

# TASMANIAN

BE TASMANIAN PODCAST

## Episode Two: The power of narrative

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast—theme music)*

*Welcome to Be Tasmanian, a podcast about an impossible mission in a small state at the bottom of the world.*

*It's about uncovering a hidden story that unites people, and using that story to inspire community action.*

*It's about place-branding, destination marketing and economic development, but it's really about culture: It's about who we are, why we live where we live, what all that means, and what we ought to do about it.*

*This is episode two.*

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

Many of us have passports, but our strongest ties tend to be local. They're linked to our memories, especially from childhood, and to the sights and sounds and smells and tastes of home.

We're Canadian, Kenyan, Indian, or Chinese. But we're from Edmonton or Nairobi, or Jaipur or Guangzhou.

Or Sydney. Or Melbourne.

Not in Tasmania. Here, it's different. People identify first with their state. Then they might talk about the towns or cities where they live. And their ties to mainland Australia tend to be curiously weak.

They are Tasmanian. Or, they aspire to be Tasmanian.

When we interviewed a few hundred of them they knew, emotionally, what it meant to be a Tasmanian. But they had no simple way to explain it.

This was rather crucial for me, as it was my job to listen to Tasmanians' feelings and stories and values and... to find a way to sum it up, define and distil it into a unifying concept, theme, or metaphor.

I would walk to my little apartment after these sessions, wherever I was in Tasmania, and I'd... worry. I would not sleep. I would text and phone my colleagues, who were doing interviews at the same time, and their experiences were similar.

This wasn't easy. But we soon learned... nothing in Tasmania is easy.

Some agencies will settle on a single idea for a nation, a state or a city. A little like a product. It tends to be big and abstract, a modern synonym of "really super", "opportunity" maybe or "innovation", "creativity".

In our interviews, Tasmanians resisted anything obvious like that. They were mysterious.

Most places, agencies, and local boosters come up with a boast.

At least eighteen cities in North America refer to themselves as 'City of Champions', and I grew up in one of them.

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A brand is about feelings. 'City of Champions' is fabulous when the sports teams and the economy are doing well and people feel like champions. But it's ironic and sad when the sports teams keep losing and the economy is miserable.

Ad agencies encourage us to own something. Sometimes it's an important industry. But... what happens to 'Motor City' when auto manufacturing declines?

What happens to 'the Paris of America', 'the Paris of the South', 'the Paris of the Plains', the Prairies, the Piedmont... when too many people actually go to Paris and come home to strip malls and vinyl siding?

What happens to 'clean and green' when some of your biggest industries are anything but, and a haze of pollution lingers in the valley, and almost everyone commutes by car?

But that isn't the problem.

The problem is none of this sloganeering works like Austin's weirdness—as an organising, uplifting, and uniting idea.

Like 'Keep Austin Weird', which we addressed in episode one of Be Tasmanian, one of the best place-branding metaphors grew by accident.

Horses, like apples as a treat, a reward, especially after a good run, and you could race your horse anywhere. But if you want to race your horse against the best in the world, there's only one place to test its greatness.

Historian Barry Popik studies popular metaphors and their origins. A few years ago, Popik did an interview for a New York Public Radio WNYC on 'The Big Apple'.

<https://gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/big-apple-nickname-origin-nyc-history>

*"Popik spent three decades trying to understand where the phrase 'The Big Apple' comes from. He traces its first mention as a reference for New York City to 100 years ago. In 1924, John J Fitzgerald, a columnist covering horse racing for the New York Morning Telegraph debuted a new column he called 'Around the Big Apple'. Here's Popik reading from it on a slightly fuzzy phone line."*

*"The Big Apple, the dream of every lad that ever threw a leg over a thoroughbred and the goal of all horsemen: there's only one big apple, that's New York."*

So 'The Big Apple' works. It's a boast that happens to be true, and it's why the city remains a magnet for the hyper-ambitious.

When I've done place-branding and economic development work in the past, mostly in mid-sized places, forgotten and misunderstood places, people tend to think the outcome of our work is a boast.

People don't know how great we are! We need a campaign!

So, they find a way to boast. They fight to get on the top ten list for safety or cheap real estate or sunny days or higher education. We're the gateway to something nice nearby, like the Rockies or the North or the Sea. We're the birthplace or the capital of a wonderful thing like baseball or heavy oil or garlic.

Again: It was different in Tasmania. No one boasted. No one rattled off statistics.

They spoke of struggle.

For thousands of years, Tasmanian Aboriginal people lived and thrived here. Then the Europeans arrived.

Here's Dr Emma Lee, a trawlulwuy (Troa-whoa-way) woman from tebrakunna country in Northeast Tasmania.

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0:50 “I’m an aboriginal Tasmanian...” to 1:19 “... colonialism can offer.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcYqeuE0nI4>

*“I’m aboriginal Tasmanian, and in 1876 on the death of our magnificent country woman, Truganini, our peoples were declared extinct. Wiped out. No more. This ‘fact’ took hold in a global imagination, of the worst that colonialism can offer.”*

We heard it so many times, from so many people, that until the 1970s Aboriginal Tasmanians were told they didn’t exist: by leaders, by teachers, by the media, by their neighbours, even by members of their own families.

Here is Dr Emma Lee again:

1:56 “Our experience of genocide...” to 2:14 “... against it.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcYqeuE0nI4>

*“Our experience of genocide actually helped to give rise to the term of genocide. The 1940s by Mr Raphael Limkin, which helped to create the UN convention against it.”*

To do this work correctly, you have to listen carefully—to try to understand even if you can never truly understand.

The story of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people came up often, and movingly. Tasmanians knew what we were sitting down to talk about: their culture, the brand and they talked about hardship.

They spoke of their convict heritage and history, and the enduring legacy of it. They told us about their grandparents migrating here after surviving the brutality and privation of World War II in Europe, only to find a different kind of difficulty in their new home: of being accepted. They talked about what happened, toward the end of the last century, when globalisation made everything in the world cheaper.

Tasmanian commodity industries struggled and shrunk. Mining towns emptied out. Factories and mills that had promised generations of Tasmanians a job for life slowly declined and then shut down.

People who felt confident, or whose parents or grandparents felt that way, suddenly had to reckon with unemployment, under-employment, and the psychological effects of feeling like their life’s work was of little value.

Tasmanians talked about times of environmental destruction and pollution. They talked about low literacy and high school completion rates. Generational poverty, racism, sexism.

And they talked about having two heads. I must say, when I told my Australian friends in North America that I was going to Tasmania, this was the first thing they said. The joke wasn’t obvious to me, that two-headedness had something to do with incest.

National media coverage, and stereotypes, had reinforced the idea that Tasmania was a dark and backward and poor place, with unhappy weather. Some Tasmanians found all of this terribly hurtful. Others talked about it with smiles on their faces, they moved their collars to show me the ‘scar’ where the second head used to be, but at the same time they admitted it had an effect on them.

They didn’t grow up ambitious, or confident, or proud to be Tasmanian. Some of them talked about going to mainland Australia to university, or to start their careers, and discovering the reputation followed and haunted them. Tasmanians were less educated, less sophisticated, less successful, the least lucky people in the ‘Lucky Country’.

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Tasmanians even heard it in their own communities and families. People told each other their dreams were unworthy, or silly, even impossible. They would watch the news, or movies and find they'd been left off the map of Australia. The 2014 swimsuits for the Commonwealth Games swimming team had a stylised map of Australia, with Tasmania obscured by emus and kangaroos. There's a whole Wikipedia page devoted to Tasmania being left off the map of Australia.

In 1987 a University of Tasmania history student, named Rodney Croome, came out as a gay man.

## **Rodney Croome on LGBTI—the dark days:**

*“In Tasmania sex between men was a crime punishable by 21 years in gaol. Tasmania was the only state that stigmatised transgender people as criminals by outlawing cross-dressing.”*

The police had “pink lists” of known homosexuals. Rodney and a group of fellow activists set up a stall at Hobart's Salamanca Market seeking signatures for a gay law reform petition.

*“The stall was closed down and we were all arrested. When gay law reform was first proposed in Parliament angry, hateful protest rallies were conducted across the state.”*

Tasmania at that time was among the worst places in the world to be LGBTIQ.

In these interviews with Tasmanians we weren't asking for stories of struggle and hardship, of unfairness, of shame. We were asking them about their culture, their brand: what they felt about their home. What made it different from anywhere else, and they told stories of struggle and hardship.

Even Tasmanians who, by almost any metric, would seem fabulously successful... tell their own stories this way.

## **Nick Haddow on his early days in Tasmania, toughing it out in Pyengana, everyone telling him his idea for Bruny Island Cheese was crazy:**

Nick Haddow, the CEO of Bruny Island Cheese... and full disclosure—the Chair of the Brand Tasmania Board, is not only a successful entrepreneur, he's also a TV star and an award-winning author. He tells his story of coming here with a passion for cheese and pursuing his craft on the east coast of Tasmania. Just when he and his wife, Leonie, another entrepreneur, were planning to leave for a new life in Japan, they took a final trip and discovered Bruny Island. They thought, let's stay and start a cheese company.

*“Failure wasn't an option for us. It had to work, but that said a totally stupid place to start a cheese factory back in 2003 when we started the Bruny Island Cheese Company, Bruny Island itself was a very, very different place. No-one went there. Nobody. Umm, you know it had no tourism industry, there was no dairy farm there. I mean there still isn't a dairy farm there and everything that we make has to first be brought to the island and then we turn it into something else and then it leaves the island. So it's a crazy place to start a business like Bruny Island Cheese Company. Actually, I'm the second cheesemaker to be on Bruny Island, and the previous iteration of making cheese on Bruny Island had stopped about four, five, six years ago and so people sort of approached me and said, “oh that won't work, cause someone's tried it before here and it didn't work”, and that's, you know, that's my happy place when people say that to me.”*

“That's my happy place.” I've heard variations of this so many times in Tasmania. When things are tough, really tough, some mysterious Tasmanian energy begins to build. It's macabre, but during the pandemic, which is as bad, or worse economically as Tasmania or anywhere else because we rely so heavily on tourism. People have used phrases like “sweet spot”. Something happens in Tasmania when it's hard.

The best brands in the world are, at their foundations, stories.

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And every story begins with a problem.

Think of your favourite novels, your favourite movies. There it is, in the beginning, a problem state or status quo. In romantic comedy, we have two lonely and unfulfilled people who haven't yet fallen in love. Cinderella is stuck doing chores, mistreated by her step-mother and step-sisters. Ebenezer Scrooge is unhappy—he's an unfulfilled miser. In 12 Years a Slave, it's right there in the title.

The philosopher Joseph Campbell devoted his life to mythology and its power, the stories we tell and why we tell them. Here's Hollywood screenwriter Dan Harmon on Joseph Campbell and the universality of stories:

1:10 *"Joseph Campbell's hero"* to 1:46 *"... it's basically everything."*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuD2Aa0zFiA>

*"Joseph Campbell's A Hero of a Thousand Faces, it wasn't a screen writing book, it was just a book about a guy who grew up a boy scout and a catholic who was really passionate about these Native American stories who started noticing similarities between parables about Christ and like these Native American folk tales that pre-dated Christ and also had no way of being touched by Christian culture. His life work became comparative mythology and mythology isn't just stories around a campfire, it's pop music, it's the dream you're describing to your friend on the subway, it's drawings on a napkin, it's basically everything."*

It's basically everything.

This is how we make sense of the world, as individuals, as communities, and as cultures. Neuroscientists have shown us that our brains are wired for stories. Put us in an MRI machine and our brains can't tell the difference between experiencing something and listening to a story about experiencing something. This is why we cry, or laugh, or even change our lives when we hear a good story.

Stories are immensely powerful.

Yet I have found, in my working life, that people tend to dismiss the problem-state, the status quo, the place where all stories begin.

If you're in the boasting business, you want everything to be magically positive. What a company, a city or a state often wants from their brand work is to say: we've always been awesome, and every day we are incrementally more awesome, choose us.

This is why so much communication, in the corporate world and in place-branding, is so bland and vanilla. People are afraid to tap into emotional truth because it doesn't sound... businessy enough.

The slogan for New South Wales is... 'Making it Happen.'

Why? 'Making it Happen' offends no one. Is it wrong? Who knows? Things certainly happen in New South Wales. It's impossible to prove it wrong, or right, or to feel... anything about it. The same goes for every slogan on every licence plate in Australia.

In Tasmania, we were after something deeper than a slogan—and almost no one we interviewed let us down. They went deep... immediately.

And there are unconscious yet official signs of it too, of the Tasmanian problem-state and how heavily it weighs on us here.

There is an image of the thylacine on the Tasmanian licence plate. It's the Tasmanian Government's logo, and when you spend time here from anywhere else you see the thylacine—the Tasmanian tiger—everywhere.

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'Explore the possibilities', it says, on the licence plate, next to an image of a thylacine peeking out from the bushes—this is an animal Tasmanians hunted to extinction.

Boasts tend to be empty. Of course we're innovative and world class. We're resilient. We're sustainable. We're creative.

Tasmanians... just didn't talk this way. They didn't sit down at the Devonport library and brag for an hour. They weren't fake or defensive.

They were open and they were vulnerable.

In Tasmania we are reminded constantly of struggle, of obstacles. It's harder on this isolated island at the bottom of the world. And at times we ourselves have made it worse, by being unkind to each other... to the land... to beautiful, shy marsupials.

This honesty, this vulnerability, this passion isn't... ordinary.

Almost every Tasmanian we interviewed established this. But then, in nearly every interview, something turned... something changed. We were listening to these stories of struggle and hardship, of obstacles and errors, underestimation, impossibility... and thinking: "and then what happened?" "Then what happened?... then what happened?"

Here's Nick Haddow again:

*"You know I often reflect on would I do anything different if I had the chance to do it again? Would I start Bruny Island Cheese Company on Bruny Island, or do it somewhere that made more sense, that had better access to people and product and or potentially just cheaper? Um, I reckon I wouldn't change a thing."*

And Rodney Croome, moving from the difference, the turn between 1987, when he first came out, and today:

*"Tasmania has the most progressive LGBTIQ human rights laws. Not only in Australia, but in the entire world."*

What happened? How did it happen? Why does it happen so often?

In the next episode of Be Tasmanian, we'll find out how, in Tasmania, the struggle leads to something extraordinary.

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

Hey, if you have questions about what you heard today about me, or the team, or Brand Tasmania, send us an email at [podcast@brandtasmania.com.au](mailto:podcast@brandtasmania.com.au).