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## Change

**L**ONG BEFORE I EVER MET HIM I KNEW HIS NAME FROM the leaky desiccated type of a slim grey-brown volume, cheaply printed but essential to my research: *The Great Ocean Road: Dune Stabilisation and Other Engineering Difficulties* by FB Herschell.

When inspecting the boxes of his papers that were deposited in the university library later on, I came to know that the grainy photo on the cover of the volume was in fact taken by him in the early days, in 1966. He took quite a few other photographs at the time as well, mostly of hummock and shoulder, camber and heath. He certainly chose the most charismatic one for the cover of his book. Even so, it was hard to make out exactly what the image on the cover was depicting. In the background there was the forest-clad cove of Lorne across Louttit Bay. In the foreground a car tyre skid in deep sand. It was clear that

at least one driver had had trouble getting through. With two men in overcoats standing not far from the skid it looked a little like a crime scene, which, in a subtle way, only made my urge to investigate the contents of the book even stronger.

So, the early world of the motor car, sand drift, the problems posed by dune shifts, roadmaking in the wind shadows. That gives you some idea of the spectrum. The poles of his range. Well, almost. This little book he wrote, the only one he ever published – and with no help from his boss Gibbon at the Country Roads Board, I might add – is so unassuming that you have to be seriously interested to notice what it actually contains.

What I was looking for when I first opened the book was narrative momentum. I had an idea that I wanted to write the largely untold history of the building of Victoria's Great Ocean Road in short historico-poetic vignettes, in the manner of the great Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano. I saw each hard-won detail of my research as the potential kernel for a historically accurate but dreamlike prose, an imaginative route back through time. And I soon had the sense that FB Herschell had been there before me.

Some of the other black-and-white photos the book contained were:

An old bridle track through a windy foredune.

The seaweed-dotted sand along the Eastern View beach.

Traxcavators on the cretaceous headland above the St George River.

The graphic vertical shadows of the slats of a ‘Gascony palisade’.

A group of headscarved women planting in sand.

FB Herschell himself in the field, on the heath, amongst the controversial marram grass, his jacket flapping in the seeding wind, in tweeds and tie, in tam-o’-shanter, in deep Victoria. In 1970.

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I was working at the bookshop in James Street, Geelong, when I met him. A long time after I’d finished my work on the history of the road. Like so much that went on in that bookshop, FB Herschell’s presence came as a stimulating intersection between what is written on paper and what is actually breathing and alive. Suddenly those fusty initials on that slim grey-brown volume had become a living man standing in front of me, chatting with my fellow staff members. And rather than that leaky desiccated type on a dun background, his eyes gleamed with the freshness of ongoing life, his mouth constantly finding shapes of dry appreciation, his pleasure evident at finding other people who dwelt deep in the nourishing but often overlooked vanishing points of beauty and knowledge.

To be honest, though, the most important thing for me was this: he had liked one of the books I had written and in his understated way wanted to make that clear to me.