

Overcliff, Undercliff, National Pass and Valley of the Waters at Wentworth Falls

Friday 15th February 2008

“..... Walking on a few yards, one stands on the brink of a vast precipice, and below one sees a grand bay or gulf, for I know not what other name to give it, If we imagine a winding harbour, with its deep water surrounded by bold cliff-like shores, to be laid dry, and a forest to spring up on its sandy bottom, we should then have the appearance and structure here exhibited. This kind of view was to me quite novel, and extremely magnificent.”

So wrote Charles Darwin after seeing the landscape at Wentworth Falls on the afternoon of the 17th January 1836. He had walked to the falls when he stopped over at the Weatherboard Inn during his horseback journey to Bathurst. He undertook this trip while visiting Sydney during the voyage of discovery of HMS Beagle in the years 1831 to 1836.

One hundred and seventy two years and twenty-nine days after Darwin was left breathless by the panoramic views on offer here, seventeen walkers gathered to experience those same vistas. The scene today as one looks south from the escarpment would be largely unchanged since Darwin's time. In fact if you employ psychological blinkers to shut out the relatively minor signs of development in your peripheral vision the scene before you has probably changed little over many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. How fortunate we are there were people in our society with the foresight and commitment to push for the protection of such places.

On a morning kept cool by the high cloud we gathered at the Conservation Hut which sits above the Valley of the Waters. As the track leads downhill we pass through a dry area containing open woodland. The species of tree from which eucalyptus oil was first distilled by the Surgeon of the First Fleet is present here, the Sydney Peppermint (*Eucalyptus piperita*). Also here are the Silvertop Ash or Black Ash (*Eucalyptus sieberi*) displaying their furrowed almost black-barked trunks supporting smooth white branches. Mountain Devils (*Lambertia formosa*) punctuate the understorey with their brilliant red blossom and the ubiquitous Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) loiters beside the track.

We turn left onto the Overcliff Track and are soon at Lyrebird Lookout. Here the first of the many panoramic vistas we will see today unfolds. Down to the right there is a glimpse of one of the waterfalls in the Valley of the Waters and below us can be seen small sections of the National Pass Track that we will traverse later in the day. In the middle distance sits the imposing bulk of Mount Solitary, its crown partly draped in rising mist. As the eye travels from Solitary's tree-clad summit down past the vertical Triassic sandstone cliffs, over the talus slopes of Permian coal measures and marine shale to the tiny outcrops of Devonian basement rocks deep in the valley a period of approximately four hundred and ten million years of geological development is revealed. We certainly are but a miniscule blip in the scheme of things.

As we continued along the track through what is now heath-like country we encounter some Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*) carrying many finger-thin newly developing flower spikes, the palest of green, held vertically along their branchlets. Then, just as I was admiring the delicate crinkly flowers of the Blue Damperia (*Damperia stricta*) and the striking pink blossom of the Grass-leaf Trigger Plants (*Stylidium graminifolium*) there was a minor commotion ahead.

We had reached the foot of a hanging swamp now fully replenished by the recent heavy rains. Helen, my better half, who has been known to put her foot in it, did. The problem was she couldn't withdraw it, the suction was too strong and she sank up to her knee in the sticky mire. There was some discussion whether any assistance should be offered but after photographs were taken for posterity she was hauled from the black ooze, her leg and boot encased in slimy sludge. I had always assumed that she could walk on water; another belief shattered.

With the Swamp Lady cleaned up and some calm restored we continued on our way. Nestled amongst the spread of Button Grass or Button Bog-rush (*Gymnoschoenus sphaerocephalus*) in the hanging swamp were some *Grevillea acanthifolia* ssp *acanthifolia* carrying a smattering of red flower combs among their holly-like leaves. As we moved along the track we were treated to tantalising glimpses of the distant views into the Jamison and Kedumba Valleys and beyond through the slender stems of the Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*).

Soon we diverted to the right and entered a little rainforest glen in the gully which carries Den Fenella Creek. The track follows this delightful cascading stream past mossy rock walls and ferny nooks to the point where the creek leaps over the cliff edge to plummet to the valley floor. The track continues around the cliff to the Den Fenella Lookout where we paused for morning tea. While most of us relaxed with cups of tea and enjoyed the magnificent views on offer John Meade, having taken his mug from his pack in readiness for a brew, spent most of the time searching for the small container of coffee he knew had been placed in the pack. He eventually found it in the mug; who would have thought to look there!

As we were about to leave this delightful eyrie we spotted a pair of Red-Tailed Black Cockatoos disappearing into the trees on the adjacent cliffs.

Presently the path dips down under a rock overhang and we are on the Undercliff Track. We were greeted to this section by a cluster of Christmas Bush (*Ceratopetalum gummiferum*) obviously reluctant to let go of the festive season for they still displayed masses of bright red sepals. The track here is bordered by thick tangles of Pouched Coral-fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*) and occasionally the tiny four-petalled flowers of the Mitre Weed (*Mitrasacme polymorpha*) add dots of white to the predominantly green groundcover. Pink flowers of the Dogrose (*Bauera rubioides*) also add a touch of contrast to the scene.

The track winds along beneath low rock overhangs, some spilling fine trickles of water from their eaves. We pass a small trough which had been carved into the rock face, full of crystal clear water and protected by an arched opening of sandstone blocks. In these protected shady places there is a proliferation of delicate ferns and velvety mosses.

We make a short diversion down to Eagle Nest Lookout where we get our first view of the double drop of Wentworth Falls. What an impressive sight. The water fans out across the curved finely tiered section of rock near the top of the falls before dropping off the edge to form a sheer misty curtain cascading to the rocks at the midpoint of the drop. Beside this curtain is a ribbon of white formed by a separate gush of water dropping uninterrupted to the midpoint. The waters of Jamison Creek then course between an array of huge boulders before leaping over the second drop to the valley floor. On the vertical cliff face directly opposite is the stairway we will soon be using to drop into the valley. The walkers at present negotiating that stairway put the scene in scale; they appear as colourful ants scurrying across the rock surface.

Back on the main track we continue on past some rock faces decorated with incredibly convoluted ironstone protrusions, under long rock overhangs dripping with moisture and past the open mouths of gaping caverns. Clinging to a rock ledge in this area was a Forked Sundew (*Drosera binata*) the sticky fluid on its multitude of fine hairs glistening in the soft light. Presently we are at Fletchers Lookout where a view straight down to the track crossing at the midpoint of the falls is on offer.

Now we are on the stepping-stones which cross the creek at the top of the falls. Upstream is the charming Queens Cascade while downstream the creek disappears into the abyss below. We are now at the point to which Charles Darwin walked all those years ago after which he stated: "So unbroken is the line of cliff, that in order to reach the foot of the waterfall formed by this little stream, it is said to be necessary to go sixteen miles round."

Thankfully it is a much shorter journey for us as we are now at the start of the National Pass Track. Having opened in 1908 this is the centennial year of the National Pass and it is great to see the track is undergoing a major upgrade. This is no patch up job but a high quality refurbishment of the entire route including the main stairway and the creek crossings.

No matter how many times you have walked down these stairs it is a stunning experience. To be walking down the face of a vertical cliff on stairs cut into the sandstone while being exposed to the views of the escarpment and the valley below is very special. One is full of admiration for those who cut these stairs one hundred years ago.

At the foot of the stairs the track leads through a little pocket of rainforest and we emerge onto a rock platform at the base of the upper falls where we pause for lunch. What a dramatic spot to rest awhile. The curved cliff faces either side of the veil of the waterfall are interspersed with horizontal ledges supporting ferns and other stunted growth. Suspended from the front of some of these ledges is vegetation taking on the appearance of tapering stalactites. Nestled in the spray of the falls were a couple of Dwarf Mountain

Pines (*Microstrobos fitzgeraldii*). Very few of these plants are known to exist in the wild where they grow only in the mist zones of waterfalls in the Upper Blue Mountains; one does grow quite happily however in the gardens of Merry Garth and why wouldn't it be happy residing there.

Continuing on we climb up a rainforested slope to emerge at a level where a horizontal band of red claystone runs along the cliff. Advantage has been taken of this band to form a substantially level track along the cliff face all the way to the Valley of the Waters.

The track meanders in and out of vast curved amphitheatres formed by the collapsing cliffs. Some are cool and moist with rock walls clothed in velvety moss. Spreading Fan-ferns (*Sticherus lobatus*) and Strap Water-ferns (*Blechnum patersonii*) surround the larger King Ferns (*Todea barbara*) providing a lush environment. In several places we walk behind water dropping from the cliff edges high above including Den Fenella Creek which we had walked beside earlier. Interspersed with these moist alcoves are quite dry areas where Black She-oaks (*Allocasuarina littoralis*) and Grass Trees (*Xanthorrhoea sp*) grow among the Smooth-barked Apples (*Angophora costata*) and the Rough-barked Apples (*Angophora floribunda*). The Smooth-barked Apples at this time are beginning to shed their bark giving the appearance of being coated with peeling paint.

Approaching the Valley of the Waters the track enters a more enclosed area and we look directly down on several Rough Tree-ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) whose fronds, from this aspect, give the appearance of large delicately patterned parasols. We proceed into the narrow valley and cross the creek below Sylvia Falls where Water Boatmen are scudding across the pool beside the track.

We now climb steeply upward beside the creek and along the way are treated to the superb sight and soothing sound of white water cascading over dark rocks. Along the way we pass little ferny grottoes protecting pools of clear icy water. As we approach Empress Falls the sound of the water builds to a crescendo as the stream gushes from a slot canyon high above and crashes into a pool beside the track. Soon we climb a set of steel stairs and pass an exquisite moss covered rock embankment with hundreds of tiny trickles of water spilling down its face playing a soft tinkling tune.

The water music now begins to fade as we climb into the dryer more exposed areas and soon we are back at the Conservation Hut. The end of another wonderful day enjoying what is one of the classic Blue Mountains walks.

While we indulged in the customary after walk cuppa it occurred to me that, unlike on the last few walks, no leeches had been encountered. Now I realise you may not have been able to stay cool on the steeper parts of the walk today but the lack of leeches is an obvious indication that you were all able to control your vibrations.