

## Hill walking in distant lands

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When my husband retired, we decided to see something of the world before settling down to a more placid existence. Being still active enough to do some walking (though I expect I must be among the oldest Cairngorm Club members) we tried to see hills and country places as well as the conventional city sights normally visited by tourists.

In Australia, one of our first visits was to the Snowy Mountains. To most people the Snowy Mountains conjure up visions of a vast irrigation project, and that is what the majority are taken to see. It certainly is an enormous undertaking, providing water for irrigation and power for industry.

The greater part of the mainland of Australia lies in the dry belt which encircles the Southern Hemisphere and Australia is the world's driest continent. The average rainfall is 16.5 inches compared with 26 inches for all land surfaces of the world. The greater part of the mainland of Australia has an average rainfall of less than 10 inches and the total flow of *all* Australian rivers is only about half that of the Mississippi. So it is vital that full use should be made of Australia's meagre water resources and an important step towards this is the series of colossal dams which since 1949 have been made, and are still being made in the Snowy Mountains. The plains of the Murray and Murrumbidgee valleys lie on the fringe of the dry heart of the continent and separating them from the south-eastern coastal strip of Australia are the Snowy Mountains, which are the highest land mass in Australia and are snow covered for five or six months of the year.

We spent two nights at Cooma which is about 60 miles from Canberra, and on the intervening day we decided that instead of visiting dams and powerhouses we would climb as high as possible somewhere, and get a good view of the Snowy Range. Cooma used to be a small town and the quiet centre of rich grazing lands. Now as the headquarters of the Scheme it has grown, from 2,000 to 10,000 inhabitants.

It lies 2,662 feet above sea level, so it was quite cold there, and even colder at Thredbo to which we drove on our free day. We went up, first through agricultural country and then among foothills covered with gum trees. The road is called the Alpine Way and is very beautiful from the point of view both of scenery and of construction. It is still a little raw about the edges but somehow that does not seem to matter so much in this country where everything is new and spacious.

At Thredbo Alpine village which, it is said, brings a breath of Switzerland to the Australian bush, we left the car and went up on the Crackenback chairlift to above the snow level. Here we started walking up and up over the vast expanse of snow. We had not meant to go much further but just to reach a good viewpoint. It was such a lovely day, however, that we were tempted to go on and on. A few skiers were about, but we soon left them far behind. The snow was in good condition for walking though occasionally we went through the surface and sometimes we met a slippery patch. We climbed one ridge after another and eventually arrived at the top of Ramshead which is 7,189 feet high. We had a beautiful view of Mount Kosciusko, the highest point in Australia and about 100 feet higher than where we were. We might have been tempted to go on to it if we had been sure of the condition of the snow, and had had more time. As it was, we had been climbing steadily for two hours and had done almost all the things one should not do on a hill! We had told no one where we were going, we had not taken any food, and we had neither an ice axe or even a walking stick between us! Our only merit was that we had a compass with us and we were properly clothed. But it was many years since either of us had done any snow climbing and I certainly never expected to do it again. The view was quite breathtaking with sparkling white snow all round and not a soul in sight. The only sign of life I saw was a solitary spider sitting all alone on the waste of snow – and tracks of something like a rabbit. Our descent was uneventful, if occasionally slippery, but by digging one's heels in, it was quite easy, and we felt very pleased with our efforts.

From Canberra we flew to Brisbane to visit cousins, and while we were there, they took us to spend a week walking in the Lamington National Park. Australians we found do not as a rule walk anywhere, certainly not in towns, but they do walk in their national parks. Queensland has been very far seeing in preserving for all time great stretches of the Australian bush, and Brisbane is very fortunate in having several of these within easy reach.

Captain Cook made a voyage of discovery up this coast in 1770 and reported that inland it was high and hilly, and he was much impressed with one hill which he called Mount Warning, a majestic peak of rocky grandeur. It is 3,480 feet but there are many other hills which are even higher to the south, west, and north of Mount Warning. In April 1930, the National Parks Association of Queensland was formed and a National Park conscience was aroused in the mind of the man in the street. In 1936 the Government recognised the public demand, and decided to spend public money in providing graded walking tracks in

the parks. By 1945, more than £31,000 had been spent on over 100 miles of graded tracks in the Lamington National Park alone. The ultimate ideal is a Scenic Rim – a 90 mile crescent-shaped rim of mountains within a radius of 60 miles from Brisbane. This is still a vision of the future. But 48,000 acres are set aside at Lamington in the magnificent McPherson Range country. Of this, only about a quarter has been properly explored and the rest is still original bush. All animal, bird and plant life is strictly preserved in the area. The mammals are mostly nocturnal, such as possums, but occasionally a wallaby can be seen. Lizards are often seen and one of our party saw a black snake – which got out of his way with great rapidity. There are over sixty species of birds, including parrots, and bower birds, which make themselves a bower in the undergrowth and always have something blue in it, such as blue berries or flowers, or even the blue top of a pen. We also heard a whip bird which makes a noise like the crack of a whip, a bell bird like a tinkling bell, and a cat bird which mews exactly like a cat – a most eerie mournful sound.

In the park there are two main types of forest – Rain Forest and Eucalypt Forest. In the Rain Forest there is a dense canopy of interlacing branches through which only an occasional shaft of sunlight penetrates to give a splash of bright colour. There is a softly diffused light at noon, giving way to an early twilight gloom, and, at night, to absolute total blackness. Wind as well as sunlight is reduced, and the air is cool and moist. On a cold day, it may be warmer within the Rain Forest than in an exposed area. Grass rarely grows, and beneath the dense mass of undergrowth the forest floor is covered by a layer of fallen leaves and twigs. There are dozens of different species of trees, and I was very interested to see that there were varieties of kinds known to us, such as brown alder, antarctic beech, tulip oak, and brown pine: but the leaves were nothing like our oak or beech. In fact the leaves were all very similar, and the difference is in the wood. There are numbers of climbing plants which twine themselves round the trees, such as the lawyer vine which can attach itself with barbed prickles. They usually start at the top of a tree, from seed dropped by birds and throw down a lattice work of cordlike roots. When these roots cross, they fuse together. They increase in size and finally strangle and kill the parent tree. Because of the lack of light, no large branches are formed below the main canopy, but the trees often develop large buttresses at the base of the trunk.

Walking all day in the rain forests one could feel oppressed and shut in. But they are interspersed with patches of Eucalypt Forest,

which is largely made up of gum trees, tall straight trees which may reach 150 feet. They have the curious characteristic of keeping their leaves, but shedding their bark every year. As the undergrowth in the Eucalypt Forest is much less dense, much more light penetrates.

The National Parks have an excellent series of well made tracks, and this has opened them to walkers. The undergrowth is so thick that progress without a track is very slow indeed, and lets one see the conditions with which the early pioneers had to contend. If they cut a path through the jungle it was quite liable to be overgrown again before they returned. Also if one ventures off the path, one is liable to fall victim to a tick. These unpleasant insects fall off trees or branches, and bury themselves in one's flesh and suck. The correct treatment is to put a drop of methylated spirit on them and then remove them with a tweezer.

But worse than ticks are leeches which, fortunately, only come out in wet weather, and we had beautiful dry sunny weather during our visit. Leeches look like caterpillars an inch or so long, and they gallop up the victim's leg at great speed until they find a suitable spot to suck, when they swell to three times their normal size. However they can be dislodged by sprinkling salt on them.

Two points struck me specially about hill climbing in Australia. One is that there are not the beautiful ridge walks we have in Scotland or the Lake District, because the tree level is much higher and nearly all the high ground is covered with trees, so that very little view is obtained except at certain view points. Another is the shortness of the daylight. In June it is dark by 6 o'clock, and even in their summer I believe it is quite dark by 8, so that the days are comparatively short.

There are two places one can stay when walking in the Lamington Park. We were taken to Binna Burra Lodge on the edge of Mount Roberts. It was started in 1934 by a man called Arthur Groom who has written a most interesting book about the district. There is a memorial to him at the Park Entrance which says simply 'To the memory of Arthur Groom 1904-1953, a man who loved and understood the bush, and found his happiness in sharing it with others'. The lodge is now run by his three sons who manage to give it a very happy family atmosphere. It consists of log cabins each of which has a lovely view. The view from ours extended from the top of Mount Roberts, across the plain 2,000 feet below us to Mount Flinders and the Pacific Ocean 30 miles away, beyond Surfers Paradise. The lodge also has a large dining room, at one end of which there is a circle of comfortable chairs round an enormous log fire. We were very glad of that fire in the evenings for the nights at 2,000 feet up were very chilly in June. The

descriptive brochure states, after listing all the possible activities, that if you are over sixty you can still amble along beautifully graded paths. They are going to alter this to sixty-five after our activities there!

We spent six days at Binna Burra, partly with our cousins and partly by ourselves, though the latter is hardly correct, for by the end of our visit we felt everyone there was a friend. It is said that in the McPherson Range National Parks 'the myriad mysteries of a sub-tropical jungle have been exploited to create friendly liaison between man and man, and man and the wilderness', and this is very true. We set off after an early breakfast taking a packed lunch with us. We were soon initiated into Australian picnics. The chief feature of these is that a fire has to be lit, a billy boiled, and tea made in the billy - tea with a delightful smoky aroma. To settle the tea leaves you either swing the billy round your head or, if you are timid, tap it with a stick. With wood lying around everywhere, there is no difficulty in getting a fire going. Nearly everywhere in suitable picnic spots (and these are limited in number, in that land of thick undergrowth), a fireplace of stones has been constructed, and one is expected to leave a suitable pile of sticks alongside it for the next comer. It is also essential to see that your fire is properly extinguished before you leave, because of the danger of forest fires. We walked for miles in the forest every day, and visited waterfalls, gorges, caves, giant trees, and high mountain lookouts with superb views over the surrounding country. We were lucky enough on our last day to be able to take part in one of the Binna Burra organised expeditions which take place about once a month. We were a party of ten, three of whom had been over the route before, two of them many times. The first part of the expedition was simple, consisting of 6 miles along one of the beautifully constructed paths through the Rain Forest. The last part of the path ran along the top of a mountain ridge known as Ship's Stern which ends abruptly in a steep precipice. This is one of the mountain lookouts to which I have referred, and from it most people retrace their steps and go back the way they have come. Not so our party. One by one we plunged over the precipice. It looked a sheer descent, and there was quite a tricky bit of rock to begin with. However, by dint of advice from the more experienced, we all got down that successfully. Then came an easier bit to give us a respite, but this was followed by about 30 feet of precipice, and for this we were attached by a safety rope, and one by one we crawled and edged our way down while one of the experts held the rope at the top and the other shouted good advice to us from half way down.

There followed an easier section, such as we have often traversed

on Scottish mountains. Rock climbing I never had done, and never expected to do at my advanced age, but you never know what you can do till you try! Certainly I have never seen anything like the next part. The descent now came to a 30-foot sheer rock face and the method of descending that was to lean over an overhanging ledge, clutch the top of an adjacent gum tree, drape yourself round it, and slide down to the earth beneath! Actually once you were safely attached to the gum tree, it was quite easy, but the nasty part was reaching out into space to find it.

The rest of the descent to a saddle was easy, as was the gradual ascent to the next hill, known as Turtle Rock. Near the top of it, we stopped for a very belated and welcome lunch. The next exploit was to get us down the sheer face of Turtle Rock which was done by abseiling. Only two of the party had ever done this before, but after the initial plunge backward over the cliff, I found it quite fascinating. All the party reached the bottom in safety, except for two members who refused to try and had to be taken home by a long and circuitous route. The Groom family were very pleased with our exploits, for they said we were the oldest couple they had ever taken over the route.

From Australia we went to the South Island of New Zealand where we were very impressed by the beautiful Fjord country on the west coast. We found it very difficult to do much walking here however. All the planted forests were labelled 'keep out', and there were no old drove roads or rights-of-way with attractive paths through the hills.

We spent a few days at the Hermitage at the foot of Mount Cook, but here there had been a recent fall of heavy snow and walking among the tangled undergrowth was very difficult. Our one real walk was at Queenstown, once the centre of the gold mining area, and now a holiday resort. It is about 1,000 feet up and the snowline was at 2,400 feet. There are many familiar names around. We lunched at a restaurant above the snowline on Ben Lomond and, during our wanderings, we passed Ben Nevis! A short afternoon climb took us up Queenstown hill on a good path – at least it would have been a good path if the weight of snow had not broken branches of broom across the track. Even more difficult to negotiate was a species of prickly shrub which also lay across the path. By dint of scrambling over this we finally emerged over the tree line and the scrubby undergrowth to see a wonderful panorama of snowclad peaks surrounding the beautiful lake Wakatapu, on the shores of which Queenstown is built.

We had one other day's hill walking on the North Island on Mount Tongariro on the fringe of the thermal area, and near Mount

Ngauruae, an active volcano which belched forth smoke continuously. We had a most enjoyable two hour climb up a narrow mountain path through thick scrub to an area high on the hillside at about 4,500 feet. Here steam was rising in clouds from numerous hot springs and pools. It was awe-inspiring to see the water bubbling and gurgling, but not half as terrifying as the boiling mud pools we saw later at Rotorua.

From New Zealand we flew to Fiji and then to America, and here we visited the most beautiful place I have ever seen. This was Moraine Lake in the heart of the Rockies. We spent some days there and would gladly have stayed much longer in this calm and beautiful spot. It is a few miles from Lake Louise, one of the main tourist centres, but as there are only a few cabins at the Motel at Moraine Lake, so there are very few people about. There are one or two well constructed hill paths, one leading up the valley of the Ten Peaks below the lofty snow clad summits. Another track climbs for a thousand feet through the forest to the Valley of the Larches, green and pleasant, at the foot of the snowy crags and fissured glaciers.

I would have enjoyed walking in this mountain paradise very much more if I had not expected to meet a bear round every corner! We were told that they had never been known to attack anyone on the trails, but if you happen to get between them and their cubs, they can be dangerous. We saw several black bears on the road. They tend to frequent roads in the hope of being fed, though there are notices everywhere warning tourists not to feed them as it is bad for them not to eat their natural food, and also they can turn nasty if they do not get all they want! There had been two grizzly bears around the rubbish dump at Lake Louise all the season, and I would certainly have hated to meet one of them face to face!

We saw the Rockies in the best possible conditions in early September, with the snow-topped crags outlined against a cloudless blue sky and reflected in the emerald waters of the lakes, and the mountain streams cascading in foaming waterfalls. To me they were the most memorable scenes of the whole tour.

