

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER, 2010

INTERLUDE

This month's Newsletter takes a break from the Tambo/Croajingolong/Orbost Shire Council series of Newsletters. Researching the Shire information is very time consuming and it has not been possible to devote the required time to this task during the past month. It is planned to resume the series with the October Newsletter.

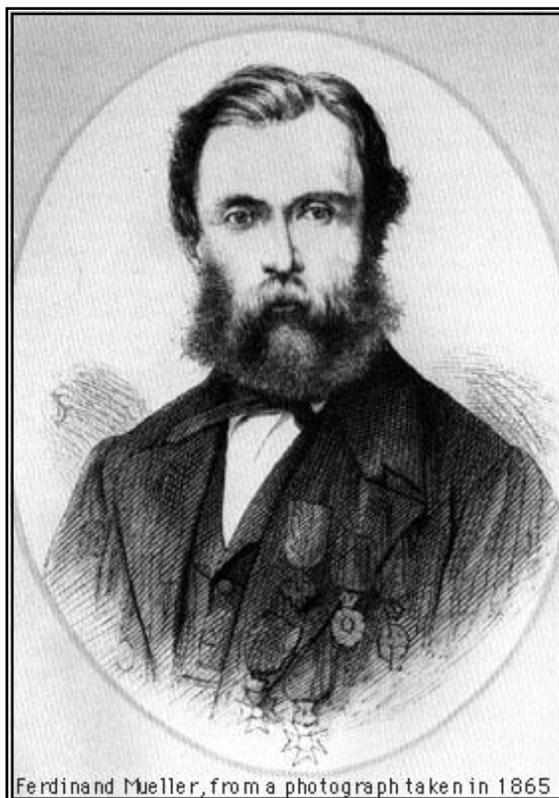
Snowy River Saga

By N. A. Wakefield

The Snowy River Mail, Wednesday, June 9, 1954:

Soon after the inception of the State of Victoria, just a hundred years ago, a young German migrant, Dr Ferdinand Mueller, was appointed to the position of Government Botanist in Melbourne. Within three years of the date of his taking office he had journeyed over 5,000 miles throughout the new colony, for the purpose of "elucidating its flora" as he used to say. In his official report for 1854 the indefatigable explorer described how he "reached in the middle of March, the country beyond the mouth of the Snowy River, the most southerly locality in which palms exist in the Australian continent." Now, with a century gone by, we find there — in place of a vast expanse of virgin jungle — the richest farm land in the State. And therein lies our story.

The area was discovered in 1836, and was visited again in the two years following by William Morris, a pastoralist of Moruya on the south coast of New South Wales. Probably from Nungatta Station, which he took up on the Upper Genoa River at about that time, this explorer led parties on three south westerly expeditions. On the first occasions progress was blocked by the Snowy River; but on the

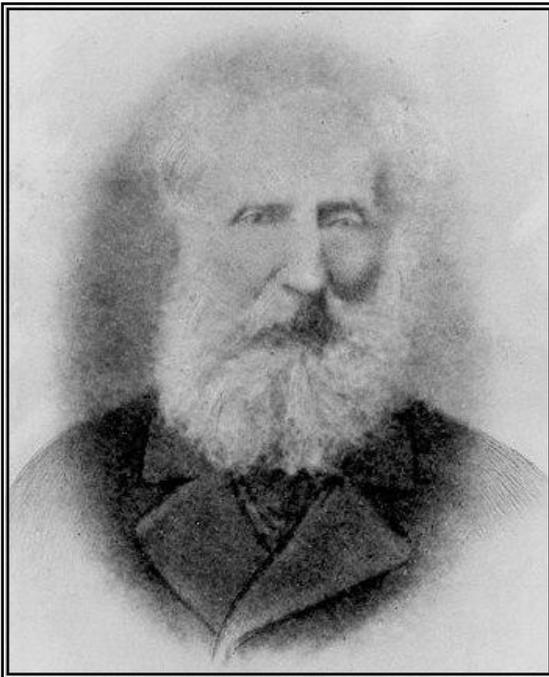


Ferdinand Mueller, from a photograph taken in 1865

After whom the Mueller River in the Croajingolong National Park, east of Point Hicks, is named.

third attempt a crossing was effected, and the stockmen took 500 head of cattle right along to the Gippsland Lakes. There the blacks harassed them so persistently that after a week of strife they were forced to return, abandoning the stock to be slaughtered by the natives.

Then in 1842, Peter Imlay — one of the three brothers who pioneered the Twofold Bay district in the 'thirties — took 800 head of cattle to establish a station on eastern side of the mouth of the Snowy River. Again the aborigines rose in defence of their hunting grounds, and were once more the visitors. Imlay's party returned to New South Wales with only 500 of the original herd.



Peter IMLAY

About four years later two brothers, Norman and John McLeod, sons of the pioneer of Bairnsdale, brought several hundred head of stock across the Tara Range from Buchan and established the first permanent cattle run on the Snowy River flats. But friction again developed between the whites and blacks, and there came the day when the hut-keeper and cook — Dan Dempsey — was speared; and Norman McLeod swam the river and galloped away, barely escaping with his life. Thereafter, the Gippsland settlers armed themselves and banded together, enlisted the aid of the Lakes tribe, and marched against the Snowy River blacks. These unfortunates made their last stand in the reedy swamps of Cabbage Tree Creek, where almost all of them were massacred.

Dan Dempsey's remains rest beneath the bitumen road in front of the Orbost Butter factory, and his grave is marked by a rough hewn granite



The memorial for Dan the Cook (DEMPSEY / MOYLAN) in Forest Road, Orbost, near the old Orbost Butter Factory.

slab; while the bones of the original inhabitants lie in the swamps — a place fittingly marked by the last remaining natural tract of the river flat jungle in the defence of which they laid down their lives.

The run was named 'Orbost' after one of the McLeod homes on the Isle of Skye and it was well established when Mueller reached the area in the course of his botanical investigations of 1854. Here for the first time he saw the great masses of the East Gippsland jungle flora, which is actually an outpost of a type of vegetation common to the sub tropics of eastern Australia. The enthusiasm of the observer can be gauged from his words: "The vegetation here assumes entirely a tropical character, with all its shady groves of trees producing dark horizontal foliage, with all those impenetrable thickets and intricate masses of parasites and limbers over running the highest trees, and with so many tropical forms never or but rarely transgressing the torrid zone. The occurrence of so many plants of a really tropical type bears a sufficient testimony not only to the geniality of the climate but also to the capability of the soil in the district. Transitions to the flora of New South Wales were here perceptible everywhere."

And what a wonderland it was in those days! The rich loam along the river banks gave growth to an unbelievable mass of vegetation — blackwood and lilly-pilly, and great gnarled kanookas with their limbs decorated with their limbs decorated with masses of ferns and festooned with innumerable creepers. The floor was thick with the green of acres of ground ferns, and above all the tangle towered the heads of

enormous mahogany gums.

Greatest of all the lianas was the water-vine, with "monkey-ropes" as thick as a man's body and a huge weight of foliage and berries, right up to the sunny tree-tops. Somewhat smaller were the yellow-berried morianda and stalked doubah with its milky juice, and the twining silk pod too. The wombat berry's orange fruit and attractive foliage and the shining heart-shaped leaves of the big-leaf vine added touches of beauty as well as botanical interest. The austral sarsaparilla, with its prickly "lawyer-vines" provided a hazard to progress, and the rare white supplejack had its place also. The gamut of jungle climbers was completed by the massive clematis and the slender little wart-flower.

In late summer and autumn the fruit eating pigeons came down from the north for the harvest of jungle berries. The beautiful wonga-wonga was always there in numbers and sometimes flocks of the top-knot pigeon joined in the repast.

On the limbs of trees, particularly of the kanookas there was a glory of epiphytic ferns. Here and there weeping spleenwort hung in masses, jungle polypody and kangaroo fern enveloped square yards at a time, and the jewel-like felt fern intermingled with curtains of fairy filmy ferns.

On the ground the greatest attraction was the giant maiden-hair fern, with its neatly patterned foliage and shining jet-black stems. At this, its southernmost station, it grew literally by hundreds of acres. Along the Brodribb River and Cabbage Tree Creek were extensive groves of great cabbage palms, rearing their heads as much as fifty feet up among the mahoganies.

Next year, in February 1855 Mueller paid his second and last visit to his "Palm Country". Thereafter he continued on as Government Botanist for more than forty years, to become the most famous scientist in the southern hemisphere and the most decorated man in the British Empire — Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller with twenty knighthoods, five doctorates, and membership of some 150 scientific societies throughout the world.

In the meantime Orbost underwent its great change. Beginning in the 'seventies, there was an influx of settlers; almost all the flats were selected, and, by the turn of the century, the vast jungles were but a memory. The great trees had been felled and fired, the ground cleaned up and fenced and ploughed. And crops of maize, pumpkins and grasses replaced the tangle of creepers and ferns.

While the "capability of the soil" was being exploited, Baron von Mueller was kept in touch with the district, for it chanced that two of the local farmers were also keen collectors. They sent him numbers of plant specimens from time to time, but there was very little that had escaped his eagle eye.

Only along the river frontages did a remnant of the jungle survive, and for a few decades the ten mile road from Orbost to the mouth of the Snowy, at Marlo, wended its way through lilly-pilly groves with a few creepers still remaining. It could have been this "old bush road" that inspired the Orbost poetess, Jennings Carmichael, to pen these prophetic lines:

Dear old road, no wonder, surely,
That I love thee like a friend!
And I grieve to think how surely
All thy loveliness shall end,
For thy simple charm is passing,
And the turmoil of the street
Soon will mar thy sylvan silence,
With the tramp of careless feet.



Grace Jennings Carmichael 1868-1904
Australian Poetess who spent her
childhood in Orbost district .

The last liana on this stretch — a great mass of water vine in the head of a mahogany — succumbed about twenty years ago and now there is but a single clump of lilly-pilly beside the Marlo road to remind us of the departed glory. Only the great mahoganies persist, in a belt along the river bank between the water and the modern farmhouses fronting the bitumen road.

On the other side of the river for a few hundred yards under the high bluff there is still a "pocket"

of jungle left — the very last along the Snowy River banks on the Orbost flats. It is a glory of clematis in September and beneath the trees and creepers one can still find a few fronds of the once plentiful black-stem maidenhair.

On the northern fringe of the flats there was originally a rocky jungle gorge with a tangle of creepers and even some tree-orchids on the shrubbery. Now it is denuded. In one place there is a granite quarry, and in another a few patches of foliage can be seen subsisting in the rock crevices.

Several miles from Orbost, above where the river issues from its rocky gorges into the area of flats on the steep banks and along some tributary creeks, there are still undisturbed masses of jungle. Although the flora type here is not quite identical with that originally on the flats, many of its typical plant species are there in profusion. These are the same kanookas and lilly-pilly trees with their attendant epiphytes, both fern and orchid; and on the rocky creek banks are masses of ferns, including a great amount of the handsome black-stem. The rare yellow doubah — another jungle climber — is an extra here, for it favours the gully jungles rather than those of the flats.

It is in this area that Pipeclay Creek offers a wonderland to the naturalist, and to the tired townsman a delightful cool retreat from heat of summer. The rocky creek-bed is easily negotiated, and one passes beneath masses of fern and foliage. Wonga pigeons still come in great numbers for the jungle berries, and numerous lyre-birds scratch and delve for food among the rich leaf-mould.

For the final phase of our story we shall see what remains of nature on the banks of the Cabbage Tree and the Brodribb. The main groves of palms along the former have been left almost unaltered. A few were cut down when a forestry track was put through some years ago, but were immediately compensated for by a strong growth of seedlings in the disturbed area.

On the Orbost side of the Brodribb, opposite the mouth of the Cabbage Tree, and actually on the rich river flats, there is still an untouched area of the original jungle. That this has remained unalienated crown land, while identical tracts nearby were cleared and converted into hundred pound per acre farmland, is a result of a very fortunate chain of circumstances. First, it is completely isolated by swamps and waterways — a triangle made by the Brodribb on one side, a creek and a strip of tea-tree marsh on another, and a reedy swamp on the third. So it escaped the attention of the early settlers. Then, nearly

50 years ago the district surveyor made special mention of its remarkable flora and noted the presence of several cabbage palms. So the Surveyor-general recorded a memorandum to the effect that the vegetation there was to be strictly preserved.



Cabbage Tree Palms

Thus, though not a reserve in actual name we have a 50-acre tract of the river flat jungle safe from violation. Not only is it protected against selection by order of the Lands Department, but also from man and his animals by its isolation behind a screen of swamps and waterways. So there the ancient mahoganies still rear their great limbs aloft over a maze of blackwood and lilly-pilly. Palms still flourish together with a dozen species of jungle lianas. The delicate butterfly orchid and the quaint jointed mistletoe are there, clinging to the trees and shrubs. In fact Mueller's "treasures of the east" are still there — even the rare white supplejack. Here alone is a spot that has escaped the fate foretold long ago by Jennings Carmichael — a little world apart that has escaped the march of progress. May it always remain so! — Educational Magazine.

Norman Arthur Wakefield (1918-1972), the author of this article, was a noted naturalist, historian and botanist, who received his early education at Orbost State and Orbost Higher Elementary Schools. He was a student-teacher at Orbost State School, did teacher training at Melbourne Teachers' College, and taught at the following East Gippsland schools: Combiobar (1938-39), Bindi (1939) and Genoa (1940-41). Then after war service (1941-45), he returned and taught at Cann River (1946-50).