

The Ruined Castle in the Jamison Valley - Katoomba

Friday 17th March 2006

The whinny of a horse pierces the crisp morning air as the clump of hooves develops a rhythm with the rumble of wheels on rails. The scrape of shovels and the clatter of coal sliding into steel skips add to the symphony. Twists of smoke curl lazily from the rough stone chimneys of the miners' cottages. A steam whistle is heard across the valley, its shrill note reverberates off the surrounding cliffs while the hypnotic thumping of a steam driven engine carries across the vast chasm. Miners labour beneath low ceilings to win coal from the thin seam lying deep below the Ruined Castle while pairs of horses drag loaded skips along the tramway. This is the scene we may have encountered had we ventured into this locality one hundred and fifteen years ago.

Back in the present we assembled on this gilded morning at the top of the Golden Stairs keen to commence this walk. The eight walkers had met earlier at the Scenic World carpark and one of Libby's patented car shuffle arrangements delivered us to the Narrow Neck Plateau while sufficient vehicles remained at the carpark to get us back to this point at the end of the day.

This truly was a magical morning; blue sky with not a cloud in sight, no wind and a pleasant temperature. The sandstone cliffs visible from this point were aglow with the light from the morning sun.

Intoxicated by this glorious atmosphere we set off down the Golden Stairs. The raucous screeching of a Black Cockatoo heralded our arrival and as we began to descend a more alien sound filtered into my consciousness. Was that the rattle of a tambourine? Surely the intoxication was not that severe. No, it was another ghost from the past. Members of the Salvation Army who conducted services in the valley and sung the hymn 'Walking up the Golden Stairs' named these stairs. The miners used this path as access to and from the valley. It is said they also sang this hymn as they climbed up and down these stairs and the name stuck.

We paused at a lookout which offered views into the valley and across to the Giant Landslide, the Three Sisters and beyond. The characteristic blue haze of these mountains was very evident this morning and softened the distant views. The musical tinkle of Bellbirds floated up from the valley floor, a pre-cursor to a much closer encounter we were to enjoy with these birds today.

Soon the track led us out of the open area where we had views of the cliffs towering above us into the wooded area of the talis slope and presently we were at the junction with the Federal Pass Track. Here we met a group of track maintenance workers which included three international bushcare volunteers, two from England and one from Japan. We paused awhile chatting to this group then took the track to the right and headed toward the Ruined Castle.

It is this section of track which has been receiving the attention of the maintenance workers and the usual scents of the bush are today enhanced by the primal aroma of freshly turned earth. Beside the track is a large boulder completely draped in Rock Felt-fern (*Pyrrosia rupestris*), the small fleshy fronds of this plant present a fascinating sight with the mixture of spoon shaped sterile fronds and the much longer narrow fertile fronds.

The track we are following now was cut in 1890 to accommodate the horse tramway and narrow cuttings, embankments and loose packed stone creek crossings are still evident. The track was constructed to follow the contour of the talis slope and thus provides easy walking. Here we are in a tall open forest of Blue Mountains Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*), Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*) and Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*). The whip crack call of the male Whipbird elicits an immediate response from the female, as indeed should be the case! (I'll probably feel a lash of a different kind over that.)

Soon the canopy becomes more enclosed. We are now surrounded by Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*) and Lilly Pilly (*Acmena smithii*). The understorey is populated by magnificent examples of the Rough Tree Fern (*Cyathea australis*), the ground is bare save for a smattering of ferns and huge vines meander languidly across the forest floor forming loops and coils as they ascend into the tree tops. We now enter a magical location; a grove of Coachwoods (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*), their towering trunks mottled white with lichens. The rays of sunshine which have managed to squeeze through the canopy highlight these blotches of lichen creating a stunning effect in this dark little pocket of rainforest. What better place to linger and partake of morning tea while being entertained by a Lyrebird practicing its repertoire.

As we proceed toward the Ruined Castle we pass remnants of the miners cottages and site office which once stood in this area. Bushfires over the years have ensured only the stonework remains. Another consequence of bushfires was the igniting of the shale trimmings which had accumulated outside the adits. Apparently these remained alight for many years under a cold surface presenting a rather dangerous trap for bushwalkers.

Upon reaching the margin of the rainforest we were treated to something quite special. A large colony of Bell Miners were putting on a performance in the trees and shrubbery adjacent to the track. Their musical bell-like tinkling was incessant as they darted from branch to branch completely unperturbed by our proximity. They must be a very friendly lot for they tended to congregate in groups of five or six whenever they landed on a branch, clustering very closely, often weighing down their chosen twig then flitting off in a group to another communal perch. We stood here for some time transfixed by the frenetic activity.

In this area of transition from rainforest to more open woodland there are Broad-leaved Peppermint (*Eucalyptus dives*), Grey Gums (*Eucalyptus punctata*), Rough-barked Apple (*Angophora floribunda*) and the occasional Cedar Wattle (*Acacia elata*). At a lower level is the ubiquitous Black Wattle (*Callicoma serratifolia*) and at ground level were two of the very few flowers we were to see today; the Tufted Bluebell (*Wahlenbergia*

communis) with its white centred five-petalled blue flowers and the Cut-leaf Daisy (*Brachycome multifida*) carrying just a few tiny yellow centred multi-petalled pink flowers. The only other bright colour we saw today was provided by a few Mountain Devils (*Lambertia formosa*) back at the top of the Golden Stairs.

Now we were at the turn off where the track begins to climb steeply to the ridge on which the Ruined Castle nestles. Along this ridge are some impressive examples of gnarled and twisted Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) and a few stunted Forest Oaks (*Allocasuarina torulosa*) with imposing deeply fluted corky bark on their lower trunks. In a more sheltered area there is a small grove of Christmas Bush (*Ceratopetalum gummiferum*) which adds a touch of softness. Black Ash (*Eucalyptus sieberi*) and Red Bloodwood (*Eucalyptus gummifera*) are also present here.

The majestic ramparts of the Ruined Castle now loom before us. We skirt around the edge of this formation and climb to a sheltered nook between the steep walls. It is decided this will be our lunch spot and while some settle down to feed the Currawongs and themselves others decide to explore. Squeezing through a small space below a large rock (actually the space couldn't have been too small for yours truly was one of those who got through) we emerged into a courtyard surrounded by tall battlements. The views from here were stunning. The undulating canopy of the forest on the valley floor is framed by the almost continuous sandstone cliffs from Narrow Neck in the north right around to the Kedumba Walls below Kings Tableland in the east. The cables which carry the Scenic Flyway appear as silver threads stretching into the valley. The sun glints off the various waterfalls around the rim of this spectacular amphitheatre bringing them into stark relief against the cliff line.

We take our leave from this wasted citadel and begin the descent from the ridge. Towering two hundred metres above us is Castle Head, a vantage point we visited in September 2002. My memory of looking down on this area from that eyrie is that the Ruined Castle, so overpowering and dominating when you are beside it, looks rather insignificant. I guess that just puts into scale the vastness of the landscape when viewed from the edge of the escarpment.

Retracing our morning walk along the horse tramway we continue on past the junction of the Golden Stairs track and head toward the Giant Landslide. The rainforest along this stretch of track is striking. There is very little understorey and this allows a clear view through the soaring tree trunks. They grow straight and true, devoid of low branches and their sparse canopies enable glimpses to be gained of the cliffs high above. Closer to ground level the trunks buttress and flare to surface roots which spread out into the gloom. A root of one of these forest giants has crept across a large boulder, threaded itself down through the stump of a long dead tree fern, which now sits suspended between the root and rock, and disappears into the soil. Another little quirk of nature.

Presently we are at the Giant Landside. Here the tranquillity is momentarily shattered when we meet a group of teenagers heading for the Ruined Castle to camp for the night

as part of a Duke of Edinburgh Award activity. It was however nice to hear excited chatter rather than the oft heard drone of “boring”.

We carefully picked our way across the rubble of the landslide as the track here is in very poor condition. It is interesting to note the fresh appearance of the sandstone face exposed by this collapse, which occurred in 1931. If this cliff looks so fresh after the passage of seventy five years it puts into context how long ago it must have been that the surrounding well weathered cliff faces were first exposed by rock falls. From this vantage point there is a clear view back to the Ruined Castle and Narrow Neck, amazing how far we have travelled today.

Soon we were at the Scenic Railway which we rode to the top of the escarpment and then drove back to our starting point at the Golden Stairs. It is said so often but that was another fabulous walk on a really glorious day.

A short but important postscript. We were discussing a few walks ago an incident of an injured walker having to be rescued from the Upper Grose Valley. Barry Freeman was involved in this operation and mentioned how it had been complicated by the fact that the exact location of the victim was not known. If the party had been carrying a distress signalling device the task would have been much easier. Geoff Kelly arrived at this walk with such an EPIRB, which he kindly presented to our group. He reasoned it would serve a far better purpose being in Libby’s pack when we were walking rather than sitting on the fridge in his kitchen. He claims he can usually find his fridge without too much trouble anyhow. Many thanks Geoff!