
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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SLACKS STAIRS AND WENTWORTH PASS

TOPIC

OUR FEBRUARY WALK

**VALLEY of the WATERS,
NATIONAL PASS, SLACKS
STAIRS and WENTWORTH
PASS at WENTWORTH
FALLS**

Friday 21st February 2014

“ There is really no such thing as bad weather, only different kinds of good weather.” This quote is attributed to John Ruskin, English author and social reformer. Of course the weather can at times be a little unpleasant and can vary through barely acceptable, pleasant, agreeable, splendid and superb. Then, like today, it can be absolutely perfect.

Twelve walkers gathered at the Conservation Hut under a cloudless azure sky; there was not a breath of wind, the temperature was quite pleasant. The bush glistened, refreshed by the recent rain. The pleasant aroma of moist leaf-litter hung in the air; the sandstone cliffs glowed under the morning sun. Bliss!

We welcomed Tony James from Mt Tomah and Bill Palmer from Bilpin who were joining us for the first time today.

Pausing at the information board Libby indicates our planned route for today; we then head down the track toward The Valley of the Waters.



Autumn in the Bush

It is a rather regal start to our walk, as we call in to Queen Victoria Lookout, the name perhaps commensurate with the majestic view on offer. The cliffs below Cathedral Point on the right and Kedumba Walls on the left frame the valley into which we are about to descend. In the far distance, past the end of Mt Solitary and across Kedumba Valley, lies the Blue Breaks; a magnificent panorama at any time, especially so on a day such as this. The imperial theme continues as we stop at

Empress Lookout, named after Empress Falls, which it overlooks. The falls in turn were also named after Queen Victoria, Empress of India 1876 – 1901. (A committee was set up by the Wentworth Falls Trustees to name the falls in the Valley of the Waters in 1897; the year of Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee. A safe bet then that the name Empress would be bestowed upon the major falls in the valley.)

The track now leads us away from the relatively dry open forest as it descends more steeply into a cooler, more moist environment. Silver ribbons of water wash across moss covered rocks, flow beneath clusters of ferns and between stepping-stones on the track to plummet toward the creek below. We zig zag more deeply into ‘The Gorge’, as the Valley of the Waters was known prior to 1895. Soon the waters of Empress Falls come into view as they leap from the narrow slot canyon and tumble over a series of cascades before

flowing into a placid pool which we cross via a curved line of stepping-stones. To the left of the track is a much smaller yet quite beautiful fall coursing down the rockface; the cumulation of those ribbons of water we had seen earlier. In the view toward Jamison Valley glimpses of the golden hues of the towering sandstone cliffs are revealed through the lush green foliage of the surrounding Coachwood and Sassafras.

The soothing lilted sound of flowing water accompanies us as we descend steeply beside the creek. At times the water is hidden beneath mossy boulders, then reappears as it ripples across rock shelves and plunges into narrow channels. Soon we are below Sylvia Falls, so named because of the silvery appearance of the water as it drops over the dark rocks; especially when illuminated by the sun as it is today. I would venture to say this is perhaps the prettiest waterfall in the mountains when, as now, it is flowing well. The diaphanous curtains of water spreading across the rockface as they descend contrasting with the narrow white ribbon flowing alongside.

The track leads us across Valley of the Waters Creek above Lodore Falls and we head along the National Pass. This pass, which generally follows a natural ledge formed by the layer of claystone or shale compressed between the predominant sandstone, is rated by many as the best walk in the mountains; it is certainly one of the most popular. Soon we note the track coming in on our right; this is where we will emerge later in the day on our climb out of the valley.

This track offers almost constant distant views into the Jamison Valley and beyond on one side and, on the other and close at hand, the spectacle of soaring sandstone cliffs; some brooding darkly in the shadows, others lit up brilliantly by the morning sun. Occasionally the track swings into shaded moist areas where, fed by hanging swamps, water dropping from the cliffs encourages the growth of ferns, mosses and other soft-foliaged vegetation. This creates a stark contrast to the generally dry environment of

this track, as it generally lies inside the drip line of the cliffs far above.

Presently we arrive at the Slacks Stairs Track but continue on for a short distance to enjoy a view of Wentworth Falls and across to the sheer cliff where minute figures of walkers descending the stairs give a sense of scale to this vista. In the opposite direction the view of the cliffs below Inspiration Point and Sublime Point indeed justifies the naming of those two features. We return to the Slacks Stairs Track junction and perhaps it is appropriate at this juncture to look at a little history of the three main tracks we will walk today.

Wentworth Pass, which generally follows the top of the talus slope from Valley of the Waters Creek to the base of Wentworth Falls, was opened in 1897. Peter Mulheran, a caretaker of the area, helped in and possibly supervised its construction.

National Pass, named for the Federation of Australia in January 1901, was opened in 1908. It was constructed over two years by a team of four men known as the "Irish Brigade" and led by Peter Mulheran. One hundred years later, following reconstruction work stretching over five years, it was reopened in 2008. The restoration work won a well-deserved Award for Culture Heritage Conservation from UNESCO.

Several sculptures, life-size stainless steel castings of local fauna – a sugar glider, skinks, a snake and a water dragon at each end of the track – were installed during refurbishment; a wonderful touch. Inevitably I guess, the water dragon at the Wentworth Falls end of the track has been jemmied from its sandstone column and stolen; a sad reflection on elements within our society. Happily the remainder remain intact, including a set of footprint impressions of the Superb Lyrebird; one can but hope for their long-term survival.

For many years there was no connection between the Wentworth Falls ends of these two Passes. The absence of such a connection could well be considered rather slack; you will be surprised, I'm sure, to learn that that had no influence at all on the naming of these stairs.

A Parramatta Real Estate Agent, resident of Wentworth Falls and Chairman of the Wentworth Falls Group of the Blue Mountains Sights Reserve Trust from 1920 was Isaac Platt Slack. He pushed for the addition of this missing link to allow a circuit walk; funding eventually became available and the stairs were constructed c1932.

Soon after beginning our descent on this track we reach a point where a full view of both drops of Wentworth Falls opens up - a spectacular sight. We then enter a natural tunnel housing the first major set of stairs which lead to the series of nine steel ladders; they deliver us to a set of four steel stirrups embedded in a vertical rock face. On our last visit here a rope was the only aid to descend this drop. The track then continues at a somewhat gentler grade to the large pool at the base of the falls.

We pause awhile to take in the beauty of this place. At the present rate of flow there is a single main stream of water plummeting down from the halfway point of the falls. This strikes a dark almost black ledge of rock where it fans into three cascades to drop into the base pool. While I generally abhor graffiti, someone who has walked this circuit has been moved to write, on an old rusting sign about midway down Slacks Stairs, the single word *Paradise* in fine white copperplate lettering; says it all really.

We now follow Wentworth Pass as it contours across the talus slope, leading us firstly through open forest. Here are towering Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*) with their fibrous furrowed bark, Smooth-barked Apples (*Angophora costata*) their tactile trunks crying out to be touched as we pass, majestic Blue Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) their smooth white trunks reaching for the sun. As the track dips into side gullies we enter pockets of closed forest dominated by the lichen-blotched trunks of the Coachwoods (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*) and Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*) with their scaly-barked trunks. The understorey abounds with Soft Tree Ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) and Rough Tree Ferns (*Cyathea australis*) while Lawyer

Vines (*Smilax australis*) twine through the shrubbery ready to entrap the unwary with their sharp thorns.

Fifty shades of green (not grey) pervade the scene as filtered sunlight streaming through the canopy plays with light and shade on the foliage, ground ferns and mosses creating a magical effect.

We encounter a shrub carrying clusters of purple globular berries; a shrub which Ray Nesci, John Meade or yours truly could not identify on the spot. Some later detective work by John and his chief superintendent Kay established that it was an uncommon species (for the Sydney district) of Pepper-bush; the Mountain Pepper (*Tasmannia lanceeolata*). This cool climate species, more common in the mountains of Victoria and Tasmania, differs from its more prevalent Pepper-bush cousin (*Tasmannia isipida*) in that its leaves are a darker green and are a much narrower lance shape as its species name implies.

Presently we reach the point where the track crosses Den Fenella Creek whose waterfall we had earlier walked behind along the National Pass. Here its waters tumble in a series of pearly silver cascades between large mossy boulders. Through breaks in the canopy the jagged cliffs of Moya Point come into view; gold and orange sandstone silhouetted against a brilliant blue sky.

The sound of gently falling water heralds our approach to Valley of the Waters Creek which we cross, below Red Rock Falls, by boulder hopping where three small pressed-metal footbridges once sat. We are now in an enchanting stand of rainforest; what better place to pause for lunch, serenaded by the running water.

Adjacent to the spot where I chose to sit I notice, on the vertical face of a large boulder, two very neat arrows carved deeply into the rock with 'Wentworth Pass' painted above. I had not noted this sign on previous walks here, the patina of many years of lichen growth a very effective camouflage.

Sated in every sense of the word we begin our climb up Valley of the Waters Creek. We pass Britannia Falls named after Margaret Carolina Britannia Murray born 1893, daughter of James and Elizabeth Murray. James Murray was a member of the committee who named the falls in the Valley of the Waters in 1897. The last P & O liner he commanded was the Britannia; why not give that name to your daughter and subsequently, four years later, to a waterfall in the year of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee.

We recross the creek, again by a little boulder hopping, immediately below Flat Rock Falls and follow the steep zig zagging track up to rejoin the National Pass. We then retrace our morning steps back to the Conservation Hut, passing along the way a happy boisterous group abseiling down Empress Falls; one can imagine QV would not have been amused.

We then made our way to Freda Moxom's nearby home where she had kindly invited us for afternoon tea. Here we were joined by Mary Reynolds who co-founded this walking group with Libby twenty-four years ago and by my better half Helen who didn't walk today as she was nursing a broken wrist from a recent bushwalking mishap.

What a sumptuous spread Freda provided, not so much afternoon tea, more like high tea. Any calories shed on our descent and ascent of 400 vertical metres over 5 kilometres were quickly replaced and more. Yet what a pleasant way to end a perfect day in the bush - great company and food in the lovely home and garden which is now Freda's sanctuary. A delightful haven in these wonderful mountains; thank you so much for sharing it with us Freda.

John Cardy

OUR MARCH WALK

Friday 21st March 2014

The Jewel in the Crown of the Blue Mountains – The Cradle of Conservation in New South Wales

Blue Gum Forest – Perrys Lookdown to Govetts Leap Lookout

The group has visited the Blue Gum Forest on six previous occasions; the last being in October 2010. This will be the first time we have entered via Perrys Lookdown and exited via Govetts Leap Lookout. This walk of about 12 kilometres is rated as hard and is for the more fit walkers in the group, there is a descent and subsequent ascent of approximately 640 metres; the final 250 metres being quite steep. To experience the majestic blue gums and the valley scenery and to sit at the base of Govetts Leap Falls make it all worthwhile, but be aware of the effort required.

There is the need for a car shuffle to transport us to our starting point at Perrys Lookdown from Govetts Leap Lookout where we will leave most of the vehicles. Meet at Govetts Leap Lookout at the end of Govetts Leap Road in Blackheath at 8.30am sharp or at Merry Garth at 7.50am for an 8.00am departure; note this is a long walk and we will need to get under way on time.

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.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Thursday 17th April – Wollangambe River and Joes Canyon (**NB: 18th is Good Friday**)

Friday 16th May – Water Nymph Dell and Minnehaha Falls

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.

14th March – Meet at Hay Lane, Sloan Reserve

Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 for details