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# Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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Volume 24 Issue 7

July 2014

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## RADIATA PLATEAU & MEGALONG HEAD

## TOPIC

### OUR JUNE WALK

**RADIATA PLATEAU and  
MEGALONG HEAD between  
KATOOMBA and MEDLOW  
BATH**

Friday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2014

Our walk last month commenced with a visit to features which drew their names from North American Indian tribes and folklore. By coincidence our walk today is to an area whose name also has its origins in North America. Radiata Plateau takes its name from the plantation of Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*), a native of California, established in this area in the 1960s. (Some references indicate the plantation was established in the 1950s.) Once again a mix of cultures and indeed a confusion of names touches our walk venue - more on that later.

Thirteen walkers gathered, once more under clear blue skies, for this walk. As Libby had not previously ventured to this location and I had walked here with the National Parks Association in September 2012, Libby took my usual position as whip and I, having promised not to lead them too far astray, led the group through the gate at the end of Pulpit Hill Road.

The clear blue skies soon turned a decided dark grey and a stiff breeze sprung up; a few spits of rain were felt. Weather guru Ray Nesci asserted there would be no serious rain



Winter in the Bush

today so, suitably assured, we continued on our way along the well-graded fire trail. Soon we diverted to the right, initially following a lesser fire trail which soon became a narrow enclosed path that led us down the slope. The canopy became more enclosed and we were in a stand of the pine trees after which the plateau was named.

The plateau was once known as Pulpit Plateau named after Pulpit Hill named after Pulpit Rock which sat atop the hill.

Governor Macquarie named the pulpit-shaped rock formation that crowned the hill during his

journey across the mountains in 1815 on the newly completed Cox's Road. It became one of the seven Pulpit Rocks, possibly the first, in the mountains and was shown on a c1815 map by George Evans. The Rev Samuel Marsden performed Divine Service from the rock to the stockade party located there. Despite being named by the Governor and preached from by the Colony's Chief Chaplain the rock was unceremoniously smote down when the road to the west was realigned.

It had been suggested the name Elphinstone Plateau be ascribed to the area in recognition of Charles Edward Elphinstone, Surveyor General of NSW 1960-63 and an avid promoter of National Parks. (A hill on the plateau has been named Mount Elphinstone.) The Geographical Names Board however approved Radiate Plateau so this name, with

its roots firmly planted in North America, remains.

The roots of the *Pinus radiata* planted on the plateau did not however establish such a firm hold; the plantation was not a commercial success. It probably did however help spread this exotic pest further afield into the native bushland.

I had mentioned to the group that we would have morning tea beside the quite large dam on the site. We crested a small rise and there before us was ----- a quite large depression in the ground. The owners of this plateau, yes indeed it is in private hands, had conditional approval of a development application (since lapsed) and built a dam in the 1990s; it became a popular swimming hole. A bore has since been sunk into the rock strata after which the dam has not held water for any great length of time. My last visit here twenty-one months ago must have been shortly after substantial rain for the dam was certainly full then; I'm reasonably sure it wasn't a mirage.

Rather than morning tea with water views, we made our way across this large turkey's-nest like depression and settled down in the warming sunshine. Nearby was a circular construction of flat stones about a metre diameter and half a metre high. Sitting atop a pillar of stones within was a flat slab with a perfectly circular depression worn into its surface; much like an Aboriginal grain grinding stone though I am fairly confident that was not the origin of this - an intriguing structure. (There were a few other stone assemblages at the dam, one in the middle which would be quickly submerged should the dam begin to fill.)

Around the rim of this dam, at what would be full water level in the event of it holding water, were hundreds of tiny bright-red sundews arranged in clusters, perhaps the Pygmy Sundew (*Drosera pygmaea*). The sticky fluid on the minute leaves glistens in the sun to entice unwary insects which are enmeshed by the many fine hairs. A digestive fluid is then released which breaks down the insect and it is absorbed into the leaves. A

deceptively macabre action by this very pretty little plant.

We retraced our steps back to the fire trail and continued on. Soon a footpad drops down off the left of the trail; this led us to a rock platform which afforded magnificent views toward Katoomba and beyond. Our gaze was drawn over Megalong Creek and across the route of the Six Foot Track to the cliffs below Peckmans Plateau, Cahills Lookout and Boars Head Rock; shaded from the direct morning sun these cliffs took on coppery deep-gold tones. Above Narrow Neck the monolithic crown of Mount Solitary rose, its eastern facing cliffs brilliantly illuminated in the morning sun. The route of Glenraphael Drive could be seen rising toward the top of the Golden Stairs as it wended its way out onto Narrow Neck Plateau. We spent some time here taking in the magnificent views on offer.

As we continued along the fire trail there were on offer, through the trees, enticing glimpses into the valley, and of the cliffs opposite. I noticed a small narrow cairn built against the trunk of a tree; was this the track down to Esgates Ladder?

My doddering memory did not hold clear images of that path from my last visit but I suggested this could be it and it was worth going down to and it was not all that steep. Famous last words! Some must have detected the doubt in my voice and elected to await our return, others foolishly followed. I soon realised, mainly because of the extreme steepness, that this was not a path I had previously trodden. It was however an obviously well used path so there was a strong desire to investigate further.

The path, if a route about ten degrees off the vertical can be called a path, eventually led to the edge of a cliff face where there were some climbing aids but we ventured no further and made our way back to the waiting group. This is obviously a track used by abseilers or rock climbers but, nothing ventured, nothing gained; it got the heart and lungs working though. Back on the fire trail I did reiterate

that I had promised not to lead them too far astray and that wasn't all that far, was it?

Soon the fire trail swung to the right and a path carried on straight ahead through a tunnel of foliage provided by the low-growing native vegetation.

Presently there was a substantial cairn beside the track on the left; I asserted this would be the route to Esgates Ladder - for sure. There was not a lot of enthusiastic response. I stated I would go a short distance down to check; no one followed. It proved to be the correct route, even my doddering memory recognised some of the cairns marking the way. I reported this back to the group and stated this track was nowhere near as steep as our last endeavour; there appeared to be a decided reluctance which I couldn't understand. We decided to carry on to Megalong Trig where it was planned to have lunch and perhaps descend to Esgates Ladder on our return.

The track emerged into low wind-blown heath and distant views opened up; these were but a small taste of what was to come. Below us rock outcrops rose up through the vegetation, weathered grey with their shapes rounded by millennia of exposure to the abrasive effects of the winds. The now redundant Megalong trigonometrical mast with its circular form atop stood like a sentinel surveying the vast valley and distant mountain range before it.

We gathered on this exposed outcrop captivated by the vista laid out before us, the rich greens of the verdant valley floor contrasted with the grey/greens of the eucalypt forests and the classic Blue Mountains blue of the distant mountain ranges and escarpments disappearing into the haze. This is one of those places where it truly feels like you can see forever.

The sweep of the view across the Megalong Valley toward the Jenolan Caves area, around past Kanangra Walls over the vast expanse of the Kanangra Boyd National Park and the southern section of the Blue Mountains National Park to the end of Narrow Neck Plateau, then along its exposed cliff faces back to Katoomba is absolutely stunning.

There are so many treasures contained within that sweep. Many, but very few in the overall scheme of the landscape, which we have been fortunate enough to visit. Mount Bindo, The Six Foot Track, Jenolan Caves, Box Creek Falls and Morong Falls, Kanangra Walls, Ironpot Mountain, Green Gully, Bellbird Point, Devils Hole, Nellies Glen and so many many more; how lucky we are.

Having absorbed as much of the vista as was possible in one viewing we sought out protected pockets behind rock outcrops or shrubbery in which to shelter from the brisk wind while we had lunch.

Fortified with Libby's most welcome bushwalker cake we headed back up the slope. (Just as well there is no rule that the leader on the day has to cook the bushwalker cake, I can guarantee any cake that was baked by me would utterly destroy your taste buds.)

And so the moment of truth arrived; we were back at the start of the path down to Esgates Ladder. I once again assured the group that the route was not too steep, was well marked and that the view from down there was worth the effort; there still appeared to be a little reluctance. To assure them that they could trust me I stated I had read and always adhered to the Politicians Code of Ethics; that of course filled them with confidence. True, some did still choose to remain at the top until we returned but others followed as I set off down the slope.

This path, or route actually, for there is very little worn track, is well marked by a variety of stone cairns, some the standard small pile of rocks but some quite unique. There is one incorporating a stick which points the way at a change in direction, one with a pointed slab of stone to do the same job. Another achieves its pyramidal shape with upright slabs of flat stone while yet another utilises a boat-shaped ironstone formation on a rock outcrop loaded with pointed pieces of rock to indicate the direction to follow; definitely cairns built using a little imagination.

Soon we are at a rock platform just above the top of Esgates Ladder which is the start of the

Ben Esgate Pass into the Megalong Valley; we are at Megalong Head.

Ben Esgate used to walk extensively in the Megalong Valley and Narrow Neck area. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Ben, then around sixteen years of age, used to use Blackmans Ladder to the north of this point to descend into the valley to collect wild honey to sell in those depression times. It is said he was late coming out of the valley on one of these collecting excursions and decided to try a new way out; he discovered this pass up to Megalong Head. He subsequently installed some spikes and chains which still exist today. Ben became a builder by trade and built many buildings around Katoomba, including an extension to Katoomba District Hospital during the war years.

The views from this point of the cliffs below the area where we had lunch are spectacular, well worth the effort in coming down to this point. To see the spot where one of the historic passes into the Megalong Valley commences added to the pleasure.

We retraced our path, guided by the rather special cairns and joined those who chose to remain at the top, then made our way back to the starting point. Another great day spent exploring a spectacular yet perhaps comparatively little known area of these wonderful mountains. Ray the weather guru was right, we did not get rained on today even though we could see rain squalls nearby.

While we were enjoying the usual after walk cup of tea, a local resident approached to inform us of plans to develop this area. Most of the plateau is owned by a transcendental mediation group who have made or are about to make a development application to the Blue Mountains City Council; there may be something published in the Blue Mountains Gazette in the near future. There was a campaign run to save Radiata Plateau from development by the same group in 2005. One would think it would not take a lot of deep meditation to come to the conclusion that this area is rather special and should be protected.

John Cardy

## OUR JULY WALK

FRIDAY 18<sup>th</sup> July 2014

**Reflective Pools, Forested Creek Lines, Shelter Caves and a Touch of Indigenous History**

**Jellybean Pool and the Red Hands Cave Circuit at Glenbrook**

The group's only visit to Red Hands Cave was in November 1999; this time we will go via Jellybean Pool to experience the upgraded track down to that spot. This is a medium grade walk of approximately 10 kilometres, mostly on well-formed track; there is a descent and ascent of 300 metres over that distance. The walk covers a wide variety of vegetation and terrains.

**Meet at the parking area outside the entrance gates at the Glenbrook NPWS Visitor Centre in Bruce Rd Glenbrook at 9.30am or at Merry Garth for a 7.45am departure.**

Bring morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea and plenty of water.

**Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 (after 7pm) or Helen and John Cardy on 9871 3661 or on mobile 0418 646 487.**

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## FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2014 – Popes Glen and Evans Lookout at Blackheath

Friday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2014 – Evans Crown at Tarana

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## BUSH CARE

**Bush Care is held on the second Friday of each month from 9am to Noon. Any help, even for a short time, would be appreciated.**

**11<sup>th</sup> July – Meet at Silva Plana**

**8<sup>th</sup> August – Meet at Hay Lane – Ferny Cnr**

**Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 for details**