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# SALT STORY

OF SEA-DOGS AND FISHERWOMEN

SARAH DRUMMOND



for Matilda Grace

## A NOTE REGARDING MAPS

Older or local names of places that do not appear on these maps, or appear under another name include: Brook's Inlet (Broke Inlet); Casey's Beach (adjacent to Nanarup); Cathedral Rock (at Windy Harbour); Irwin's (Irwin Inlet), Floodgates (adjacent to Torbay Inlet and Muttonbird Beach); the Gordon (Gordon Inlet); Kinjarling (King George Sound and surrounds); Pallinup (the Beaufort, Beaufort Inlet, Pallinup Estuary); Possum Point (in Irwin Inlet); Seal Rock (adjacent to Point King); Skippy Reef (off Possession Point); Wilson's, the Wilson (Wilson Inlet); Whalebone Beach (Doubtful Island Bay).

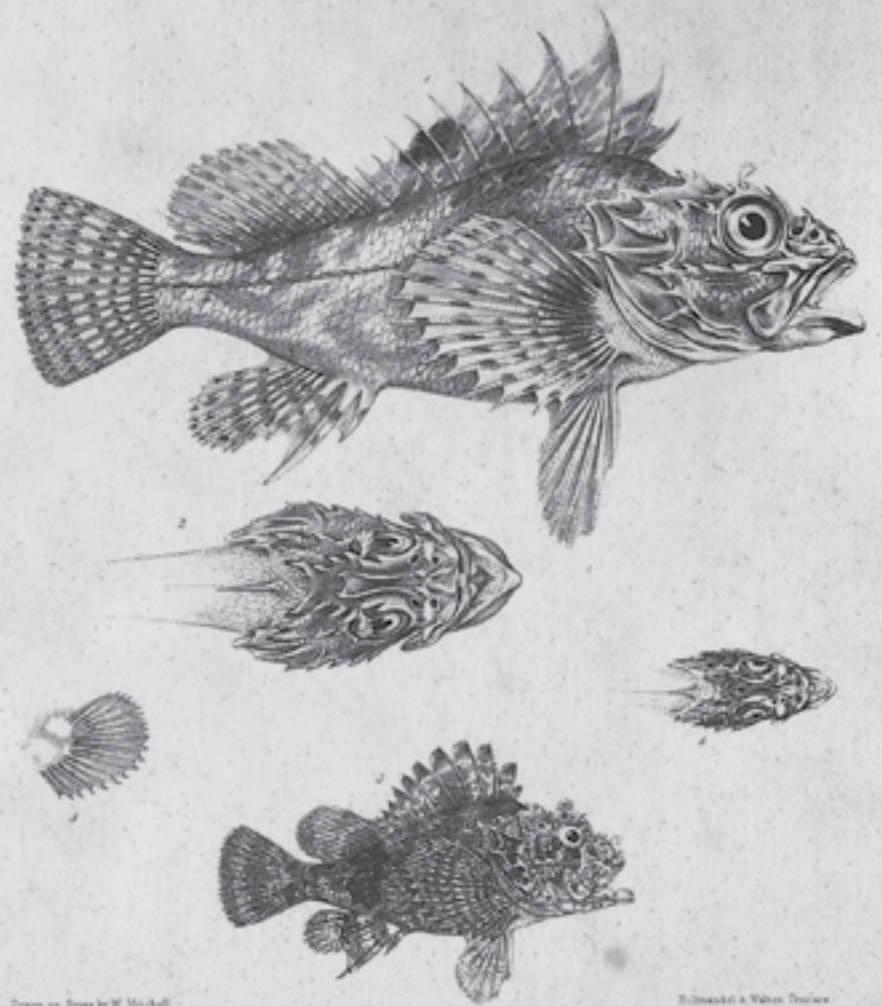
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SAME TRIBE AS ME  
(AN INTRODUCTION)



Drawn on Stone by W. Mitchell

Engraved by Walter Drouin

## SALT

He was burly and sad and smelled vaguely of mutton. He handed me an apple and talked about fish. 'They're not real salmon, y'know. That was Captain Cook's fault. He thought they looked a bit like a salmon and the name stuck. They're really a kind of overgrown herring.'

The old fisherman looked to me for a response. Folds of skin nearly obscured his eyes and scabby cancers colonised his nose. 'You eat an apple just like I do.'

'Core and all?'

'Yeah. Don't those seeds taste good?'

*Salt Story* was born in the Great Southern inlets and bays of Western Australia. Initially, these tales of fisher men and women may appear to read as fragments of a day, a life – ripping yarns, beautiful lies and a few home truths. But these sixty-two pieces contribute to a living history of the estuarine and inshore fishers. *Salt Story* is my tribute to the beauty and fragility of the industry.

Small-scale, inshore fishing on the wild south coast hasn't changed much in the last century. Aluminium boats with outboard engines have replaced a lot of the wooden carvels and clinkers, and fish find their fate meshed in nylon monofilament rather than heavy cotton nets tarred with grasstree resin. Trailered boats allow fishers to work estuaries further away, for shorter hours. Once a fisherman's whole family may have camped on the shores of Wilson Inlet for the six weeks that

the mullet were running. Now he can drive out, set nets and make it home in time for dinner.

I first met Salt when I camped by the beach and helped his salmon team seine tons of the fish into shore. A pink and whiskery bloke, wearing a beanie, a pair of jocks and a jumper that stretched over an impressive beer gut, he sat aboard an ancient tractor and towed one end of the net up the beach. The net strained against the suck of the swell, full with thrashing salmon. Men, women and children held the net upright, heading off any fish that threatened to leap out. The six or seven dogs present managed to look concerned, excited and bored, all at once. When the fish were dragged up on the beach, Salt climbed off the tractor and stepped with thorny feet through the small sharks and salmon, grabbing stingrays by their mouths and throwing them back into the surf.

As a wayward teen, I found myself hanging around a lot of jetties and beaches. Beaches, piers and wharves reminded me of another point of arrival and departure – the roadhouses – where at night the neat red lights of the big rigs signified to me the will of a people removing themselves from housebound communities. The lot of fishermen, yachties and truckies seemed to be a purposeful shiftlessness, a nomadism that raised a middle finger to the myth of the Great Australian Suburban Dream.

'You never stray far from the sea, do yer,' said Salt, when I hatched my next project out loud. What was it again? Getting a berth on the anti-whaling crusader *Sea Shepherd*? Writing a biography of a Norwegian whale chaser? Maybe it was my plan to head down to Antarctica with the Patagonian toothfishermen for a season.

I have always wanted to hang out with these kinds of people. I want to understand them, to rub through the veneer of people who spend their lives on the water. I say 'veneer' because being away from land and then returning can produce a kind of aloofness. Land people will never

understand what sea people are talking about. They are creatures from different universes.

Back in the days when Salt was still being nice to me, he said, 'Dunno girl. I just don't swear around women. Never have.'

How touching and old-fashioned, I thought.

It's funny how things slide. Aboard, Salt has the tongue of jellyfish tentacles. It is not a hasty generalisation to say that fishermen can swear a bit. So be warned, there is some 'language' in these stories.

The places we fish are the inlets and bays of the Great Southern: Broke Inlet, Irwin's, Pallinup Estuary or the Beaufort as it is also called, Oyster Harbour and Princess Royal Harbour, Waychinicup, Stokes, The Gordon, Wilson's, King George Sound and Two Peoples Bay. Some of the inlets are stone bound and permanently open to the sea. Others are closed by a sandbar until it rains enough. Then the rivers rush down from high country and the sea pushes in. Sometimes people bulldoze a channel, to save their cow paddocks, their road, their fishing shack or their sea-changer from the seasonal, watery annihilation as the inlet swells into the country. The inlets tend to sit behind a mound of sand-dune country. These are fertile, furtive places, protected from the open 'yang' roar of the ocean and onshore winds. They often seem to have their own climate, their own little raincloud hanging in the stillness, a cooling breeze ruffling the water, the reeds dripping with moisture and threaded with tiger snakes.

From fish traps and spears and cooking beneath the ground wrapped in paperbark, to netting the Pallinup estuary for mullet and bream and sending the fish in trucks to the Perth markets, the south coast inlets and bays hold stories about men and women within them: the fugitives, shell-shocked hermits, bird lovers and salmon-fishing families. The fishers told me stories about their ancestors, some of whom

have fished this coast for five generations. They mostly work at night or in the dawn hours and tend to keep to themselves.

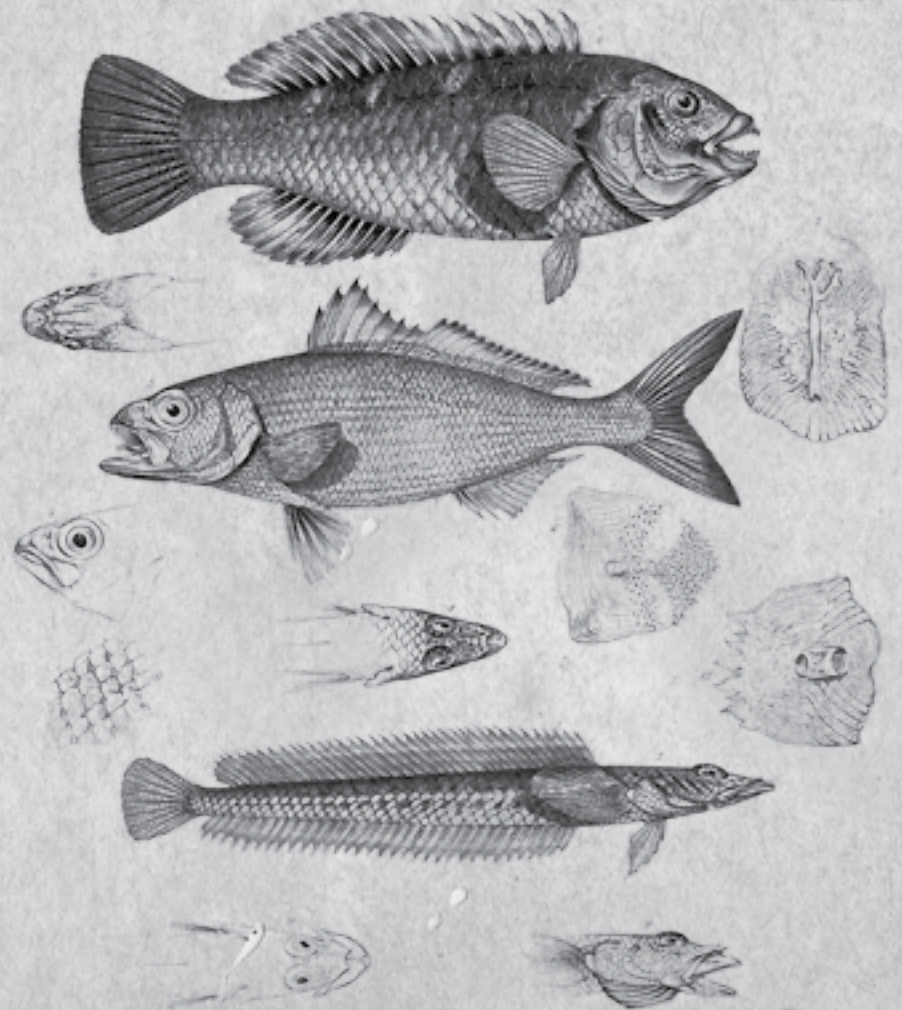
Theirs is an existence which is challenged today by constant wrangles with government departments over licensing, industry reviews, and the uncertainties presented by proposed marine parks. Some south coast fishermen think of themselves as an 'endangered species' and, considering the social and political pressures, popular anxieties about overfishing and friction between commercial and amateur groups, it's not an unreasonable status. In some countries the commercial fishers are a valued part of their nation's cultural heritage but this is not always so in Australia.

*Salt Story* tells of netting with Salt in a little tinny in the southern waters of Western Australia, and of some of the other fishers who work the same grounds: sea-dogs, fisherwomen, tough guys, oystermen and storytellers.



## MASTER'S APPRENTICE

Working for Salt involves no contracts, few rules and sometimes I get the feeling this apprenticeship will never end unless one of us dies or I manage to snare myself a Fisheries officer for a husband. I've quit twice and he's sacked me once but come the next week, we are always back out on the water.





## THE NET THAT DOESN'T CATCH ANYTHING

'What have we got? A brick fish!' We haul up the house brick that holds the net to the ocean floor.

'Nuffing!' Salt shakes his head in disgust. He says it every time we pick up that brick. 'Fuckin' nuffing.'

There is a legendary flathead lurking somewhere in King George Sound. I hear about it quite a lot. 'It just ate that KG,' Salt growls, tearing a mangled King George whiting from the mesh.

'Not a stingray?'

'Nah, it's that big fuckin' flathead. Too big to fit in the box, it is. About the size of a small crocodile but nastier.'

If you told me the word gullible wasn't in the dictionary, I'd have to check, secretly, later. 'Really?' I ask, agape. 'Have you seen it?'

'Seen it? It tried to chew me leg off,' he pulls up his wet-weather pants to show me the scar. It is a terrible scar, two sets of teeth marks, scoring across to meet in the middle of his calf.

'But wasn't that a shark?' Last time he showed me that scar, he said a dog shark had latched onto his leg and he'd had to cut off its head because, in all the excitement, the shark's jaws locked.

'Nah, that's the other leg, girl,' he smirked. 'Great night at the Bremer Bay pub that night. The barmaid had to fetch the pliers onto me.'

In the early evening, the western wind turbines slowed and then stopped.

'Not far now. We're nearly onto The Net That Doesn't Catch Anything,' Salt says.

'It's not so bad, that net.'

'Nope. I'm cutting it off tomorrow. Forgot to do it today. Doesn't catch anything,' Salt says. The silver gleam of King George whiting flash into the plastic bins. 'And it's too shallow. Pike swim straight over the top.' Just like that, there is a pike, then two, three, wrapped up in mesh like a rolled roast and still baring their teeth. 'I'm gonna cut the whole lot off. It's useless. It's The Net That Doesn't Catch Anything.'

Salt has diamonds on the soles of his feet tonight, electric blue, phosphorescent diamonds.

'Take me home.' He sits amidships on the pile of nets and looks ahead as I take the tiller. Just like a working horse, it is my favourite time of day but not because I am going home. It's nearing ten at night and the wind has dropped. We have the loveliest tub of fish for tomorrow's market. Navigation lights – green, red, yellow, blue – blink around me. I head into the channel and feel the chill of the land. The woodchip mountain is composting, woody scented. Steam clouds the orange lights. Our crocodilian wake flickers with fire in the water.

We never say anything during this part of the trip, not just because of the noisy two-stroke. It is that short period of absolute satisfaction that everything is right with the world.

'I'm gonna get on the piss soon,' Salt tells me at the jetty. 'Been too good for too bloody long. I'm gonna go out and shake this town up, shake things up a bit. It's about bloody time.'

He's pretty happy. He's outfoxed that fisherman's jinx yet again. It's been a good night's fishing, despite that net.