

# Canoeing Pioneers on the Snowy River

The historic first descent of the Snowy River from Jindabyne to the sea, by Peter Hogan

**'DON'T BE AN ADJECTIVAL FOOL, ARTHUR;** if you go down there you'll never come back. Why, there are places there the blacks have never seen', said a Monaro bushman when Arthur Hunt told him of his plan to canoe the Snowy River from Jindabyne, New South Wales, to its mouth at Marlo, Victoria. Despite the warning, Hunt and a mate, Stanley Hanson, set off in an overloaded, wooden canoe without life-jackets and with limited white-water canoeing experience, wearing boots that nearly sank them when they capsized. It took them two months but against huge odds they succeeded, arriving in Marlo to a hero's welcome on 20 April 1937.

Hunt kept a diary during the trip and took numerous photos. It is not known what happened to these but fortunately he wrote a series of articles about his adventure that appeared in the *Sydney Mail*, a weekly newspaper that has ceased publication.

Even today, with much better equipment and a greater knowledge of the river, a canoe trip down the Snowy is a bit of an adventure. A popular trip with canoeists is



Stanley Hanson running a rapid. All uncredited photos Peter Hanson collection

**'They had been warned that it would be very difficult, one local bushman describing it as "a complicated form of suicide".'**

from McKillops Bridge to the junction with the Buchan River. This section of the Snowy winds through remote country and drops over rapids with names such as Georges Mistake, the Washing Machine and the ironically named Gentle Annie. Even experienced canoeists are forced to portage some of the rapids. But it is child's play compared to some parts of the river that Hunt and Hanson tackled.

Hunt prepared carefully for their adventure. He tried various condensed and dried foods and decided to take riced potatoes, dried onions, powdered tomatoes, cakes of dehydrated vegetables and pemican (strips of dried beef). Like typical bush-

men of the time, they took a good supply of flour, tea and sugar as well as tins of butter and jam. They also took a gun for game, and fishing lines. Hunt prepared a first aid kit with the help of a doctor, a nurse and a pharmacist. Other equipment included a camera, a gold dish, a pick, a compass and an aneroid barometer. Anticipating wear and tear on his backside, Hunt had an

extra seat sewn into his shorts. He ordered thick, knitted socks, and boots with extra-heavy soles, fitted with ankle protectors and made from vegetable-tanned leather which is less affected by water.

All the gear and food were packed in small, labelled, waterproof bags which were then packed in four waterproof kitbags. The kitbags were labelled Personal, Ironmongery (including billies and guns), Tucker and Bread. Everything was then put in a large canvas bag and strapped into the canoe. This proved to be secure—even when the canoe capsized they didn't lose any gear.

The canoe, made of pine, was 3.5 metres long and weighed 45 kilograms. It had done

three previous trips so it was reconditioned for the Snowy River trip with extra planking, a false keel and chafing-battens for protection from rocks. Two lengths of rope, about 18 metres long, were attached to the front and the back for roping the canoe over rocks. Despite the careful reconditioning, the canoe started to leak after just a few days. By the time they got to Dalgety, the first town downstream from Jindabyne, several cracks were letting in water and some of the chafing-battens had come away from the planks. They camped for three days near Dalgety, repairing the canoe between bouts of playing cards while waiting for the rain to stop. There were a few more stops for repairs during the journey.

When he made his epic journey Hunt was a 30-year-old bachelor who ran a family business selling wine and spirits. He never married and lived with his mother in Goulburn for most of his life. Hunt was a keen sportsman and a member of a local theatre group. He made several pioneering canoe trips in the 1930s including five months canoeing the Murrumbidgee River from near Canberra, and following the Murray River to its mouth at Encounter Bay. I'm told he later had a plan to start a nudist colony on an island in Jervis Bay but abandoned it when he found that navy planes flew over the island. He died in 1958.

Hunt's companion on the trip was 42-year-old Stanley Hanson from Nowra, on the NSW coast. Hunt and Hanson had been on shooting, fishing and camping trips together and Hunt felt that he knew Hanson

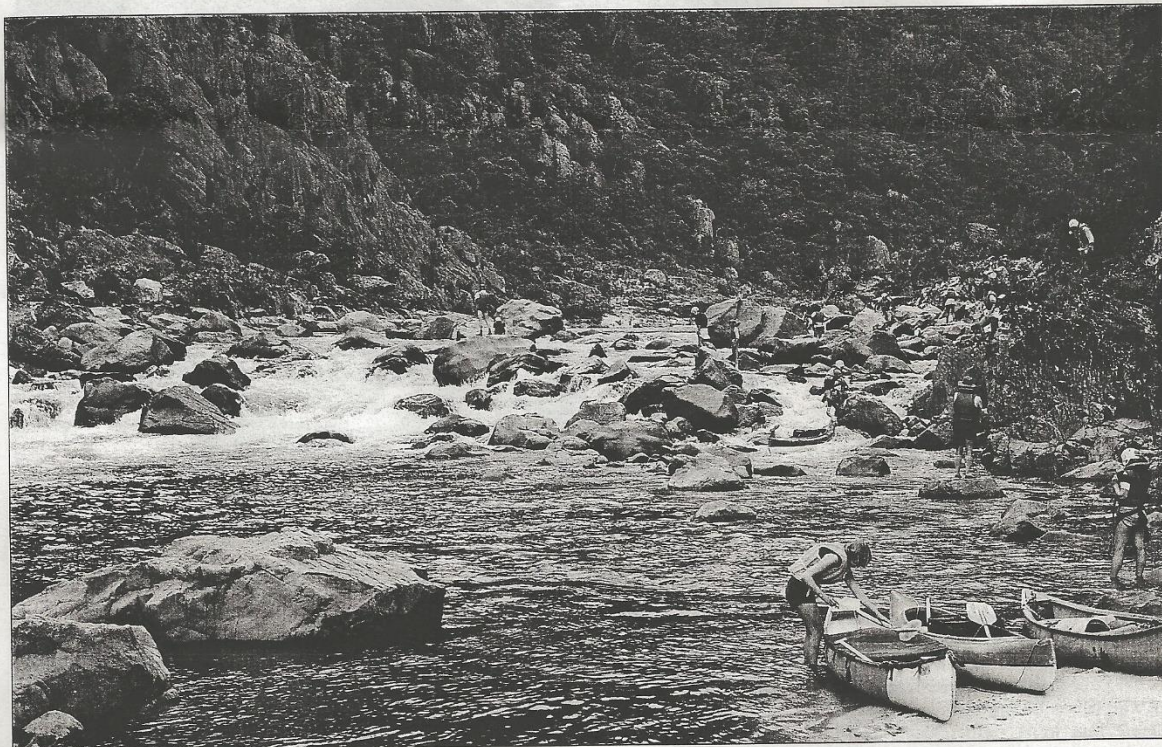
well enough to spend a few weeks together in remote country. In the *Sydney Mail* article Hunt said, 'I knew Stan would stick. He was a good bushman, knew boats and had a useful knowledge of prospecting. I knew enough of his faults and he knew enough of mine to make me think that we would have a reasonable chance of getting along together.' For most of the trip Hunt paddled in the back and Hanson, who had never canoed before, was in the front.

I spoke to Hanson's son, Peter Hanson, who still lives at Nowra for half the year when he isn't looking for opals near Lightning Ridge. He told me that his father's occupations included fisherman and SP book-maker. In 1937 he was a hire-car operator,

from his back, Hanson was reluctant to go to a hospital in case he wouldn't be allowed to finish the trip. Fortunately, after the carbuncle was removed his back felt much better.

Hanson was fond of snakes, which caused Hunt some consternation at times. Hunt describes the scene when he picked up Hanson. 'He was standing by a large kitbag (with) a very lively copperhead snake... Handling and playing with snakes is one of Stan's favourite pastimes, but I like playing with them with a gun.' On another occasion Hanson found a brown snake and proceeded to tease it. When it struck at him he would hit it across the head with his hat. He then picked it up and played with it. As

them as they took a nap under a bridge. After Jindabyne, the Snowy flows south-east through sparsely settled country to Ironmungy. At first the going was easy but it wasn't long before they were running rapids and portaging round rocky sections. They were careful to have a good look at each rapid before deciding whether to paddle it, rope the canoe through or portage it. The pair were to do many portages on the trip but seem to have accepted that they were the price of conquering the river. Hunt wrote: 'I think one of the fascinations of canoeing lies in the fact that each difficulty encountered has to be studied and overcome by different means.' They must have worked hard over the next couple of weeks.



Canoeists portaging Gentle Annie rapid on the Snowy in more recent times. Peter Hogan

owning a Buick and a Cadillac. Hanson had six children. He died in 1978 aged 84.

When he was 17 Hanson survived being shot in the back. Doctors stitched him up but expected him to die. He lived but needed a belt a foot wide to keep himself together. 'Since then', wrote Hunt in the *Sydney Mail* article, 'he has fallen over a 200-foot cliff and escaped with a few broken ribs, has been nearly drowned twice, been bitten three times by various species of snakes and won a boxing tournament. So the shot did not affect him to any great extent.' During the trip Hanson's back gave him trouble and he had to be carted to Dalgety on the back of a truck, where a bush nurse removed a carbuncle. This was after a bloke they met on the river had attempted to open him up with a razor blade. Despite the pain

soon as Hanson put it down Hunt killed it with a large rock, which did not please Hanson.

The amount of wildlife seen by the two canoeists is amazing. Hunt reported seeing kangaroos, wallabies, dingoes, wombats, emus, brumbies and goats. They saw 'thousands of black ducks' and also lyre-birds and wonga pigeons. They caught perch by trailing a spinner in deep pools. Trout were plentiful and fairly easy to catch although they were disappointed that the biggest was only about two pounds (just under a kilogram). On the second night they camped by a long, wide pool which was dotted with the furry backs of platypus. Canoeists today are not so fortunate.

The journey started with an undignified retreat from local boys throwing stones at

The *Canoeing Guide to Victoria* describes the section above the MacLaughlin River as 'just too steep and has too many portages to be worth while'.

Hanson and the canoe nearly came to grief while negotiating the first gorge. They needed to get round a big rapid with a drop of over five metres and found themselves on the wrong side of the river. With the rope tied around his chest and Hanson hanging firmly on the other end at a point upstream, Hunt allowed himself to be swept across the river. Hunt then hung on to the rope to haul the canoe, with Hanson hanging on the back, across to his side. But Hunt had too much rope: he just managed to haul it in to save Hanson and the canoe from being swept by the strong current over the drop on to the rocks below.

The next day they had their first big portage. After setting up camp that evening Hanson returned from shooting rabbits for the pot with the news that the gorge lower down looked impassable. A narrow channel passed through sheer walls and the river dropped over difficult rapids and small falls. As the river curved round a ridge behind their camp-site it looked as if they would have to haul canoe and gear over the ridge. Hunt wasn't too keen on this plan. They took

## The Snowy River today

The Snowy River starts at 2100 metres above sea level a couple of kilometres south of Mt Kosciuszko. It is dammed at Guthega, Island Bend and Jindabyne. The Jindabyne dam is the last dam on the Snowy River and was completed in 1967. Until recently, from one to three per cent of the previous flow was released into the river. This will be increased to 25 per cent over the next five years. Water from the Island Bend Pondage, which collects the snow melt from the upper reaches of the Snowy River, is also diverted to the Murray and Tumut River catchment areas. There is also a dam on the Eucumbene River, a major tributary of the Snowy which flows into Lake Jindabyne. At Jindabyne the river is 960 metres above sea level and flows for over 450 kilometres to the sea. Major tributaries below Jindabyne are the MacLaughlin, Delegate, Jacobs and Pinch Rivers in NSW and the Suggan Buggan, Little, Rodgers and Buchan Rivers in Victoria.

The river passes through three National Parks: the Kosciuszko National Park in NSW, the Alpine National Park (Tingaringy section) in northern Victoria and the Snowy River National Park also in Victoria. The southern part of the Kosciuszko National Park and much of the Snowy River National Park are classified as wilderness areas.

After Jindabyne there are only four road bridges over the river: at Dalgety and Ironmungy in NSW, McKillops Bridge in northern Victoria and the Princes Highway at Orbost.

some of the gear to the top of the ridge the next morning and then had a closer inspection. This showed that they could get the canoe through with several smaller portages. However, there were no camp-sites in the gorge so they would have to get through that day. Most of the morning had gone before they got back to camp and made a start. They worked the rest of the day without stopping to rest or to eat. At two points they had to haul the canoe and gear 30 metres over rocks and lower it all down on ropes. Cold, wet, tired and hungry, they got through the gorge just before dusk.

After the trip Hunt told the *Coulburn Evening Post*: 'The roughest part of the river is between Ironmungy and the junction of

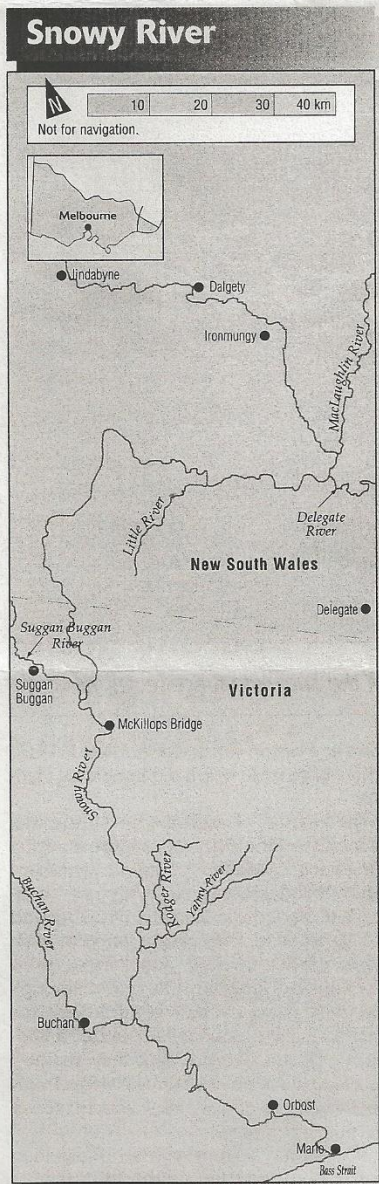
the MacLaughlin River.' Expecting to do it in a couple of days, it actually took them nine. After a day that required a few portages they camped by a pool and walked up a hill to look at what they had to face the next day. Hunt describes the scene: 'The sight that greeted our eyes was very much worse than the gorge above Dalgety. We saw a deep narrow chasm through which the river boiled and foamed between a tumbled mass of boulders. There were no pools of any description; all we could see were rocks and broken water, and the sullen roar made us wonder just how long the trip would take...It was the roughest stretch I'd seen on any river.'

It took several portages to get through that section of the river, including one of about half a mile (800 metres). Some of the gear was carried to the end where they would camp that night. They were able to rope the canoe through a few bits but most

of the day was spent carrying gear and canoe. It was one of the hardest days of the trip. Hunt again: 'The lower end of the gorge was completely blocked with huge boulders for a distance of 70-yards (64 metres) and we could catch only occasional glimpses of the water as it forced its way beneath that tangled barrier.'

The next few days were not much better. They worked from sunrise to sundown doing portage after portage, averaging about one-and-a-half kilometres a day, rarely able actually to paddle the canoe. 'It was a canoeist's nightmare,' said Hunt. At times the river actually went underground. Just before the MacLaughlin River is a feature called the Stone Bridge, which was used by Aborigines as a natural crossing place.

After the Delegate River joins the Snowy River it heads north-west into what is now the Kosciuszko National Park. It winds through almost inaccessible mountain country, changing direction nearly 180° during its journey before heading south to Victoria. This is still very remote wilderness country which very



Stanley Hanson charms a member of the local population of brown snakes.

few canoeists have tackled. Canoeists grade rapids on a scale of 1 to 6, with grade 4 described as 'Suitable only for very competent canoeists'. The *Canoeing Guide* tells us: 'From the Delegate River on there are very many rapids of Grade 3-4 standard with several portages. There are two waterfalls...(which)

are not canoeable by anyone at any level and must be approached with extreme caution.'

The first of these waterfalls is the Corrowong Falls, where two big drops and some fast rapids drop the river about 20 metres. Hunt and Hanson found a reasonably easy portage along the old riverbed. Along the way they encountered a few snakes, Hanson—but not Hunt—was pleased to see them.

They had some pleasant and easy paddling for a while and soon after the falls came to a spot where they had arranged a food pick-up. A walk, lasting an hour and a half, took them to the camp of a local farmer, where they were showered with hospitality.

about 1200 metres of jagged shale and boulders on the left bank. They did it in four stages and were exhausted by the end of the day, every muscle in their bodies aching.

Although the surrounding country was wild and inhospitable, the river itself was easier after the falls. There were not many portages and they became more daring at shooting the rapids, which resulted in a couple of duckings. At times they had to drag the canoe over long stretches of shallow water. But they were fit and were having a great time. After turning in a great arc the river heads south to the Victorian border. Before they reached the border they un-

scribing it as 'a complicated form of suicide'. They had also been warned that it would be almost impossible to walk out because of the thick scrub. But they were undeterred.

Getting through the gorge was one of the worst days of the trip. There were three portages and the slippery conditions made them more difficult. Hunt wrote: 'Certainly it was rough but not as rough as it had been higher up. It was the rain that made it so

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***'It looked like the embodiment of a mad canoeist's nightmare.'***

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***Arthur Hunt, left, and Stanley Hanson on the Snowy River in 1937.***

It was from here that Hanson was taken to Dalgety to have his carbuncle cut out.

Returning from Dalgety, they hiked to one of the highest points in the area to survey the next section of the river. The scene was daunting. Hunt wrote: 'It looked like the embodiment of a mad canoeist's nightmare. Surely the Creator of the Universe must have raked together all the spare, rough mountain ranges, gorges and boulders into one vast heap, meaning to level them out when He had nothing more important on hand.' The thought of getting out of the area if anything happened weighed on their minds. They were aware of stories of prospectors going into the area and never being heard of again and that surveyor TS Townsend in 1846 had found it impossible to proceed along this section of river.

But they continued on to the next obstacle, the second waterfall. Hunt called these the Little River Falls but the Little River (in NSW) is now called Byadbo Creek. From the top of the falls they saw a drop of about ten metres and a difficult rapid. This was followed by a series of rock-strewn, narrow channels that they would also have to portage. The right bank of the river was too steep for a portage so it had to be over

expectedly met a party of surveyors—and a bit later a gang blazing a track which was to become the Barry Way, a road connecting the Monaro and East Gippsland. As usual when they met people on the river, they enjoyed the hospitality and company of the men.

As they approached the Victorian border the weather tested their hardiness. The wind and driving rain kept them constantly cold. Sometimes they stopped to light a fire to thaw out. At other times they dragged the canoe along a beach to get their muscles working properly.

They crossed the border and soon reached McKillops Bridge. A few years before, a huge flood had wrecked the newly constructed steel bridge but a new bridge had been built when the pair arrived. The twisted remains of the old bridge testified to the power of the river in flood.

A couple of days were spent at the bridge as they needed to get more food from Delegate and the canoe needed some repairs. Once again, the hospitality of the locals was generous.

The next challenge was the Tulloch Ard Gorge. They had been warned that it would be very difficult, one local bushman de-

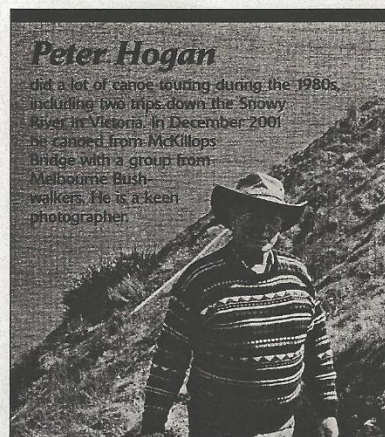
unpleasant; the rain, the cold and the slippery rocks.' However, more confident of their skills, they were shooting rapids that earlier they would have roped the canoe down.

Soon they saw cleared paddocks and signs of civilisation. Perhaps surprisingly, Hunt reported that he began to miss the peace and serenity of communing with nature. At Orbost they stayed overnight at a local hotel before continuing on to Marlo the next day. News of their progress down the river preceded them and the people of Marlo turned out to greet them. The *Bairnsdale Advertiser* reported that the owner of the Marlo Hotel offered them a week's free accommodation. However, the pair declined the offer.

Their canoe had just made it. There were dozens of cracks in the timber and some of the planks were almost worn through from being dragged over rocks. Hunt considered the canoe to be beyond repair, but he had it transported back to Goulburn.

The following year the River Canoe Club of NSW made Arthur Hunt and Stanley Hanson honorary members of the club. **W**

Thank you to Gordon Thompson of the Goulburn Historical Society; Peter Hanson, son of Stanley Hanson; and Ross Winters of the River Canoe Club of NSW for help with research for the article.



**Peter Hogan**

did a lot of canoe touring during the 1980s, including two trips down the Snowy River in Victoria. In December 2001 he canoed from McKillops Bridge with a group from Melbourne Bushwalkers. He is a keen photographer.