A photograph of Bob Brown, an Australian senator and environmental activist, sitting on a mossy rock in a lush forest. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark trousers. In the background, a waterfall cascades over rocks, surrounded by dense green foliage and trees. The scene is peaceful and natural.

NEWSWALK

# BOB BROWN

## 'I MADE A STAND AGAINST THE REPUGNANT STUFF'

In the third of the Newswalk series, the Australian senator, environmental activist and saviour of the Franklin river takes Nicholas Shakespeare to find the waterfall that inspired his career as one of the founders of the world's largest Green party

## NEWSWALKS

In his *Walking Essays* of 1912, a brilliant young English writer, AH Sidgwick, proposed that walking “lays a foundation of mutual respect more quickly and more surely” than any other activity. The environment of a walk was exactly right: “Familiar enough to create a sense of ease, and yet strange enough to throw the walkers back on themselves with the instinct of human solidarity.”

When Paddy Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin strode, chatting, through the Peloponnesian landscape, they were enacting Diogenes’ *solvitur ambulando*—it is solved by walking.

With this in mind *Newsweek* has invited some of the world’s most interesting thinkers to go on a five-mile walk of their choice, while reflecting on their own lives, inspirations and ambitions.



spot it at last - in a meadow beneath the dolerite cliff of Drys Bluff: a white cottage with a red ripple-iron roof. It has taken all morning to reach “the remote upper Liffey”, as even the local paper calls it, yet my journey to this wooded valley in the north-west of Tasmania has been 16 years in the making.

I cross the narrow footbridge, over a gossiping river, and past a sign saying “Trespassers Welcome”. The cottage door swings open, and he ambles down to meet me, a tall, thin, balding figure with eyes the blue of his shirt and a wide boyish smile.

I last saw this valley in 1999, with a local lad, Jamie Cox, who was eager to show me the Liffey Falls and a house that was for sale. We failed to find either, but our winding drive through the blackwood forests planted in me a desire to have a stake in this island: on Tasmania’s east coast 10 days later, I walked into a two-bedroom shack that had a view across the bay towards Antarctica and decided to buy it. Shortly after that, I heard Bob Brown’s name for the first time.

He was a senator for the Australian Greens, the world’s biggest Green party, which he had helped found; and for many years held the balance of power in the Australian Federal Government, polling the largest Green vote (18%) recorded in any general election anywhere in the world. Already, he had a reputation as a canny, unbiddable conscience who demanded that we treat the planet with fiercer respect, and warned us of the incalculable price of our “rampant materialism”. The first Green party was established in Tasmania in March 1972. Today, there are 100 Green parties worldwide. A sizeable credit for that achievement must go to 68-year-old Brown.

He leads me back up the slope, towards the white cottage that played a central part in the Green movement. It was built in 1900 out of timbers milled on the property, then a Kentish cherry orchard; Charles Crack’s original plough lies in the grass. Later, the orchard was felled and cleared. “His son told me it was like a wedding cake at night when they burned all the trees.”

Exposed, the tiny cottage has stood witness to frequent trespassers. Once, some escaped prisoners left their shotgun in Brown’s shed; another night, robbers broke in and stole his parents’ vases (the items were later tracked to Elizabeth Town, 60 kilometres away). Brown picks up a rocking chair on the porch, and rotates it: underneath, in black marker, is written STOLEN FROM BOB BROWN, LIFFEY. The same message - “so they can’t sell it on” - is scribbled on the back of a photograph in the hall which shows a solid, white-bearded man standing outside in the meadow. “That’s my dad. He came here every summer from Coffs Harbour after my mother died, to escape the tourists - or ‘terrorists’ as he called them.”

Brown’s father was a policeman, as were Brown’s twin sister, his two brothers, his four uncles, his grandfather.

“What did he pass on to you?”

“Common sense. ‘You do that again and you’ll get more than a kick in the pants’.”

Brown’s destiny was not to follow his family into the constabulary; instead, to safeguard our environment for future generations, “striving to make our common human tenure on Earth longer, and fairer and happier” - a role that became clear to him only when living in the Liffey Valley. Beyond the reach of mobile phones and television, its silence was regenerative. “When the river’s in flood, you hear the boulders rolling underneath, boom boom, and you can hear the ecological evolution of the planet taking place.”

He shows me into the front study where he’d been making notes on a book about a Somali woman stoned for adultery. On one wall, a black and white photograph of Brown silhouetted against the Iguazu falls; on another, shelves of books (Chomsky, Marx, Lovelock, though no fiction or poetry). And some padded 1950s armchairs with the springs showing, as if burst apart in over-animated conversation. Occupying two of these chairs had once sat Petra Kelly, founder of the German Green Party, and her partner Gert Bastian (eight years on, he shot her dead as she slept). “Petra was high octane. She saw how political parties put on Green spots in opposition, and then shed them when in power.” Change, Kelly said, would arrive only when the Greens got into power with their own party.

With this in mind, in 1978, Brown had patted his verandah twice and gone forth to do battle “out there, where forests are smashed down”; to this cottage he returned in order to replenish himself. The walnut tree near the house shaded Greens fundraising picnics, dam blockade meetings, the birth of Bush Heritage Australia, and the commitment ceremony of Brown and his Tasmanian partner, sheep farmer Paul Thomas,

in 2009. “Liffey has been a huge sanctuary for me. I don’t think I’d be here without it.”

### Jailed aged six

We head out to the Liffey Falls, a walk through the forest that Brown has made hundreds of times, though not once since his retirement from the senate in 2012. He took this walk, he says, “to turn my anxious soul into an organised force”.

To the waterfall, along the same fern-striped path, Brown had led his mother in 1974; and a year later, his father. (His parents are buried side by side in the local churchyard). “They’re displaced in time, but in my mind I still see them together.”

Like the universe 13.7 billion years ago, the Browns exploded into being out of nowhere. They hied from the Lancashire town of Nelson, only then they were called Spooners. “My grandfather, George Spooner, was a draft dodger. I think he was also a bigamist. My mother once looked over her glasses and said ‘women trouble’.” George Spooner escaped his family, surname and congested past by sailing to New South Wales, where he joined the police force - as George Brown. “I was given the name Jack after my father. While Jack Spooner was where I was headed, Bob Brown is where I ended up.”

He grew up in Trunkey Creek, no electricity, a population of 150 “and one rough-as-guts hotel”.

His first jailing was for refusing to eat his mother’s spinach. His mother came from a

family of dairy farmers in New South Wales and took pride in growing organic vegetables. “Aged six, I made a stand against the repugnant stuff.” His father locked him in single wooden cell behind the police station. An excellent preparation, Brown grins, for his imprisonment in environmental protests decades later.

As well, he grew up Presbyterian - going to church until he was 18. But one Thursday evening, when studying medicine at Sydney University, Brown attended a Presbyterian Fellowship Bible class in suburban Earlwood, and asked the woman leading the class if it was true that South Sea Islanders who had never heard of Jesus all went to hell. “Yes, that is so,” and she located the text.

Brown got quietly up and left the Church of the Loving God, never to return. “It was unconscionable,” he says. He perceives organised religion as “an abuse of power” and observes with concern its influence over Australian prime ministers like John Howard and Tony Abbott, and Tasmanian senator Eric Abetz. “Their first allegiance is to a group of men who wrote a book 2000 years ago full of dreadful things, and from which they blithely claim moral superiority while ignoring some of the things in that book.” This does not mean Brown isn’t a believer. “I think there is a life force in the universe because I’m talking to you. We’re having a philosophical discussion about what life means.”

He took this walk, he says, ‘to turn my anxious soul into an organised force’



Home in the hills: Bob Brown’s white cottage with a red ripple-iron roof in a meadow beneath the dolerite cliff of Drys Bluff

Brown had gone forth to do battle 'out there, where forests are smashed down'; to this cottage he returned in order to replenish himself

### Tasmanian tigers

He points out foxgloves beside the path, spread from the gardens of saw-millers' wives. Five sawmills operated in this valley in Victorian times, exporting blue-gum planks for the wharves of London. In their sailing ships, the millers brought out blackbirds, blackberries, trout and rabbits. Between the silver wattle, Brown spots another blow-in: "That is the biggest ragwort I've ever seen!" And stalks off through the bush to yank it out of the ground, a yellow plant his policeman's height. "It kills stock if they eat it - attacks the liver."

Abandoning God, Brown channelled his Presbyterian impulses into the natural world. After a stint as a GP in London - he was on duty at St Mary Abbots Hospital on 18 September 1970 when a dead Jimi Hendrix was wheeled into Casualty - he travelled to Tasmania in the quixotic hope of finding a thylacine.

In 1972, Brown accepted a six-month locum as a GP in Launceston. On the ferry, he looked out and saw the Western Tiers and headed straight for them. I understand his reaction to the crags and lakes and pencil-pine forests; mine was virtually the same. Next day, Brown sent a postcard to his parents in Coffs Harbour. "I am home," he wrote.

With two others, Brown started the Tasmanian Tiger Research Centre, and for eight months spent his weekends in "chook sheds" monitoring a network of wired boxes in north-east Tasmania. Each box was fitted with a live chicken and a camera bought from an RAAF disposal store, a little Kodak flash camera with a fishing-line trip. "We had stacks of pictures: devils, wombats, wallabies, everything you could think of - except the tiger." He also checked out 200 tiger sightings dating back to February 1936, when the last Tasmanian tiger in captivity perished of cold in Hobart zoo. "I accounted for all but four." Most were dogs.

Brown had hoped to emulate the medical doctor in New Zealand who in 1948 went walking in the Murchison Mountains and heard strange calls and rediscovered a family of takahe, a bird similar to a turkey. But with each weekend that

passed he grew more sceptical. He says: "I wanted to believe. There is nothing in life I wanted to be more wrong about than the thylacine."

One summer night, Brown was driving home when, two kilometres from his house in Launceston, he saw - five metres away - a large animal trotting along Vermont Street: kangaroo tail, buff-coloured, with four large stripes across its backside. "And guess what? It was a greyhound. A mutant greyhound. But it brought home to me that a thylacine was even less likely to find than a mutant greyhound."

Brown never encountered a Tasmanian tiger, but he found two things arguably more precious. First, the white cottage in the Liffey Valley, on sale for \$8,000. And next, on a two-week rafting trip down the Franklin River, Brown discovered his vocation. He saw platypus, marvellous gorges, astonishing side caverns, rapids thundering, Huon Pine trees - some thousands of years old - the occasional eagle floating overhead, "and nobody".

And then, as he came round the bend into the majestic River Gordon, there they were: jackhammers, helicopters, barges. In 1972, Tasmania's Hydro-Electric Commission had submerged Lake Pedder and its halo of pinkish sand. Now, four years on, the Commission was preparing covertly to flood the Franklin, one of the last wild rivers in the world, but regarded by Liberal premier Robin Gray as "a ditch, leech-ridden, unattractive to the majority of people". To Brown, the Franklin was an invigorating paradise, and he recognised, suddenly, why he had been placed on Earth: to protect it from the fate suffered by the thylacine.

### Saving the river

Brown translated his love affair with the Franklin into a campaign of public awareness that gathered up behind him the passions of other people wedded to the place. In December 1982, he wrote to his parents from Risdon prison in Hobart, after being jailed with 500 others for obstructing Hydro-Electric's bulldozers: "It must be very hard to understand me at times. But I believe in what I am doing and so do the others I mix with."

Brown's father was watching television when Bob's arrest was reported.

"That's it," he said, and stood up.

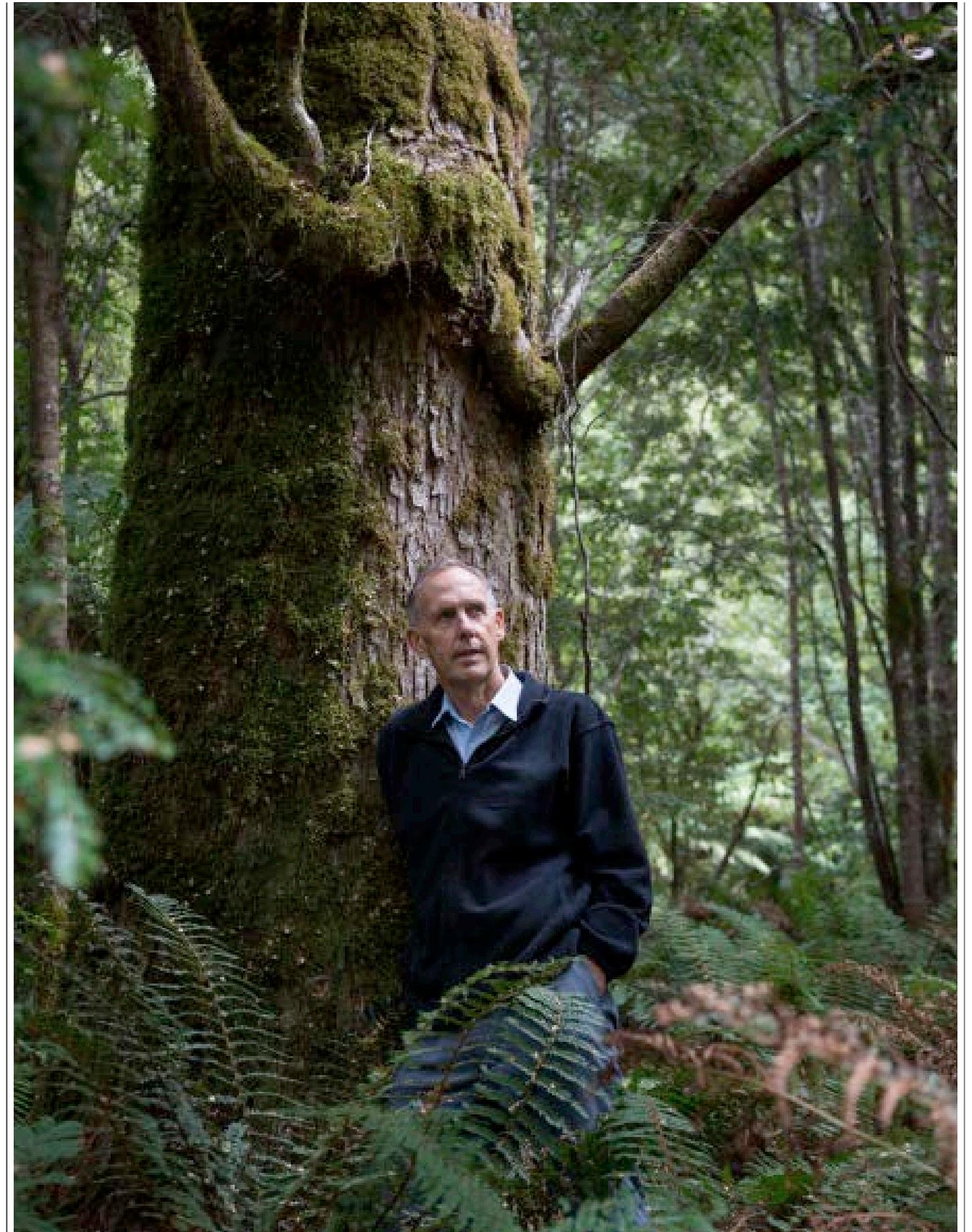
"Jack, where you going?" asked Brown's mother.

Brown says: "He went into the next room and took a pen and wrote to Prime Minister Fraser: 'I have voted Labour all my life, but never again. Anyone who puts a hand on a son of mine is finished'." Soon afterwards, it was decided not to dam the Franklin.

Bob Brown's success in saving the river led to many people hearing of Tasmania and made tangible the word "wilderness". Thirty years later, more than a fifth of the island is designated a World Heritage Area - including the blackwood forest we meander through.

"All this was pencilled for logging when I came here. Des, who helped me to pull down a wattle-tree, said, 'Bob, we're going to use

### Brown's Path



At one with nature: "Unless we celebrate the planet, we're not going to protect it," says Brown who wants citizens of all nations to unite to shield the Earth



**Adoring public:** “Thirty years ago, I’d be braced, ready for ‘You so and so’. I haven’t changed. The world has,” says Brown

explosives’. Hardly had Des left before I was on my bike into town. It was the first act of the Gray Government, to log Drys Bluff” - which became the first of 1.5 million hectares to be protected by Brown.

The valley in those days received less than 200 visitors a year. Today, the number is 30,000, and growing. We meet them on the path, hikers, day-trippers, young families. They greet Brown ecstatically. He stops to ask each one how they are.

“Good, good, real good. And you?”  
“Good.”

And he is. He’s grown more influential since renouncing power. “People ask, ‘Why didn’t you give those speeches in politics?’ and I say, ‘I did!’ But the eyes would roll and the abuse would start and the press gallery would be empty.” Neither the press nor the public have ignored the book he has written in retirement, called *Optimism*.

He reflects, after one woman stops on the path and asks him to pose with her for a photograph (“I snuggled up with hotties last night and read a few chapters of your book”): “Thirty years ago, I’d be braced, ready for ‘You so and so’. I haven’t changed. The world has.”

#### Rage against extinction

We rejoin the river. He leans over the bridge, to see if he can spot a platypus, as on his first night at Liffey. Then reminds me: “The River Liffey was also the Tellepanger river of the Blue River Tribes.”

Brown’s blunt message in *Optimism* is that we stand to emulate the extinction not only of the thylacine but of the Tasmanian Aborigines, unless we patrol our planet with more vigilance. And he tells me of a UN-backed report published a week before (“on page 11 of *The Australian...*”) predicting that even if all emissions of carbon dioxide were to cease right now, sea-levels will rise over the next 500 years



**Into the valley:** the sign by the footbridge that leads into Bob Brown’s home in north-west Tasmania

by between nine and 32 metres.

As for the finite resources left on land: “When I came onto the planet the population was 2.5 billion. Now it’s 7.4 billion, and we’re heading for 12 billion. That’s a 300% increase in consumption.”

Guided by his father’s common sense, Brown has perfected a strategy to rage against our extinction. “Global democracy” was launched at the first Global Greens Conference in Canberra in 2001, an appeal to citizens of all nations to join hands in protecting Earth from unregulated corporate and government interference. “Stephen Hawking says that Artificial Intelligence is the end of us. Yet who is talking about a global treaty to discuss AI?” Ditto the proliferation of satellites all at once orbiting the Earth - “as though someone turned on a torch. But who gave permission? Who will compensate us for the loss of the night sky?” He goes on: “Unless we celebrate the planet, we’re not going to protect it.”

This is Brown’s mission until he lies buried in Liffey, and he quotes the American poet Drew Dellinger:

*It’s 3.23 in the morning  
and I’m awake  
because my great great grandchildren  
won’t let me sleep  
my great great grandchildren  
ask me in dreams  
what did you do while the planet was plundered?  
what did you do when the earth was unravelling?*

It’s a poem to keep anyone awake, yet Brown expresses grounds for hope. In 1990, he was walking down the street in Launceston when a little old man tapped his shoulder. “You won’t remember me, but I was dead and you brought me back.” Twenty years earlier, Brown had received a call from the man’s wife to say she



**To the waterfall:** “I’m an optimist if I can get to understand how we can protect our grandchildren,” says Brown

thought he had died. Brown advised her to put his feet up, turn him on his side, and he’d be there in four minutes.

Because of Brown, the man survived. “And I do love being with my grandchildren,” he said.

I ask Brown: “What was your reply?”

“I gave him a bit of a hug.” Then, walking on: “I’m an optimist if I can get to understand how we can protect our grandchildren. To see them smiling in your imaginary eye is to make you happy.”

#### Dreaming of the girl next door

We reach the waterfall, and take a rest on a rock in the shallow pool below. It’s here, with the Liffey Falls cascading about us, that Bob Brown shares with me an unforgettable example of optimism. He learned of it immediately after he sealed the purchase of his cottage from a phone box, having spent two nights in this rainforest. Dropped off in the Ulverstone bus depot, Brown fell into conversation with a reticent, white-haired old man also waiting for a bus. “I told him my joyous story of buying Liffey, and he told me his story.”

The kindly old man with a cord around each trouser leg was called John. He was the grandson of a convict transported in chains to Hobart. John’s family lived on a remote block in the bush. His father was a tyrant.

John told how, aged 15, he had run barefoot to the river to meet a girl who lived nearby. Brown saw in his imagination the two bush waifs coming together, embracing, disrobing and taking the

sweetest plunge of their lives into the clear cool waters, perhaps the very waters which ripple around our feet.

But John’s father had followed him. He bludgeoned his son unconscious with a stick, and left him for dead on the bank, blood and serum trickling from his ear. His mother found him unconscious, and carried his fractured body home. When he regained his strength, John bolted into the forest, and mended under the trees and stars. He snared bandicoots to eat raw, or to roast after he had stolen matches from an outlying farmhouse. For the next few years, he avoided everyone, met no one, all the while dreaming of the girl next door.

Eventually, John found out where she lived - and saw her once, at a country fair, but she didn’t see him. He had never stopped loving her. He told Brown her name, and said she was a grandmother and how content he was that her life had turned out well. “He was happy because she was happy.”

Brown says: “The inspiring nature of that lonely man is a lesson for the rest of us, this unusual mammal herd of 7.4 billion that has decided to take over the planet. He taught me that it is possible, even in the darkest of lives, to seek out happiness with what you have.” **N**



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**‘When the river’s in flood, you hear the boulders rolling underneath, boom boom, and you can hear the ecological evolution of the planet taking place’**





His father locked him in single wooden cell behind the police station. An excellent preparation, Brown grins, for his imprisonment in environmental protests decades later.

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