

The Wollangambe River at Mt Wilson

Friday 18th April 2008

The breeze from a passing vehicle causes a flurry of leaves to dance along the thoroughfare before settling back into the golden carpet by the roadside. The semi-naked crowns of towering trees that line the avenue appear as ghostly forms through the swirling fog. Leaves fluttering down through the mist indicate the autumnal disrobing of these exotic giants continues apace. Bold splashes of crimson and gold emerge from the veiled landscape as we meander through the Mt Wilson village to our meeting point for this walk to the Wollangambe.

In very light rain, or perhaps it was heavy mist, fifteen walkers gathered at Du Fours Rocks Road to begin the journey into the wondrous ravine which wends its way along the northern outskirts of Mt Wilson.

Today we would experience, in addition to the mountain scenery and the intimate atmosphere of the river, an encounter with some unique horizontal treecreepers and evidence perhaps of some exotic creature roaming along the riverbank.

As we move away from the Fire Station the track leads us past tall tree ferns, their drooping fronds partially cloaked by the mist. The moist leaves of the lower vegetation glimmer in the subdued light while the greenness of the water-drenched mosses is striking. Soon we arrive at the Wollangambe Track proper where a sign states it is 2.3 kilometres to the river; no mention is made, perhaps by design, of the vertical distance.

We begin the descent under a sparse high canopy of Blaxlands Stringybark (*Eucalyptus blaxlandii*) and Blue Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*). Closer to ground level the wiry vines of the Wombat Berry (*Eustrephus latifolius*) twine through the slender branches of the Prickly Current Bush (*Coprosma quadrifida*). Soon the bush encroaches on the track as we encounter Bush Pea (*Pultenaea sp*) and Broad-leaved Wattle (*Acacia sp*) with attractive silver/grey foliage on its long stems. Also here are examples of the Narrow-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia linearis*) carrying some fleshy light green fruit that terminate in needle-like points which are the remains of the flower style.

Soon we drop below the mantle of mist and more distant mountain views are revealed. The vista of dark fog-shrouded summits was to me reminiscent of stylised Chinese landscape paintings. Closer to hand the trackside was decorated by tiny cratered hillocks built by the ants to protect their nest entrances; they obviously believe there is more rain to come.

In this more open woodland the Hard-leaved Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*) dominate. The prevailing strong winds on this exposed hillside have twisted these trees into haunting sculptural forms. The remarkably distorted trunks with bark compressed into creases and folds support eerily twisted limbs. Foliar fingers reach out from the extremities with an unearthly movement in the almost still air. Fire attack has created

dark hollows and mysterious cavities in the trunks that contrast starkly with the almost pure white newly exposed bark. The insect larvae, which usually cover this bark with profuse doodling, must have been suffering writer's block for there are few inscriptions present.

The brooding form of Halfway Rock looms before us and we stop here for morning tea. While we lingered on this elevated platform surrounded by the sublime Blue Mountains bushland there was much discussion about other walks in other places, the Snowy Mountains, Central Australia, Tasmania and South Australia; the diversity of natural beauty and grandeur in this land is staggering, a 'Lucky Country' indeed.

Alison Halliday recalled riding to this spot in her younger days and leaving the pony here while she continued on to the river. Her recollection of the track was that it was much wider then and of the bush being much more open. I suspect there will be a few among us prepared to give their kingdom for a horse when we return to this point on our uphill journey later in the day.

We follow the track to the left through a cleft in the rock and pass below a small wind eroded cave. The track now contours across the hillside, low sandstone bluffs above and a well-timbered gully below. We pass the junction of the track which leads to Joe's Canyon and continue on to a rock platform that affords a view down onto the river. From this vantage point the tortuous paths of both the Wollangambe and of Bell Creek are clearly visible. The cliffs across the river carry a few pagoda-like formations and tantalising glimpses of the sandy beach can be seen through the foliage of trees far below.

The saddle continues on to a knoll where we turn left and drop down into a moist gully, clambering through the branches of a fallen eucalypt. A path along the high riverbank leads us to McConachie's Cave. Here Libby explains that we will not venture as far upstream as was intended due to the recent rains making the necessary rock scramble a little treacherous. We would however cross to the beach and explore to a point just upstream of the Bell Creek junction. This would give those in the group who have not been in this special place before a glimpse of an area we will explore on a future walk.

Those who didn't mind getting their feet wet donned shoes more suitable for wading before crossing the stream while those with a good sense of balance boldly walked upright across a large fallen tree trunk to the beach. Others used a less conventional method. Treecreepers, small birds of the Climacteris family, are sometimes seen in these mountains clinging to and scurrying up and down the trunks of trees. Today we were to discover two new species of Treecreeper, the *Climacteris Anneii* Clarkeus and the *Climacteris Barbari* Harryis. These high flyers, making use both of their wings and knees, stayed low and crept cautiously across the tree trunk bridge. No wet feet and no chance of overbalancing and falling in the drink, well done Anne and Barbara!

The walk upstream from the beach takes us through a thickly wooded area below a canopy of Coachwood (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*). The understorey is edged by Water Gums (*Tristania neriifolia*) some still displaying clusters of yellow flowers. Here there

are Pepperbush (*Tasmannia insipida*), Brush Muttonwood (*Rapanea howittiana*) and Scrub Beefwood (*Stenocarpus salignus*) which is related to the Firewheel Tree of warmer climes. The Shiny Fan-fern or Umbrella Fern (*Sticherus flabellatus*) is the main groundcover here and those keeping a keen lookout may have spotted the delicate blue-capped fungi *Mycena interrupta*.

An ancient moss covered tree trunk recumbent on the riverbank extends into the glistening water. We pass a little rock islet clothed in moss and ferns; a small tree having germinated on this rock hangs on tenaciously. The sonorous peal of a small waterfall is heard as we approach the junction of Bell Creek. Vertical sandstone walls now rise above us as we make our way through a group of King Ferns (*Todea barbara*) and emerge beside the purling stream as it passes over a bed of black stones. We proceed a short distance upstream, some clambering over boulders others wading along the stream as it sweeps under a low rock overhang. The cathedral-like section further upstream beckons but that is for another adventure on another day.

We return to the cave overlooking the beach and it is here that we have lunch; another spot to add to the long list of exclusive places in which this group dines. Helen Warliker (nee Gregson) in her publication 'A Mount Wilson Childhood' describes growing up in the 1920's and 1930's in this area. In the chapter on the Wollangambe she tells of visiting this spot, then known as the Lake, stating: "We usually went left – to the Lake – slipping and sliding through thick brush to the water's edge. Across the river on wobbly stepping stones and onto the little sandy beach beside the lake. What heaven!" We can attest that seventy odd years later it is indeed still heavenly!

Four of the group decide to keep their feet dry and head back to the village via the path used this morning, promising to leave a marker at Halfway Rock to indicate to Libby when we got there that they had passed that point. The remaining eleven who decided to dabble in a paddle and wade downstream veered off the main track at the knoll above the beach and dropped back down to the river.

Near the route we took to drop back to the river were a few examples of *Epacris reclinata* displaying their red tubular flowers and long pendants of Dragon's Tails (*Dracophyllum secundum*) hung from crevices in the rock walls.

On reaching the river we noticed a series of animal footprints in the sand, quite large and fresh, firm impressions along the edge of the water and clear but distorted prints higher up the bank indicating a speedy exit. Our approach could well have disturbed whatever had been prowling here. Perhaps it was a dingo, maybe a wild dog or possibly, it was suggested, something far more exotic; we will never know.

The walk now turned into an adventure. Wading back and forth across the river, clambering through fallen trees, bush bashing along the riverbank. The scenery we were exposed to made it more than worthwhile. Clear pools, crescents of golden sand, burbling rapids, an orange cliff face with dark vertical lines from thousands of years of weathering

superimposed upon horizontal lines resulting from the laying down of sandstone beds millions of years ago; this is a magical place.

Presently we are on a flat bench above the river that is tucked in against a lichen-encrusted cliff. Coachwoods form a shady glen here and King Ferns thrive. Soon we drop down closer to river level and the *Lomandra* growing vertically downward from the ceiling of a rock overhang indicates to me that we have arrived at the point from which journeys down the canyons commence.

Libby suggests we should cross the river and skirt around a couple of huge boulders to get a clearer view of the narrow section of canyon downstream.

The pool we must cross is about thigh deep. Deep water means wet clothes. Wet clothes mean a cold and uncomfortable walk out. Now perhaps it is an autumn thing with foliage being freely shed all around but on the last walk and again today those without short apparel simply shed their outer layers, undeniably a very practical approach however - no names, no pack drill. One of our number did nonetheless manage to end up with wet clothes after an unintentional partial immersion in the invigoratingly cold water of the pool.

Standing at the start of the canyon once again produced waves of nostalgia for those in the group who had been fortunate enough to travel down this narrow gorge in the past. Not surprisingly Cheryl's first sight of this terrain ignited in her a desire to experience the canyon journey sometime in the future.

Reluctantly we prepared to leave this hauntingly beautiful place and made our way up the hill. Along the way we noted some wonderful stands of *Restio fastigiatus*, their stems reminiscent of clumps of fine bamboo. Small drifts of Flannel Flowers (*Actinotus helianthi*) also decorated the trackside.

Back at Halfway Rock we found the arrow signal left on the track by the four dry-footed walkers indicating they had continued on. Libby now revealed, to the dismay of some, that despite its name this landmark is not actually at the halfway point and we are not yet quite halfway back up the hill. Are there perchance any horses available? Nay!

On arrival at the War Memorial we are treated to the delightful sight of a clump of bright red Fly Agaric mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria*) emerging from the green grass, a lovely touch on which to conclude yet another wonderful walk.

Helen Warliker stated in her memories of seventy or so years ago: "A trip to the Wollangambe was the supreme adventure for us in our youth and epitomised more than anything else those halcyon days." Rest assured a trip to the Wollangambe still gives rise to a carefree feeling of joy and tranquillity.