads. I thought that the young Gang would prefer *Waltzing Matilda* to Mozart.



The de Laszlos cooling off in the 'Hann River'

The Gang behaved like Bush veterans. Because I had sculpted the three of them the previous year we knew each other very well. Lucy is a dream and full of bubbly laughter and always wanting to help. Robert has also inherited his parents' sense of humour and was ready to lend a hand setting up camp. William is a *Just William*, full of mischief and helped Charles to collect bugs at night by the light of a gas lantern. Introducing the three of them to the Bush was a joy as they were interested in everything: six-foot high ants' nests, giant Broilga cranes, snakes, goanas, dingoes, kangaroos, bee-eaters, mopoks, kingfishers, Wandjina paintings; the Gang wanted to know about everything!

Pat and Margie were the cooks while Sam kept the Captain's Log of our journey. While Lucy and Robert helped with fires, collecting wood and water, Damon and I were the camp builders, leaving Charles to collect bugs, with William carrying the gear for him. It brought back many happy memories of when Margie and I used to take our own boys camping.



Just William

We were off early and down the first big Jump Up within a couple of hours. We reached the turn-off at the end of Mt Jameson and by midday had pushed up the edge of the Black Soil Plain along the escarpment. Luckily my memory seemed to be working. I made one slight mistake, which gave us a puncture, but that was a good warning to go a little steadier. By this time I was up on the cabin roof again, directing Damon away from potholes as he led the convoy through the six-foot high spear grass. We reached the rock wall and started along the face looking for the cairn that we had left as a marker in 1981. I missed it and we ended up stuck between the creek and the rock ledge. We pulled up for lunch and broke out the biscuits, jam and Staminade. Luckily the Gang thought the green drink was quite nice, so replacing their lost salts was not a problem. Neither Margie nor Sam thought much of it, but then Damon stepped in and gave them a lecture on health!



Crossing a dry creek

We started up again and retraced our tracks. This time, travelling in the right direction, I was seeing the landscape from the same angle as in 1981 and to my relief spotted the cairn. Up we went on to the shelf and drove down to the far end. We all got out and inspected the track down the steep slope and started moving rocks, filling holes and clearing grass so the drivers could see.

I suggested to Damon we leave one jeep with unnecessary gear on top of the shelf for an emergency exit in case of fire. There was a large area of rock on the shelf, bare of grass that would not carry a fire. We transferred our gear, locked up the jeep, hid the key and drove the two semi-empty trucks down.

The heat of the day had passed so the Gang climbed onto the back of the trucks and we set off again with Damon leading. We reached Camp Borya in about half an hour and soon had the nets set up, firewood collected ready for lighting, and water in the billy for tea.

There was still a good hour before the sun set so I suggested that Damon and I should go and check out the pool as the existence of a good water supply would dictate how long we would be able to stay. We had enough water for two nights and one day so we could definitely climb Agnes the following day, but it would have been great if we could also have a swim after a hot climb and a long walk, besides being fun for everyone.

There was no way that Damon and I were allowed to walk off on our own. Charles and Pat said that they would start the fire and have a meal ready for our return. We had lost time setting up camp and looking for swimming trunks, but eventually set off in Indian file, dropped down into the ravine and started along the rocky bed towards the pool.

As we marched along I soon became worried because I had forgotten just how far it was. Suddenly Lucy let out an almighty scream. She had brushed against a green ants' nest hanging in a tree. Panic! They were in her long blonde hair and inside her shirt. The Indians came to a stop and everyone started to brush ants off poor Lucy. This of course got the ants onto everyone else. I knew there was nothing I could do so I hurried on to look for the pool.



Camp Borya

When I reached the spot there was nothing, not a drop of water! The pool had disappeared! By the time I got back to Damon the light was failing fast, so to avoid getting caught in the dark I suggested we return to the camp. I don't think I have ever felt so disappointed in my life.



Back at the camp we found a blazing fire and hot food waiting for us

Lucy soon put the nasty experience behind her and was back into her usual bubbly gay mood. The green ant is to be ignored at one's peril! A lesson learnt and everyone would be on the look out from now on. Later Lucy was the first of the Gang to try biting off the tail of one to taste the refreshing citrus zing you get from the juice. Sweet Revenge!

I was worried about the water. True we had enough, but in the Bush it is always good to have too much just in case something goes wrong and we had to prolong our stay. Damon reassured me and told me to stop worrying. Soon we were all fast asleep as it had been a big day.

We had set the alarm for six o'clock and by seven were ready to leave. Making sure that everyone's water bottles were full we set off for what was going to be a rough and hot day. Charles decided not to come, as he wanted to sort out all the bugs that he had collected with William, and Pat said she would keep him company. They would also go down the ravine later and see if they could find another pool a bit further along the watercourse.

We waved goodbye and started off towards the first barrier of rocks. The Gang was leaping ahead like kangaroos just as I had done eight years ago. Now I was finding it much harder. We came to the first cliff and dropped down onto the floor of the little grass valley, crossed over the log bridge, and started up the ravine on the other side. I warned everyone that there were a lot of green ants in the gully so they had better watch out. The undergrowth in the gully was much thicker, so Damon suggested that we did what Rick and Peter had done in 1981, and climb out of the gully and skirt around the hill.

This we started to do and I soon realised why they had then found it so tiring. The rocks got bigger and bigger. It was all right for the Gang, they behaved like monkeys, but it was hard going for Margie and me. We were very glad to reach the top eventually where the de Laszlo family was waiting for us. Damon is a marathon runner and Sam was still practically a teenager, so they were all fine. However, the view of Agnes was marvellous and I could not believe I was here again! When we had caught our breath and had a mouthful of water, I was glad that we had come that way, but I firmly told them all that we were going back *my way!*

We climbed down onto the saddle that led across to Agnes, and then started to traverse up the slope towards the wall of rock and 'Jacob's Ladder'.

We were puffing by the time we had climbed the scree up to the wall. There is no grass on this jumble of rocks, but plenty of nice holes to break your leg in. At last we arrived at the crack up which we had to scramble.

Damon led the way and the Gang followed, Sam, Margie and myself bringing up the rear. Sam voiced concern about how she was going to get down, as she is not fond of heights, but as there were a lot of loose falling rocks whizzing past us, dislodged by the Gang up front, I am afraid that we did not pay much attention to her worries. I was beginning to laugh inside as I had a surprise for them all when we got to the summit.

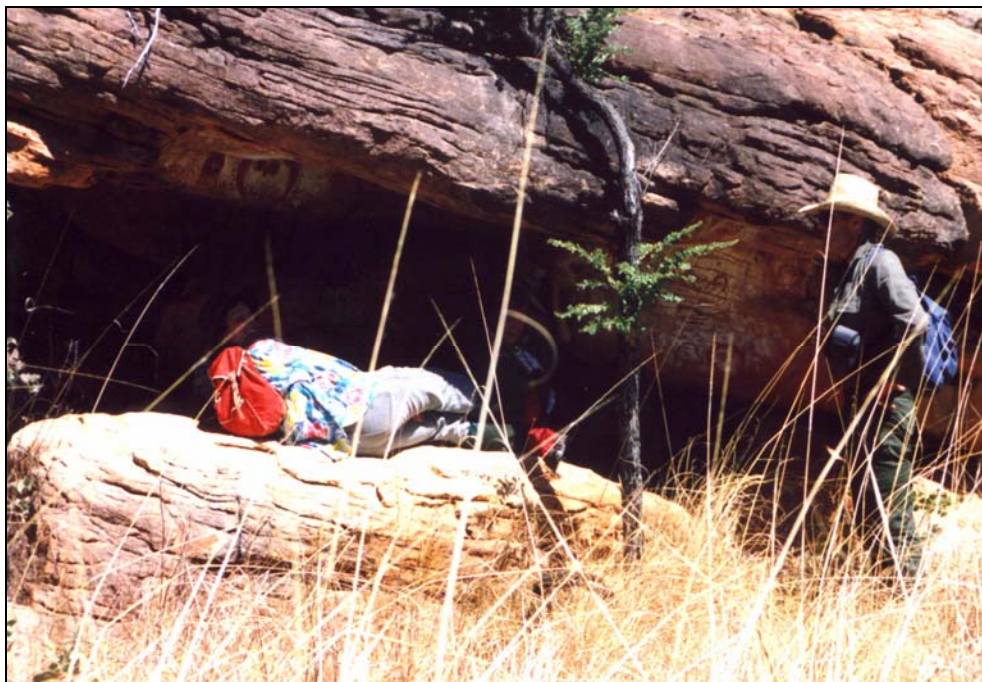
We reached the Standing Stone and paused for breath before heading off across the next slope. The Gang was first to arrive at the base of the summit and climbed straight up onto the top. Screams of delight rained down on the older members of the troop, as we struggled to catch our breath and keep up. Eventually everyone was sitting on the top by the cairn eating dried apricots and sipping Staminade. The view was immense. We could see all the way across to Mt Hann, and Mt Bradshaw way over the other side of the Prince Regent River. Behind us we could see the route we had taken from the camp, but not the trucks. We had done the journey in under three hours.

I dug around in my sack and pulled out my surprises. I handed a little blue box to each person, which they opened to find a Gold medal on a leather bootlace. One side showed Mt Agnes, 1989, and the other the person's name. We then had a self-timer photo call.



Medal ceremony at the top

It was time to leave. We climbed down the side, past the large dead pine tree trunk back to 'Jacob's Ladder'. We had a little trouble getting Sam down but as the fear was in her mind and her feet didn't listen, she came down as though she had done it hundreds of times before. We started back around the hill heading for the ravine and *my way*.



Home of 'Old Quizzical' and the 'Black-headed python'

We soon reached the entrance to the ravine, but before going down it I introduced everyone to *Old Quizgical*. He was still asking what the hell was going on, or was he eyeing off the Black Serpent's Head next door to him?

We reached camp to find Charles and Pat had a fire going and a billy of tea made. They had kept an ear out for us and had heard us coming some way off. I asked Charles if he had had any luck. "Yes." I could have kissed him. What a fantastic homecoming! Charles's description of the pool sounded like the one I remembered. I obviously had stopped just before reaching it the night before. It was the icing on the cake of a superb day. We would be able to have a swim and wash in the afternoon when the heat dropped a bit. Right now all any of us wanted was to crawl in under our nets. Boots off, a cup of tea and we were all soon fast asleep.



Siesta time

By about mid-afternoon the Gang was starting to rebel, so we headed off in our bathers towards the pool, carrying empty water containers. Lucy carefully avoided the green ants, as did everyone else, and we arrived without a single bite. It was still a Paradise, just as I remembered it. We filled the water containers and then the buckets for clothes' washing. But we could not wait any longer to be in that cool clear water!

It was heaven. What a moment getting into a rock pool is especially when you have just climbed a mountain, even if it is only a little one. William put on a comedy act when Sam insisted on washing his great mop of thick red hair. I wonder what an Aborigine would have thought if he had come round the corner and caught us all cavorting about like crocodiles?

Clothes were washed and laid out on the hot rocks to dry and then we just sat around lapping up the 'spirit of the place'. While the Gang talked about the day and looked at their medals, I silently thanked the Fates for allowing me to be here again sharing it all with Margie. *How lucky can you be, butter side up*, as her father used to say!



Paradise

We reluctantly climbed back up the ravine carrying the water. That night, sitting around the fire listening to Bush ballads, Damon smoking his little pipe, while I puffed on a cigar, was one of the happiest times that I have ever spent in the Bush. I was savouring every moment because I knew I would never pass this way again.

With a heavy heart I helped load the two trucks with all our gear. Damon forbade William to put the sun-bleached cow's skull on board, so we placed it up in the branches of the biggest of our shade trees, telling him it would be there for ever, and he could come and have a look when he was grown up. We climbed on board and drove back towards the third truck.

Our Toyotas sailed up the Climb as though they had been doing it all their lives. The modern truck was a different animal to the ones we had in 1981. They behaved more like tanks and crawled rather than bounced. The third truck was still waiting for us, safe and sound, no parking tickets on the windshield! We unloaded some of our gear from the other trucks, found the hidden key and set off in line for the cairn at the end of the shelf.

Soon we were down and away off along the edge of the black-soil plain, round the corner of Mt Jameson, and back on the track for the Hann River. We reached it in the late afternoon and set up camp in the same spot we had

used on the way out, leaving the crossing until the morning. We were all dying for a swim after the long drive.



Water Babies

After a lovely wallow in the clear river water, the girls cooked a meal for us, and we washed it down with Staminade and rolled out our swags. We had not been able to get the trucks to the campsite, so were unable to use the ropes to support the nets. As there were no mosquitoes Margie decided that this was the night to join me out under the stars, no net, and risk the snakes and spiders. It was warm and you knew that you could touch the stars if you could just be bothered to reach up into the navy blue heavens above.

We were nearly all asleep when we heard the sound of a growling engine across the river. A truck was coming! The growl got louder and louder and looking across the water we could see the headlights bobbing about between the trees. It was making an awful noise, clanging and banging, steel on steel.

By this time we were all wide awake again. Thankfully the truck swung off the track and stopped, the headlights went out and a door banged, a hurricane lamp was lit and we could see a figure walking about. Soon a fire was going and then a radio blared out!

We were incensed! How dare someone interrupt our peace and quiet! This was our neck of the woods. And then the awful realisation hit us, we were amongst people again and our special Agnes time was over. The trip would continue for several more days, with our going to Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Tunnel Creek, and then back to Kununurra, but the Bush experience was over. Tomorrow we would reach Mt Elizabeth Station and be back on the Gibb River road again.

Come first light we looked across the Hann and saw a big Toyota truck with a trailer loaded with a boat and two four-wheel motorbikes. No wonder there had been a lot of clanging last night when it arrived.

Before we crossed the river I wanted to try and find the tiny dancing figure paintings that I had seen in 1981. I was very keen to show them to Damon because of their completely different style to the Wandjinas we had seen. The map marked two places where there were Native Paintings. The first was back down the track that we had come up the previous evening and the other was after the river crossing. I couldn't remember which was right.

We decided to check out the one on our side first, although I had been studying the terrain as we passed and felt sure I had not missed the spot. We found nothing and returned to the camp and loaded up. By the time we made the crossing the owner of the newly-arrived truck had disappeared, so we set off along the track looking for a canyon mouth in the 20-foot high cliff face. Was my memory failing me?

We came round a bend and nearly drove slap into a parked truck. Mrs Peter Lacey was leaning on the bonnet talking to a man and beside them was a four-wheel motorbike, so putting two and two together, we surmised that this must be our noisy neighbour of last night. We greeted Mrs Lacey and she asked us how we had got on, had we climbed Mt Agnes, and had we had a good time? Yes, it had all been a great success, the trip of a lifetime.

She then introduced us to Grahame Walsh, and we chatted about hearing him arrive. He said he had thought of walking over, but as there were no lights and only a dying fire, decided we might be asleep. He asked if we were on our way out. Yes, we told him, but first we were trying to find the *native painting* site marked on the map. I told him that I had been there in 1981 and had seen some paintings that were nothing like anything I had ever seen before, *tiny blood-red paintings of little people dancing*. Grahame said that he knew of nothing like that in this area. Mrs Lacey told us that Grahame was a Rock Art expert and if he didn't know, no one would.

With the aid of hindsight, I think Grahame was probably put in a bit of a difficult position by our question. Mrs Lacey's mother-in-law was a full-blooded Aborigine from the area and still alive so she would have respected the old lady's ancestral beliefs. This meant that Grahame would have steered us away from a Wandjina sacred site, as he was an old friend of the family.

But I had seen the paintings and I knew that they were there. I had photographs to prove it and Damon had seen the film I had taken of them. I was confident the site must be very close.

We said goodbye and set off down the track again. We had only gone about 100 yards when I saw the canyon mouth. I asked Damon to stop, climbed down from the roof and walked ahead to check there were no hidden burnt sticks. We parked and set off to climb up over some large rocks into the mouth of the canyon. As we walked along I examined the rock face to the left, which is where we had found the paintings in 1981. Nothing!

Then the Gang got restless and we headed back out again. I was mystified as I could have sworn that this was the right place as it even had the same spooky feeling I had felt eight years ago.

As we headed towards the entrance we suddenly saw Grahame coming through the canyon mouth. Damon walked over and hailed him. "Did you find anything?" asked Grahame. "No," replied Damon. "Bad luck, would you like me to show you?" We set off again and Grahame led us to a large house-size

rock in the middle of a circle of 20-foot high cliffs. There in a little alcove was a skull stained with red ochre.



Skull and cross bones

Grahame showed us a few small Wandjina paintings on the way back to the mouth of the canyon. I quizzed him about the *dancing figures*. He replied, “No, I know nothing of them and as I know this site like the back of my hand, you obviously must be wrong.” There was no point in arguing so we sat down by a big rock and Grahame started to tell us about himself. It turned out that he had taken hundreds of photographs of Aboriginal paintings and had published a book for the Government, so Damon and I each ordered a copy.

Grahame asked what we had been up to and we told him about the Wandjina paintings that we had found and Mt Agnes. He was delighted by this, especially when we told him about *Old Quizical and the Black-Headed Serpent*. He said he had been looking for this site for years, as it was the beginning of the 'Black Python Dreaming Trail'. He could not get over the fact that a bunch of *bleeding pommies* had found it. He asked us to draw a mud map for him so he could find our paintings when he passed Mt Jameson.

We said goodbye and climbed back into the trucks and headed towards the station. A few days later we reached Kununurra and handed over our beloved trucks to the hire company. They had done us well. We booked into the motel and the Gang fell into the swimming pool. After a very refreshing dip and some alcoholic drinks for us adults, (the first for eight days!), we gathered in the dining room for a *Last Supper* with my eight friends who were wearing their medals. The manager of the hotel asked us if we were members of a Religious Order. We certainly were, the *Sacred Order of Mount Agnes*. There are some moments in life that you cherish for ever.