

**SOUTH
WEST
JOURNEY**
Federation Peak 1955/56



Many visitors to Tasmania note a certain superficial resemblance in the scene to England and certainly some parts of the North and East have that gardenlike orderliness of a country that has seen many years of careful husbandry, yet this is only one of the many facets that make Tasmania an island of very rare beauty.

One of the most remarkable features of the Tasmanian scene is a comparatively small area known as the South West; an area bordered by the Hobart-Queenstown road in the North, a forbidding surf-pounded coast in the West and an arbitrary line drawn from the South West cape North. Most of this country is marked on maps as either unexplored, mountainous or uninhabitable. It is certainly the last two and to a certain extent, the former. It might be asked, "Why in this age of ever expanding industry and commerce, should this pocket of land remain inviolate? Are there no natural resources at all? Is there nothing man can turn to his own economic use?"

My own feelings are that it is just a matter of time, even now the tentative feelers of jeep tracks probe into the edges of vast primitive forests. Soon graded roads will follow them, but in the meanwhile the country is much the domain of the mountaineer and bushwalker or anybody who is prepared to face the rigours of its notoriously wet climate and carry a heavy pack through all kinds of unpleasant conditions.

In recent years light aircraft have made this area a little more accessible and certainly less hazardous, by dropping food at certain pre-arranged places and even landing parties on the beaches of places like Lake Pedder right in the heart of this country and at Cox's Bight on the West Coast.

Due to the work of Bushwalking Organisations, detailed maps of the area are gradually becoming available and most of the spots previously marked "unexplored" may now be removed from the map. The spirit that moved Hume and Mitchell still lives -but in an age that does not require new pastures, it goes unsung. Each year more people venture into this area. Its combination of precipitous mountains, glacial lakes and sub-tropical rain forests, are unsurpassed in grandeur elsewhere in Australia. That it is still country only for the experienced there is little doubt. Its complicated system of valleys, some choked with the densest vegetation. Its swift unpredictable rivers, its sharp spurs and ridges sometimes covered with lacerating scrub, make accurate route finding an essential of all who venture there.

The following is a diary of the climb of a particular peak deep within this territory. A peak that was climbed for the first time as late as 1948. As many as ten parties a year now climb it and its popularity is due not so much to its degree of difficulty, but it's inspiring, challenging shape. A tower of jagged rock called Federation Peak.

Friday 23rd December.

Arrived in Hobart at 6.30am on a bleak, rainy and grey morning as ever masqueraded under the name of summer. Caught a bus at noon for Geeveston and from there a taxi to the end of the timber road that penetrates some 15 miles into the bush. The driver of the taxi thought we were mad and didn't hesitate to say "There's some of the roughest country in the world out there, and you're going there for a holiday!"

Ivor, the bronzed surfer, my companion and brother, apologised for himself. He would much sooner spend the time on a surf beach, but hadn't the heart to let me go alone.

The driver left us at the end of the road. We watched as he turned his car around and his lights soon disappeared round the first bend. Then we were alone in that twilight that is neither night nor day. In this mysterious half-light the trees around us seemed enormous, higher even than their 200 feet. Being so precipitated onto the edge of the S.W. within so short a time of leaving Melbourne we had an overpowering sensation of its age and mystery. We were beginning to wonder what we were doing there away from the lights and the comforts of the city.

Saturday 24th December.

Camping tonight at Blakes, a bark lean-to, three hours walk up the Huon River from the road. There are 7 of us here, three different parties, and just enough room to sleep in comfort. We had great difficulty locating the track this morning as bulldozers had torn the place apart. After following two false leads we were eventually

put right by two members of the Hobart Walking Club, Jim and Denis, who are going in the same direction as we are.

The walk up the Huon would have been pleasant but for the fact that we were carrying 55 lbs which we were not used to.



Picton Bridge



Picton Hut

Sunday 25th December.

Waited till nine o'clock for Keith and his party whom we had passed on the track yesterday, and together with Jim and Denis we slogged up Blakes Opening, a button grass lead that gives access to the upper slopes of Mt. Picton. After the button grass comes dense scrub, but thanks to the pioneering work by the Hobart Walking Club, this had a track through it.

Finally, a blazed route led through open myrtle forest, and beyond to open going above Red Rag Scarp. We are all now camped in a coomb just below the massive dolerite peak of Mt. Picton. Its a wild desolate spot made no more homely by the grey unfriendly clouds that from time to time blot out Picton's summit. Most of the trees have long since died in the numerous fires that have swept across this highland. Somehow the Waratahs have survived and they at the moment are in the loveliness of full bloom, their deep red feelers lifted to the sky. Tonight is Christmas Eve and after our usual meal of dehydrated food, we had coffee with brandy in it.

Monday 26th December.

Away to an early start this morning. Left Keith and his party still making breakfast and then said farewell to Jim and Denis at the top of Blandfordia Ridge. They are out to do some exploration in the Western Arthurs.

The cloud was down over the South Picton Range and after wandering off the ridge once, we reached the Low Saddle. After which the ceiling lifted and we were able to see our route over the remaining section of the ridge. From the last bump on the ridge, Burgess Bluff, we could see our objective - Federation Peak. In the grey overcast light, it looked a long way off. Unlike the dolerite ridge we were on, the Arthurs, both the eastern and western, are quartzite, a rock that weathers into airy fantastic shapes. Our view confirmed this. The full length of the range is one jumbled mass of spires, towers and jagged ridges and at the southern end of this 50 mile range, rising high above the ridge in splendid isolation is the Peak itself.

Camped tonight near the south Craycroft River.



First view of Federation Peak



Keith Ball



Glenda Kellam

Tuesday 27th December.

Caught up with Joe, Don and Trevor, the other party with whom we had spent the night at Blakes. They are also going to the Peak, and together we spent the rest of the day battling through high button grass and fallen timber to a camp site at the foot of Moss Ridge. The, by now, not so bronzed surfer, has managed to persuade me to leave half of our food at this spot and return the way we have come. It seems as though he really intends to do some surfing this Christmas.



Map of the Federation Peak Area



John Stuart and Barry Revill

Wednesday 28th December.

It's raining, and has been ever since we reached the top of Moss Ridge. There was a moment when the clouds dispersed a little and we had a fleeting glimpse of Mt. Hopetoun. It was a sight of such wildness and savagery that even the mellow evening sun, that lit the crags with a weak, pale light, did nothing to soften the effect.



On Moss Ridge

It took nine hours to get to the plateau below the Peak, mainly because it has been not, and in places you have to haul yourself up steep slopes of mud by the roots and branches of trees. We have been blazing our route up, and Keith and his party should find it useful when they come along.



Climbing Moss Ridge

Seven members of Melbourne University Mountaineering Club party also arrived here tonight. They came via the Arthur Plains after being flown in by plane to Lake Pedder. The place is beginning to get crowded.



Moss Ridge



The two plateaus and the peak

Thursday 29th December.

It's been raining heavily most of the day. Joe had to start back this morning, and so he went without even climbing the peak.

The M.U.M.C. party of seven, made an attempt on the Peak this afternoon but could not locate Bechervaise Gully which is the normal way up, because of the cloud.

Don and Trevor climbed the Peak by traversing a needle on the south-west side and getting into the main gully that leads to the top. By seven o'clock the weather seemed to be changing for the better and Ivor and I dashed up the terrace, located Bechervaise Gully, and began to climb it. When we got to the narrow chimney part of the climb, we discovered it to be a waterfall. Ivor was leading and seemed to be having a certain amount of difficulty. As it was getting dark and we were both getting wet, we climbed down and went back to the camp.

Friday 30th December.

We were on top of the Peak at seven o'clock this morning. The climb, as described in the notes that we had, was of a standard referred to as 'very difficult'.

Nevertheless there was no sensation of exposure and apart from the fact that it was in a gully, and subject to stone falls, the climb was quite safe. However, neither of us liked it as a climb. It is of no great length (180 feet) and does not lead directly to the top, but to another open gully, up which you can walk another 200 or 300 feet to the summit.

It was a strange morning without any wind whatsoever. About 1000 feet above us the sky hung, overcast, grey, but not menacing. The landscape was lit with an even, sharp light and we could see all of the Arthur Ranges and mountains far beyond, including the Anne group. South and west we could see the coast and beyond it the open sea. Near the New River Lagoon, we could see the white lines of breakers forming on the beach and white lines round the rocky coast. We sat entranced, looking at this scene, so incomparably grander and wilder than any mountain scenery we had yet seen in Australia.



Westward view from the summit to the coast.



Bechervaise Plateau seen from near the summit.

We must have stayed on the summit for two hours and probably would have stayed there longer had we not seen the sky in the north turning black. We knew the sign all too well and wasted no time getting down. We met the M.U.M.C. party coming up Bechervaise Gully just as the first squall hit us and it has rained pretty continuously ever since.

At these times there's always a little doubt as to whether the chosen camp site is a good one, and we keep looking under the ground sheet at the platform of scrub we have built, to see how much water is below us. Our site is good but Barry and John have a river running through the centre of their tent.

We've been singing most of the night, each 'pair shut off in their tent feeling very close knit, with all this elemental world outside. This place is so forsaken by all living things, that on these two small plateaus of open ground below the Peak, surrounded as they are by baureu, scorparia and other dense scrub, we have seen no mammals, nor even any of their droppings.

Saturday 31st December.

We got up at 5 o'clock in order to go back down Moss Ridge, but as the weather looked as though it might be good, we started at 7 o'clock for Hanging Lake instead. The route led down the Great Stone Chute, a tumbled mass of great boulders that provided a comparatively easy route through the dense scrub down to one of the Northern Lakes.

Round this lake of isolated loveliness, the Moss Jungle was the finest we had ever seen. Everything was completely covered with brilliant green moss which was saturated with water, every movement bringing a deluge down upon us. Apart from fallen timber which sometimes made platforms up to thirty feet high, the floor of the forest was reasonably open and though travel was slow, it was not difficult since we had no packs.

Our trip to Hanging Lake was not entirely sightseeing. Don and Trevor had gone there the previous day to pick up their airdrop and had hinted that if we came along, they might stack us on a feed. Hanging Lake, as the name implies, hangs. It is suspended some 3000 feet above sea level in a glacial cavity, a black mysterious pool. Don and Trevor were camped in the scrub just below it and after we had made a circuit of the lake and climbed Geeves Bluff, we shared some of the luxuries of the airdrop, for lunch.



Hanging Lake



Hanging Lake

On our way back, we searched for Ivor's trousers which he had somehow managed to lose. We had worn shorts in the Moss Jungle because it was so wet, and tied our trousers round our waists. His must have come undone while we were struggling through scrub or over fallen timber. We tried to follow our route back but there was such a sameness about the Moss Jungle, that search as we might we could not find them. Loss of a pair of trousers in normal circumstances means little that is if you don't lose them in Collins Street, but in S.W. Tasmania where weather, scrub and snakes are usual hazards, it can mean at least great discomfort and at the worst, injury or even death.

Back at camp, although it had rained intermittently and was still raining, we made a big fire with pandani, scoparia and the remains of a King Billy Pine and partly dried our saturated clothing before heavy rain drove us into the tent. Every time it rains heavily and we have to lie sheltering in the tent, the surfing gent gets all nostalgic about surf beaches. Tomorrow we will go to one, I've told him. "I've had this weather" he says, "D'you know, it's rained every day on this trip."

It's New Year's Eve tonight. People we know in Melbourne will be having all kinds of gay parties, but I for one am glad to be here. The rain is beating against the tent and I am writing this lying on my stomach, by the light of a candle, afraid to touch the walls of the tent lest water should leak in. Today had been so well worth while.

Ivor's so very keen to get back, yet even he would not have missed that fantastic jungle - an untrod, untouched, timeless world with only the dripping water from the moss and the occasional crash of a tree to mark the passage of time. From Geeves Bluff, the views were even better than from the Peak and were made even more dramatic by the constant squalls drifting across, picking out the shapes of ridges with veils of rain!

Sunday 1st January.

It has been pouring down all night and is still raining this morning. I got out of the tent at 7 o'clock this morning, after a cold breakfast of dried fruit, cheese and salami, but it was so cold and wet that I crawled back into my sleeping bag to thaw out a bit.



Luckmans Lead and in the far distance the Western Arthurs

As it had not improved by 9 o'clock, we started off down Moss Ridge. Keith and his party, the only ones now left on the campsite, are going back via Luckman's Lead, and were still in their sleeping bags when we left.

We reached Moss Camp at 10.30, and the cave made a welcome shelter. We made a fire, thawed out, and had a hot meal, then moved on down Moss Ridge, following the blazes we had made coming up. These were so useful that our time going down was only three and a half hours, compared with the nine hours it had taken us to climb up. The weather, of course, contributed somewhat to this, it was so cold and wet that we did not stop once.



Cave on Moss Ridge on the way out – Ivor having a brew.

We are now camped in the open button grass plains of the West Craycroft Valley, having cooked tea during the intervals between showers.

Monday 2nd January.

It was raining heavily this morning, so we did not get away until noon, by which time there was a

considerable improvement in the weather. The West Craycroft River was our first obstacle. It was in full spate from the heavy rains of the past three days. It was a frightening sight - cold inky brown water, thrashing furiously over boulders and other hidden obstacles.

We chose a spot where the river was comparatively straight and the water turbulent, due to the presence of even-sized boulders not too far below the surface. The water came over our thighs and the drag was so powerful that we could only move singly in safety, by each supporting the other while we moved. In this manner we reached the other bank.

We crossed the South Craycroft River on a fallen tree but this one had nothing like the volume of water of the Western branch.

The top of the South Picton Range was mantled with cloud and as the easiest route lay on the top of the range, we had to climb into it. In the valley, although the weather had not been warm, it had been tolerably pleasant. Up on top at 3000 feet, it was quite a different story. An icy blast from the south-west howled across the bare ridge, and visibility was down to 200 yards.

We managed to navigate the two bumps known respectively as Anderson and Chapman, then as the time was approaching 5 o'clock and it had begun to rain, we started to look for a campsite. We found a sheltered spot in the lee of some large boulders.

After an hours work with the slasher and some minor excavations, we made a suitable site for the tent, pitched it and immediately got into our sleeping bags. Here we lie now. We've thought about making a fire, but the quality of the wood here would make it very difficult.

Bush fires have constantly raged across this ridge so that there is not a living tree in sight. The gaunt, wet, soggy specimens outside are the remains of a small forest of King Billy pines that once graced this saddle. Other than this, there is only low saturated scrub and even assuming that we could get a fire going in this rain and wind, cooking would be a most unpleasant task. So we are eating cheese, salami, scroggin (mixed dried fruit and nuts) and dried apples, all washed down with water of which there is a super-abundance.

Tuesday 3rd January.

I think it was Tilman of Nanda Devi fame who once said that the greatest affliction suffered by the mountaineer was bed sores. How right he was. There is something about mountains, orographic, geographic and meteorological, that gives them peculiar weather. For those moments of supreme joy when we see jagged ridges and buttresses through windows of torn cloud fragments and valleys dappled with shadow and light, we must pay a price. The price seems to be bed sores.

We're lying here now, the rain beats sometimes frantically, sometimes insidiously on the thin fabric of our tent. Outside you can see fifty yards sometimes less. The tent which has now been wet continuously for eight days, is beginning to leak a little, but reviewing the situation, we find that things could be a lot worse.

Our sleeping bags are only wet at the bottom. Most of our clothes are wet, but the damp woollen shirts that we slept in last night are once again dry as are our string singlets. This combination of clothes, together with a plasticised cotton hooded jacket, has proved very satisfactory. We are reasonably comfortable and have food for at least another seven days.



Ivor in the canvas tent

10.30. a.m.

We've just had breakfast. Last night we left some apricots soaking and we warmed them over a couple of candles. We also fried some bacon in this manner and it was highly successful. The surfing gent, who was complaining unendingly about the weather, is now trying to roll himself a cigarette in newsprint, having used his last paper yesterday. "Next trip" he says, "I'm going to bring a pipe." Next trip!! Already we're discussing the next trip!

9.00 p.m.

By 1 p.m. we could stand it no longer, the inactivity was killing us. It would be better to go out there and wander around in the mist and rain. On a constant compass bearing we must make some progress. We were in Pineapple Grass Flat. North of us lay the Red Herring, the last hump on the ridge, and then, and this was the hard part, the Low Saddle. If we didn't hit the centre of the Saddle, we might wander down miles off our track, without knowing which side of the Ridge we were on.

The Red Herring was not easy to negotiate, and for safety, we went right over the top of its very broken crest. We began to descend to the Low Saddle, and at this stage a division of opinion took place. "We should be more over to the right", said the surfing gent. "I thought more over to the left." "I have a feeling for topography", he said "I can sort of feel where the lowest part of the Saddle is"

In mist, on a slope with obstacles to negotiate, it is very difficult to decide which is the centre of a broad ridge. We settled on a compass course and fifteen minutes later dropped out of the cloud into the Low Saddle. The rest of the route was clear and after a brief rest, we walked till 6 o'clock, to ,,"here we are now camped. Needless to say, tea was cooked once again in intermittent showers, but at least we had a decent bit of wood to burn.

Wednesday 4th January.

We are camping tonight just off the timber road, after a long day during which we came down of the Picton Range and walked through the forest by the Huon River and so back to where we started from. The forest, which on our first night seemed so frightening, now seems gentle and comforting after the days spent among rock precipices and eerie jungles, and the slender thread of road that winds its way so arduously through this forest, is our guarantee of fresh food and the comforts of civilised living.

Reading through this diary, I find it hard to grasp how primitive our life has been over the past two weeks, how close to the earth and reality we have been. For out there is the real world, this an unconscious world of

our own desires, built to keep out those elements of uncertainty that we had been experiencing. Many times people ask us “Why do you go, why endanger your life when you can live so comfortably in the city?” How can you explain? It’s not just the scenery, nor the exercise though both are present. It’s like a revelation, a vision, a perspective of the value and meaning of life

Alf and Ivor at the end of the walk

