

Bellbird Point and Ironpot Mountain in the Megalong Valley

Friday 19th May 2006

“Often I sit, looking back to a childhood,
Mixt with the sights and the sounds of the wildwoods,
Longing for power and the sweetness to fashion,
Lyrics with beats like the heart-beats of Passion;
Songs interwoven of lights and of laughters
Borrowed from bell-birds in far forest rafters;
So I might keep in the city and alleys
The beauty and strength of the deep mountain valleys:
Charming to slumber the pain of my losses
With glimpses of creeks and a vision of mosses.”

Thus Henry Kendall concluded his famous poem “Bell-Birds”. So many of us to this day still automatically recall at least the first two lines when we hear the song of the bellbird; “By channels of coolness the echoes are calling,
And down the dim gorges I hear the creek falling;”

We will indeed be hearing plenty of bellbirds today and as much as that poem encapsulates the spirit of their song, I believe the last stanza captures the essence of bushwalking. So often in times of drudgery, in times of stress, in times of sorrow, one draws solace from the recollection of pleasant experiences gathered while close to nature in the bush. That exquisite waterfall, the sound of a rippling stream, the overwhelming greenness in a rainforest, the intimacy of an enclosed canyon, the grandeur of a towering cliff face; today we will add to our store of memories for recall in the future.

Twelve walkers gathered at Blackheath where we welcomed an exuberant Chris Weaver back to the group. Here a car rationalisation was organised by Libby before we began our journey into the Megalong. A pleasant bonus today is the drive through this picturesque valley. The steep drop from the escarpment leads to the tunnel like passage through the lush environment of Blackheath and Coachwood Glens. Soon after crossing Pulpit Hill Creek we emerge onto the floor of the valley. The brooding shaded cliffs below Radiata Plateau in the east and the golden sunlit scarp rising to the Shipley Plateau in the west provide spectacular backdrops to the open farmlands we are now travelling through. As we near Megalong Creek the rising mists twist and swirl giving transient glimpses of the craggy rock faces of Narrow Neck. Soon we descend into the shade of Green Gully where the road meanders beside a small stream, crosses Galong Creek adjacent to the old Carlon Farmhouse and climbs to the Dunphy car park. We have arrived at the starting point for the first walk of the day.

As we set off toward Bellbird Ridge our progress was overseen by a mob of curious but completely unperturbed kangaroos grazing in the gully below. The initial climb is quite steep rising about forty metres in a very short distance. Incidentally the walks we were to undertake today were quite unusual for the Blue Mountains. In both cases we would be

climbing uphill on the outward journey and having a downhill homeward run rather than the more usual uphill finish - an agreeable change.

Soon we were on Bellbird Ridge about one hundred metres above our starting point. Here we were walking through delightful open woodland where Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*) and stringybarks, possibly the Thin-leaved Stringybark (*Eucalyptus eugenioides*), predominated. Standing out against the dark trunks of the stringybarks was the light green foliage of the Narrow-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia linearis*). As we approached the end of the ridge Forest Oaks (*Allocasuarina torulosa*) became evident, some quite old examples displayed deeply fluted bark which is hard to the touch despite its corky appearance.

We pass a few examples of Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*) that carry several emerging flower spikes which at this early stage of development look like golden waxy candles. Quite suddenly we emerge onto a rocky outcrop, this is Bellbird Point. Here, entertained by the constant musical 'tink-tink' of the Bell Miners, we decide morning tea would be in order. Some publications state that Bell Miners favour lerp-infested trees. It is obvious the trees in this vicinity must be very lerp.

The views from this vantage point are absolutely stunning. In the near foreground is the folded landscape of many steep tree-clad ridgelines plunging down toward the line of Breakfast Creek. To the south are the Wild Dog Mountains whose litter includes Blue Pup Spur, Brindle Pup Gully, Little Dingo Hill, Howling Dog Ridge, Ghost Dogs Gully and Faithful Hound Ridge. Beyond these features the cliff lines of Kanangra Walls can be seen. A nearby cliff face to the southeast contains a huge cavern while beyond a long saddle in the same direction is an impressive line of shear cliff faces which form part of the distant Kedumba Walls. While we were taking in the grandeur laid out before us a pair of cockatoos flew along the gully far below, their brilliant white forms starkly highlighted against the olive green of the tree cover.

There are two plaques attached to the rocks on this point. One in memory of a bushwalker Phyl Roots dated 1940 and another to Millie "Biddy" Everingham dated 2001. One could not imagine a more magnificent nor peaceful place for one's spirit to linger.

We retraced our steps to the Dunphy car park where tables and seats added an unusual touch of luxury to our lunch break. Once again we were dining in very impressive surroundings. Illuminated by the midday sun the rocky outcrop of Bellbird Point was visible on one side of the Carlon Creek gully. On the opposite side our objective for the afternoon, the summit of Ironpot Mountain, beckoned.

We drove part of the way up Ironpot Ridge which saved us about one and a half kilometres in walking distance and about one hundred metres in climbing height. As we walked along the more level approach to the mountain through a stand of young Blue Mountains Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) we passed several nests of what we as children used to know as 'meat ants'. These are the ants which form domed nests covered in fine gravel

and are usually located in open grasslands. It was common practice to lay dead snakes on these nests and the ants would very quickly carry all edible material into the depths of the nest. Radiating from one nest we passed was the typical ant track, a ribbon about eighty millimetres wide completely devoid of any growth along which a constant stream of ants travelled to-and-fro carrying food and tiny pebbles to the nest. Brought back many childhood memories of stirring up the ants by scraping the surface of the nest with sticks or scuffing it with bare feet when feeling particularly brave or foolhardy. The bites we inevitably received from the angry ants never seemed to deter us. In the dry soil of this area were many tiny conical pit traps set by the ant lions, a classic case of supply and demand I guess.

Looming before us now was a track which ran straight up the face of the hill at a slope of at least forty-five degrees. Near the top of this steep section of track was a large rock overhang forming a long gallery. The rear wall of this gallery displayed alternating layers made up of beds of river pebbles and seams of sedimentary sandstone each about two hundred and fifty millimetres thick. In places the soft stone was honeycombed by wind erosion.

A short climb up a cleft between two rock outcrops delivered us to a wide almost level ridge top. Here the tree cover consisted of Grey Gum (*Eucalyptus punctata*) and the same species of stringybarks encountered on the nearby Bellbird Ridge. In the understorey were examples of Sweet Pittosporum or Mock Orange (*Pittosporum undulatum*), Broad-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia levis*) and a few small Cypress (*Callitris* sp). On the more sheltered eastern slope of the mountain were scattered a few Kurrajongs (*Brachychiton populneus*), their shiny light green leaves standing out among the darker colours of the forest cover.

The exposed rocks in this area are a conglomerate of water worn stones ranging in size from small pebbles up to almost football size boulders embedded in a sandstone material. We pass a large outcrop of this material decorated with numerous knobby protrusions of deep green moss. We drop down into a shallow gully where the rock faces carry a wide variety of lichens, some form silver/grey crusts clinging to the surface while others appear as tiny beards moving in the light breeze. These rock faces also accommodate several clumps of Rock Lily (*Dendrobium speciosum*) their leaves showing signs of nibbling by wallabies.

A short climb brings us to a rock platform containing an intriguing pattern of five holes. They were around one hundred and fifty millimetres diameter, some hemispherical, others much deeper than their diameter while some had undercut rims. It appeared these holes perhaps originated by stones having been prised from the conglomerate and the resulting depressions further worked to deepen and widen them. There were several other examples of these holes scattered around this area and many sharpening grooves were sighted in the vicinity.

We were now walking along a very narrow ridge, the views to the northwest toward the Cocks River and beyond were spectacular. To the south we were looking down through

lush protected vegetation past Ironmonger Hill and Ironmonger Spur toward Breakfast Creek. Hanging in a pendulous bunch on the tip of a Geebung branch was a ball of 'harlequin beetles' their multicoloured bodies glinting in the sun. The atmosphere in this area is very special, quite different to other places in the mountains.

As we retraced our path to the cars it was noticed there was a lot of wombat scats along the track. As usual most of these are deposited atop a stone and are cube shaped, almost like miniature wool bales. This elicited the story from Allan Cupitt of the 'explanation' given to some overseas tourists when they queried the unusual shape of the scats. They were told that the wombats hibernated in winter and the scats were shaped that way to allow them to be neatly piled in the burrow. That story doesn't really stack up does it?

Then we were back at the cars. We seemed to tarry a lot longer over the usual afternoon cup of tea, probably disinclined to leave this beautiful locality. Many bon voyage wishes were made to Libby for her impending trip with Keith to England, Switzerland and France – best wishes to you both for a wonderful trip and safe return.

So to the drive back to Blackheath. Green Gully looked even more inviting in the soft afternoon light and upon ascending to the Euroka area we were treated to the effect of the lowering sun setting the sandstone cliffs below the Narrow Neck Plateau afire. A spectacular end to yet another marvellous walking day, very much complemented by the journey to and from the venue through this lovely little valley.