

Station Rock and Camels Hump at Mount Tomah

Thursday 18th September 2008

The gentle lapping of the sea on the hull of Cook's Endeavour as she glided through the deep tropical waters off the east coast of New Holland lulled the off duty members of the ship's company into a relaxed torpor. They were jolted from this state of tranquillity and comfort when the ship hit a reef and became firmly stuck, water pouring in through the shattered timbers. Young Joseph Banks, the ship's gentleman botanist, was frantically trying to determine which specimens he could perhaps save as the crew threw cannon, ballast, casks and other heavy goods overboard while the pumps were furiously manned. Having to abandon ship was a distinct possibility.

In Yorkshire, England at around this same time young Martha Caley was also suffering some discomfort as she gave birth to her first son, George. These coincident yet disparate events, in June 1770, had some bearing on a long association being established between George Caley and Joseph Banks.

During March 1795 George Caley, now a twenty-five year old self-taught botany enthusiast, sent some of his specimens to (the now) Sir Joseph Banks requesting his help in finding work as a botanist's assistant. George, who had had no previous introduction to Banks, used the coincidence of the Endeavour running aground on the same day as his birth as a form of leverage in the hope it would aid in eliciting a positive response from Banks. It appeared to work.

Banks suggested to Caley that work as a gardener would be a more rewarding way in which to develop his knowledge of botany and helped him gain employment at several significant London gardens, eventually at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

After much prompting by Caley, Banks agreed to finance him at fifteen shillings per week plus provisions from the public store, to journey to New South Wales in order to collect specimens for Banks and seeds for the Kew Gardens.

George Caley arrived in Sydney Town on the 'Speedy' in 1800, established himself in a modest hut near Government House at Parramatta and set about making forays into the unfamiliar and uncharted bushland in pursuit of plant specimens.

In early November 1804 he set out on his most ambitious journey of discovery, to reach the Carmarthen Hills, those rounded hills which rise above the horizon west of Richmond. Today we were to walk on one of those hills and visit a spot that played a significant part in Caley's epic journey.

We gathered at Mt Tomah (Fern Tree Hill in Caley's day) on a glorious mild morning, blue sky, still air, gently rolling clouds, what more could one wish for? We could and did wish for more; to have Libby fit and well and here to lead us was the wish of all present. We truly hope the power of positive thought holds great force Libby, for everyone

associated with the walking group have you constantly in their hearts and minds and wish fervently for your complete and expeditious recovery.

In Libby's absence thirteen hardy (perhaps foolhardy) walkers gathered to allow yours truly to lead them to Station Rock and onto Camels Hump, then hopefully back again. With my advancement from the rear gunner's position to the pilot's seat, Fred Roberts kindly agreed to act as whip for the day.

Heading past the South Tomah Trig Point (elevation 1016 metres) and across the cleared ridge we were treated to magnificent views to the east across Caley's Devils Wilderness and the Cumberland Plain to the city beyond and to the west across the Upper Grose to the line of the Darling Causeway and Mount Victoria.

Presently we entered some very pleasant open woodland, diverted to the left and soon came upon the small stone cairn that indicated the spot where we leave the path and plunge into the rainforest. This marker was placed when Libby, Beth and I scouted this walk on a very windy day in July after we found our way to the elusive Station Rock and navigated the path back up through the rainforest.

We drop down the steep hillside through this magical pocket of forest. The red soil and thick leaf litter on the forest floor is dotted with rocks while fallen tree trunks lay supine on the hillside, all draped in velvety green moss luminescent in the subdued light. Soft Tree-ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) thrive in this environment. Many, having lost their grip on the steep slope, have tilted downhill then bent their bodies to again seek the light. Several of our walkers also lost their grip on terra firma and tilted harmlessly downhill. Possumwoods (*Quintinia sieberi*) are also abundant here, starting their life by germinating on the fibrous trunks of tree ferns and growing 'strangler fashion' often eventually killing their host. I find these rainforest environments absolutely enchanting.

Emerging from the glorious gloom of this enclosed domain we enter a sea of ground ferns from which springs a surreal forest of dead mallee trunks, victims of the November 2006 fires. As we descended further we came across several examples of the Oak-leaved Daisy-bush (*Olearia quercifolia*) growing in the moist drainage lines. Although not in flower at this time their glossy foliage presented an attractive display. This small shrub is considered 'at risk' because of its rather limited distribution in the central Blue Mountains. Also attracted to these moist areas are frogs and many could be heard here today. They too could consider themselves at risk because attracted to frogs, gastronomically, are snakes. Particularly fond of frogs are Tiger Snakes and we spotted one sunning itself on a rock outcrop a little uphill from Station Rock. It lay perfectly still with its body flattened against the rock surface, its head raised and neck coiled. After several walkers had passed by it decided enough was enough and moved off into the undergrowth. Shortly after this encounter we arrived at Station Rock.

What an impressive vantage point. Little wonder that George Caley chose to name it, in the surveying context, Station Rock; an elevated point from which to take bearings and make observations. As we enjoyed morning tea here one could not help but reflect on the

extraordinary effort it must have taken for the Caley party to reach this spot. On 3rd November 1804 Caley, his dog and three convicts – ‘three of the strongest men in the colony’ – crossed the Hawkesbury near Richmond and headed more or less in a straight line for Mount Banks, so named by Caley during this expedition in honour of his patron. This of course meant they had to climb over many ridges and down into deep valleys, the ridge along which Bells Line of Road now runs eluded them. They reached this point on 10th November and attempted to continue directly to Mt Banks but were turned back by the precipitous walls of Thunder Gorge (believed to be the spot referred to by Caley as Gaping Gill) in the Carmarthen Brook. They sheltered in small caves below Station Rock for two nights then skirted Mt Tomah, climbed onto Mt Bell (then Table Mtn) and followed the line of the present day Bells Line of Road to gain access to Mt Banks. A day was spent climbing to the summit and exploring the mountain. Having ventured further west by far than any of the new settlers of Sydney Town they returned to Parramatta by virtually retracing their outward journey, arriving back three weeks after their departure; an astonishing achievement. Makes having to retrace our path back up the one hundred and ninety vertical metres to the ridge seem a bit of a doddle, doesn't it?

As we climbed back up the hill we were treated, on the fringe of the rainforest, to the sight of a splendid group of Rough Tree-ferns (*Cyanthea australis*) standing tall against a background of luxuriant foliage. Wending our way back through the enclosed forest we were entertained by the lyrical calls of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo and the Golden Whistler occasionally interspersed with the sharp ringing whipcrack of the Eastern Whipbird. Mother Nature surely provides a rich palette from which to refresh your spirit.

Back on the ridge we rested awhile before descending once more, following the fire trail down the steep western flank. This led us through delightful open forest with an understorey containing Broad-leaved Hakea (*Hakea dactyloides*), Tea-Tree (*Leptospermum sp*) and Broad-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia levis*) carrying pale green fruit. There was an abundance of ferns providing a ground cover. Beside the trail were several examples of the Tall Everlasting or White Paper Daisy (*Helichrysum elatum*) displaying their showy yellow centred white flower heads while racemes of pinkish-purple flowers were just beginning to open among the delicate leaflets of the Native Indigo (*Indigofera australis*).

As the fire trail curved to the right we diverted onto a narrow enclosed track that led off to the left. Here we are walking through a tunnel of shrubbery, Heath Banksia (*Banksia ericifolia*) display their orange flower spikes, several species of Wattle (*Acacia sp*) add a touch of gold to the scene and tiny green satanic faces peer out from the foliage of the Honey Flowers or Mountain Devils (*Lambertia formosa*). To the left of the track is a rock outcrop which affords a view across to Camels Hump. An Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) growing here is just beginning to produce red tipped flower buds, a lovely sight. The ironstone protrusions formed intriguing patterns here and in a shallow water pool on the end of the outcrop are several grinding grooves showing once again that the original inhabitants of these mountains knew how to pick an idyllic spot in which to work.

As we dropped down toward Camels Saddle we came across a profusion of Sydney or Ledum Boronia (*Boronia ledifolia*) in full blossom, a stunning sight, and further on were a few examples of the Pale-pink Boronia (*Boronia floribunda*) displaying their delicate flowers. The quad-petalled dark pink flowers of the Black-eyed Susan (*Tetralochea sp*) add to the exuberance of the colour here. Complementing this flush of vibrancy is the glossy pale green convoluted stems of the Curly Sedge (*Caustis flexuosa*) and the two metre tall clumps of its big brother *Caustis pentandra*, its bunched stems leaning across our path.

Past a tiny stone cairn a path leads off to the right toward Claustral Canyon, we continue straight ahead and follow a very indistinct path which takes us across the saddle. The track becomes quite overgrown and we push through the vegetation, suffering an occasional minor stab from the Dagger Hakea (*Hakea teretifolia*) that grow profusely here.

After crossing some impressive sandstone platforms we begin to climb up toward Camels Hump, named incidentally not because of its humped profile but after Barry 'The Camel' Dunnett, a pioneering canyoner in this area.

On this slope there were several beautiful examples of Hard-leaved Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*), the smooth bark on their gnarled and twisted trunks carrying curious scribble patterns in unusually wide strokes. We pushed carefully through some Needle-bush or Silky Hakea (*Hakea sericea*) and past a few examples of Pink Spider-flower (*Grevillea sericea*) and emerged onto a rock platform with water seeping across its face. Here again, in areas where the water flowed, were several grinding grooves. One can but ponder whether there may have been Aboriginal craftsmen working at these elevated sites in 1804, watching in sheer wonderment and disbelief, the curious antics of George Caley and his party attempting to navigate the deep ravines below.

We selected a rocky eyrie and settled down for lunch. The expansive view from this vantage point took in Mount Banks, Hay, Caley, Strzelecki, Dixon and Barranbali. The tops of the imposing vertical cliff faces of Mount Hay Wall and Kolonga Walls peeked above the intervening ridgelines. Immediately below us the deep Rainbow Ravine coursed its way toward Carmarthen Brook. A Wedge-tailed Eagle soared high above and the rest of the world with all its drama and troubles seemed a million miles away. (Sounds much better than kilometres doesn't it?)

After spending some time soaking up the sun in this idyllic spot we set off to climb the two hundred and sixteen vertical metres from Camels Saddle back to our starting point. So ended another wonderful day in the mountains visiting sites once used by early explorers of these parts and walking in the footsteps of the more recent adventurers, George Caley and his party. How lucky we are!

Further reading: George Caley – 19th Century Naturalist by Joan Webb
Back from the Brink by Andy Macqueen (Second Edition)