

Mount Hay and the Butterbox

Friday 17th November 2006

The air was filled with acrid smoke and the repetitious thumping of helicopter engines reverberated through the valley. The party cautiously skirted around the main battlefield area and avoided the guard stationed at a roadblock. As they negotiated the narrow pass on the western flank ominous plumes of smoke could be seen billowing above the escarpment. Occasionally aircraft were sighted making bombing runs into the area of conflict. As the party began heading east two choppers loomed out of the haze and dropped down to take on more ammunition before returning to the heat of battle. Eventually the small contingent from Mt Wilson succeeded in negotiating the perimeter of the bushfires and control burning operations and advanced to the meeting place at Leura for the Mt Hay walk.

A vehicle rationalisation resulted in each of the fifteen walkers being allocated a seat and our small convoy headed off along Mt Hay Road. This road twists and turns along the Mount Hay Range past entry points to some previous walks eliciting many pleasant memories. The Fortress Ridge track which leads you to stunning views of Govett Gorge and Carne Walls was the first. Then just past the appropriately named Flat Top is the entry to the Lockley Pylon track which delivers you to the panoramic views to be had from the peak of this conical landform. Continuing on we complete our fifteen kilometre journey along the range and arrive at the car park for Mt Hay. The views on offer from this point make the trip worthwhile without actually walking anywhere.

The very gentle breeze present was, conveniently for us, pushing the smoke of the Grose Valley fire away from the area we were to walk in today. I am sure those fighting the fires would have been overjoyed to know that.

We set off across the saddle which forms the watershed for the Rocky Points and Mount Hay Creeks. Interesting to note that rain (you do remember rain?) which falls to the left of this track drains into Rocky Points Creek and drops into the Grose River within a couple of kilometres. The rain however which falls only a metre away on the right hand side of the track travels a long tortuous path along the Mt Hay Creek and Wentworth Creek before reaching the Grose River more than twenty kilometres downstream.

There is a gentle climb up to a small plateau of heath where we paused for morning tea. Along the path to this point and indeed surrounding us as we sat in this magnificent landscape was a profusion of wildflowers. Mountain Devils (*Lambertia formosa*) provided a touch of red with their jutting tubular flowers while soft clustered balls of pink were displayed by the Pink Kunzea (*Kunzea capitata*). Closer to the rocky ground and sitting atop stubby stems the showy purple blooms of the Native Iris or Dwarf Purple-flag (*Patersonia sericea* var *longifolia*) provided a strong contrast for the brilliant yellow blossom of the Ivy Goodenia (*Goodenia hederacea*). Flannel Flowers (*Actinotus helianthi*) were on show with their velvety bracts and not to be outshone by its larger cousin the tiny star-like flowers of the Lesser Flannel Flower (*Actinotus minor*) appeared

in numbers sheltering in the lee of boulders. Black-eyed Susan (*Tetradlea ericifolia*) added further splashes of pink to the scene.

Continuing up the flank of Mt Hay we pass examples of the dwarf She-oak (*Allocasuarina nana*) displaying their feathery red flowers clustered along the stems and Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*) become more prominent. We clamber up a rock embankment and arrive at a level rock shelf on the shoulder of the mountain.

From this vantage point the vista laid out before us contains many items of interest not the least being a railway tunnel! There to the left hand side of the Butterbox formation is the form of a classically arched portal. When we later walked to the spot where this tunnel entrance appeared to be located it had disappeared; there was no evidence of anything remotely resembling a tunnel. Perhaps Geoff this tunnel catered exclusively for ghost trains and possibly led to a Harry Potter-like platform number nine and three quarters.

We left our packs on this sandstone shelf and headed for the summit of Mt Hay. Very soon we were clambering over basalt boulders and the nature of the vegetation changed quite dramatically. Here in this more sheltered environment there were examples of the Native Mulberry (*Hedycarya angustifolia*) and the Blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*). The ground cover here included the yellow flowered *Senecio linearifolius*, a native plant taller than the fireweed, its South African cousin. Also here were the exquisite flowers of the Tufted Bluebell (*Wahlenbergia communis*) and tucked in against the rocks were some Native Geraniums (*Geranium solanderi*).

Soon after passing some large moss covered boulders we reached the stone cairn which marks the summit of Mount Hay. The novelty of breathing fresh crisp air must have been having an intoxicating effect on one of our city dwelling walkers for Victoria seemed to be on such a high she didn't really need a mountain.

We spent some time in the shade at the summit, some exploring the immediate vicinity while others simply gathered around the cairn and continued the tradition of adding a small stone to the structure. Victoria's friend Merle however decided a small stone was not really her style and struggled up the side of the cairn with a boulder which she ceremoniously dumped onto the pile.

Returning to the point where we had left our packs we decided it was time for some sustenance and a more pleasant place to dine would be hard to imagine. Lunch of course was finished off as is normal with a slice of Libby's delicious bushwalking cake. Despite Libby having been out fighting the bushfires until midnight she arose early enough this morning to bake the cake as usual, organise the travel arrangements for the Mt Wilson contingent and drive her vehicle to Leura; what a woman!

Heading back along the path toward our starting point we passed a group of Tea Trees (*Leptospermum* sp) their delicate white petalled flowers prominent in the bright sunshine. The pink spidery flowers of the Pink Spider Flower (*Grevillea sericea*) complemented the

profusion of pink buds of Pale-pink Boronia (*Boronia floribunda*). The white flower heads of a few Slender Rice Flowers (*Pimelea linifolia*) completed the display.

Back near the saddle we turn right and make our way toward the Butterbox. On the approach to this formation the stone shelves contain the most fantastic convoluted patterns of ironstone. We pass a small cave near where the entrance to the mysterious tunnel appeared to be located and climbed to the level platform atop the Butterbox. The views from this vantage point are amazing.

Off to the right is the spectacle of Explorers Wall towering above the Grose River and stretching downstream from Edgeworth David Head. This is topped by the Explorers Range carrying Mounts Caley, Strzelecki, Dixon and Barranbali. To the left are Wallford Wall, Lockley Pylon and Du Faur Head from which the Du Faur Buttress drops down to the Blue Gum Forest.

The view across the Blue Gum Forest into the Upper Grose Gorge is always spectacular; today it is truly awesome in the worst sense of that word. From this position we have a box seat view of the fire in the Grose Gorge. In the relatively calm conditions prevailing the plumes of white smoke are rising vertically from the talis slopes and wisping around the cliff faces. If for a moment you could erase from your mind the potential danger of the fires the scene does possess a dreamlike beauty. One is reminded of Chinese paintings of mist shrouded mountains. Amidst this display of nature's dreadful power and the grandeur of the rugged landscape once again there is an example of the tiny cameos of beauty which nature provides. There at our feet on this almost barren platform of rock is a cluster of dainty Slender Violets (*Hybanthus monopetalus*) their minute mauve flowers moving in the gentle breeze.

In a situation as surreal as this it was no surprise at all that entering from stage left, Elvis made an appearance. Of course it was one of the giant helicopters water bombing the advancing fire front. We watched these activities for some time, each of us I'm sure silently wishing both the airborne and ground based fire fighters every success and above all a safe return.

Presently we turned to head back to the car park. Along the track we sighted examples of Rush Lily or Vanilla Plant (*Sowerbaea juncea*) with their dense clusters of lilac flowers and a couple of specimens of the Common Fringe-lily (*Thysanotus tuberosus*) their delicately fringed pink flowers anything but common. Scattered among the low heath vegetation were the delightful clear white tiny flowers of the Mitre Weed (*Mitrasacme polymorpha*) their four petalled flowers less than ten millimetres across.

We drove back to the Lockley Pylon trackhead in order to partake of the traditional after walk cuppa in the shade of the woodlands. On our return drive to Leura we passed a large roadside drift of Flannel Flowers, perhaps not quite as stunning a display as on the last occasion we saw them yet spectacular nonetheless.

Once again we had experienced a magnificent walk in glorious conditions. The exposed heath lands on the edges of these spectacular gorges are very special places. Our pleasure today of course was tempered by the ever present reminder of the fire slowly advancing along the Grose Gorge.

Postscript: What a difference five days makes! The area we enjoyed in those ideal conditions with its kaleidoscope of colourful wildflowers is now blackened by fire. On the Wednesday evening following our walk Helen and I stood at Wynnes Rocks Lookout at Mt Wilson and through the smoke of the massive fire burning between Mt Banks and Mt Tomah watched as an arc of fire travelled across Mt Hay.

The bushland will of course regenerate. Libby's daughter Beth told us she was out with a fire crew in an area burnt only one day earlier and she came across an isopogon whose multitude of cones had split open due to the heat. Against a background of destruction it gave the appearance of a beautifully crafted flower arrangement; the expelled seeds scattered in the ash below ready to begin their contribution to the rebirth of the bush.

Virtually the whole of the Upper Grose Gorge, Govett Gorge and the plateaux and ranges bordering them have been devastated by this inferno.

At the time of writing no homes had been lost and more importantly no fire fighters injured. We can only hope this continues to be the case and give our heartfelt thanks to all those working tirelessly to contain this conflagration.