

Torrey Canyon by Tom Ingate 2011

The first time I came across the Torrey Canyon oil spill was in a collection of photographs by Jane Bown. What was striking for me was that this was from a book published in 2007. How had I spent ten years surfing and swimming around the coast of Cornwall without hearing about the Torrey Canyon? This photo story is part of my journey of discovery. Following in the footsteps of this seemingly forgotten event I photographed locations around Cornwall affected by the oil spill. The whole series was shot between January and April 2011, I was at some of the locations exactly 44 years after the event, the quiet of those wintery beaches became quite eerie. Patches of dark seaweed, raised beach deposits, and clusters of mussel shells took on a new significance. Visually mimicking the oil and becoming shadows of memory and layers of story across the work

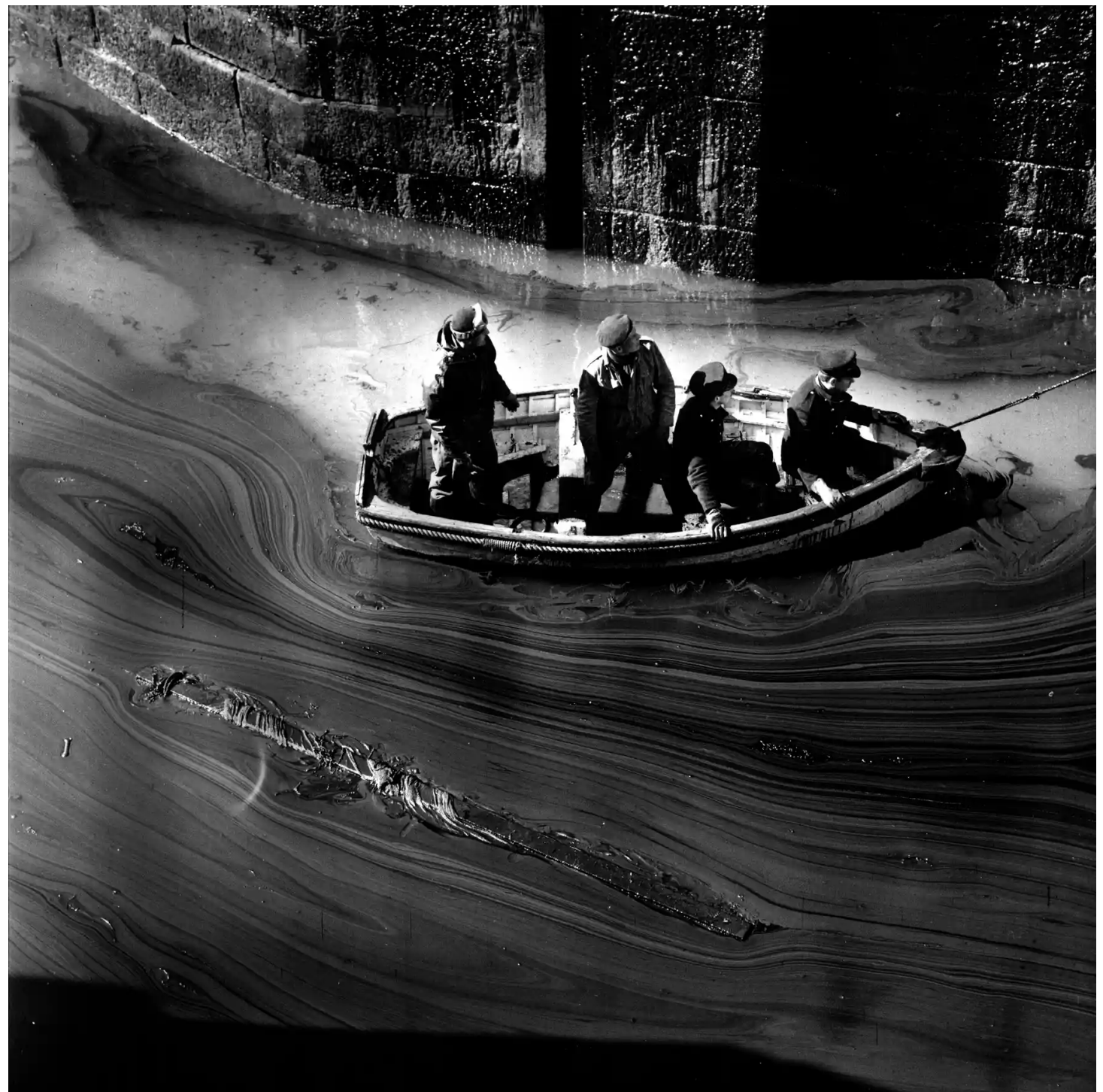


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To the Seven Stones Reef Approximately fifteen miles west-southwest from this point is the Seven Stones Reef. When the Royal Navy bombed the wreck to try and sink it and set fire to the oil you could see the smoke rising thousands of feet high. Everyone remembers is the smell of crude oil.

Godrevy raised beach Solidified oil can be seen on many beaches around Cornwall either mixed with sand as tar balls or layers of oil deep in the sand, along the hightide mark, or baked onto rocks in direct sunshine. The raised beach is a reminder of previous sea levels and where they may be in the future as global temperatures continue to change.

Penhale Corner Beyond the environmental destruction that filled newspapers and broadcasts the less reported destruction was to the local economy. Fear at the loss of fishing and the impact on tourism, and dismay at a government that was making the situation worse with a misjudged clean up.

Praa Sands Exposed peat beds after storm waves and yesterday's high tide. Local communities were not consulted on the best way to clean up the oil slick. The general feeling was that the central government had their ideas and wouldn't listen to locals when the plans simply didn't work.

Porthleven Harbour Fishermen off to work and diesel oil in the water. It was a photograph taken at this location by Jane Bown that introduced me to the Torrey Canyon disaster. Bown was covering the story for the Observer when she photographed a small fishing boat with four military personnel making their way through the oil.

To the channel The prevailing westerly [wind?] moved the slick out across the channel, where it and made landfall on the Channel Islands and Breton coastlines. There is still a quarry on Guernsey full of Torrey Canyon oil that is used for clean-up training.

Parc-an-als Cliff Fishermen were employed to help with the clean-up, the rates were good but didn't compensate for the long-term impact on fish stocks. There were reports of some people making a few quid from salvage and the reselling of empty oil drums.

Godrevy At the time the Torrey Canyon was the largest oil spill in the world. The shocking environmental impact and mistakes in the clean-up generated large scale voluntary action but also initiated the government's environment department, the formation of industry regulators, and motivated campaign groups.