

EAST GIPPSLAND SYMPOSIUM

14 SEPTEMBER, 1967

FOREWORD

A one-day symposium on East Gippsland was held on 14 September 1967. The region is defined for the purpose of the symposium as lying east of the 148th parallel and between the main Divide and the sea; the accompanying Figure shows the area and major towns. It is a distinctive region in its climate and ecology, having more generous summer rain than other parts of the State; it is also little known and little developed by man as compared with other parts. The object of the symposium was to bring together the many kinds of scientific information available on this region and to stimulate further research through discussion. The symposium was organized along the lines of three previous symposia, namely those on the High Plains of Victoria, on the basalt plains of Western Victoria, and on the Victorian Mallee, published respectively in volumes 75, 77, and 79 of the Proceedings.

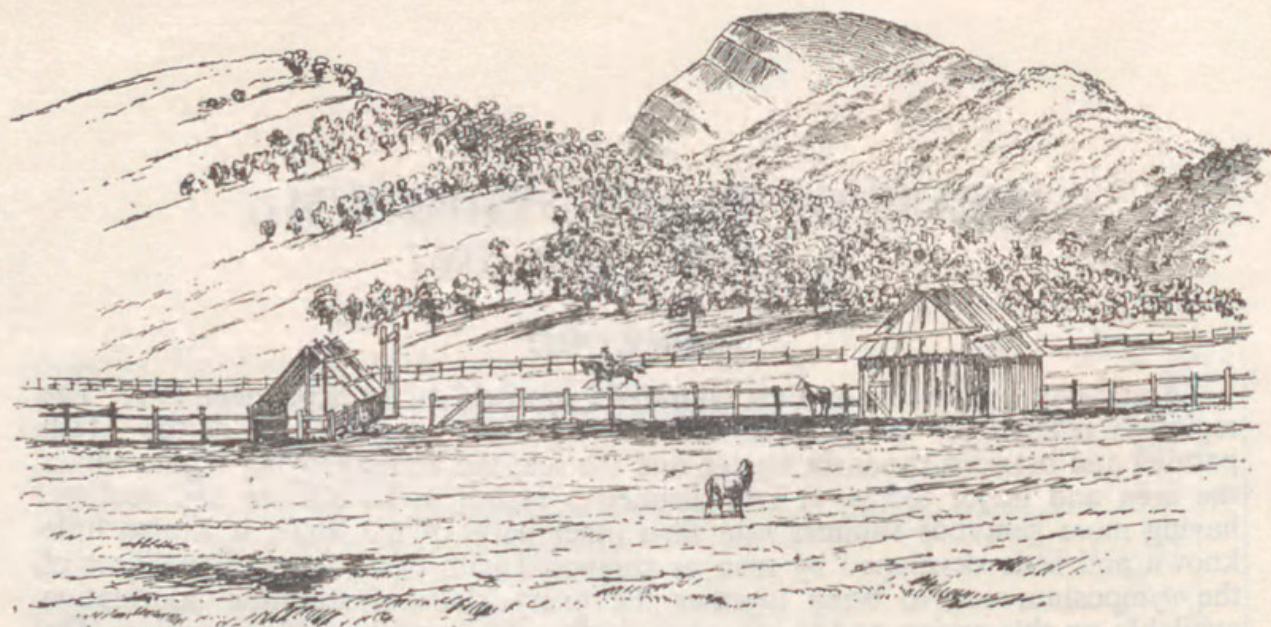
The Council of the Society has decided to publish this Symposium as a separate Part since it will have its own interest and attraction beyond the membership of the Society.

G.W.L.

ALFRED WILLIAM HOWITT

By courtesy of the Victorian Department of Mines, sketches of Gippsland by Alfred William Howitt are used in this number of the Proceedings. These particular drawings were used to illustrate his classic paper, 'Notes on the Devonian Rocks of North Gippsland' (1876). Though slight, they are quite charming, and an apposite supplement to the Symposium on East Gippsland. Howitt is of particular interest to the Royal Society of Victoria not only because of his contributions to the geology, botany and anthropology of the particular area covered by this Symposium, but also because of his long personal association with the Society itself.

He was born in Nottingham, England, 1830 and died at Metung, Victoria, 1908. Both his parents were distinguished writers who numbered amongst their friends Charles Dickens, the Brownings, Hans Christian Andersen, Tennyson, the Rosettis. Howitt's literary heritage is apparent in the vivid wording of his own extensive writing. With his father and a brother, he migrated to Victoria in the gold-rush of 1852. Their search for gold was unsuccessful, but Howitt stayed on in Australia after his relatives left in 1854, and in the next few years had various occupations. He was a very intelligent man, educated in Germany as well as in England, and the space of Australia, so little explored, challenged him. He became an extremely skilled bushman. 'I am naturally a savage and must have open air and forests which are necessary to my existence', he wrote in a letter home, ex-



Mt. Tambo from the Omeo station. (*A. W. Howitt, 1876.*)

plaining why he did not wish to return. 'I have a great hankering after tent life.'

Subsequently, he was a member of an expedition led by Blandowski of the Melbourne Museum to explore the Mornington Peninsula. He worked on a cattle station at Cape Schanck, on a small farm at Caulfield, managed a sheep station at Thalia Plains, and from there explored north into South Australia to assess the nature of the country for pastoral use. Partly because of this experience of the terrain, but also because of his outstanding qualities as leader, explorer and bushman, he was chosen, 1861, by the Royal Society of Victoria to lead the Burke and Wills Relief Expedition to the Centre. His own account of this journey was vividly presented, many years later, in his Presidential Address to the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science, Adelaide, 1907.

From Burke's 60th. camp we followed the course of Cooper's Creek, passing his first depot and then coming to his second depot, Fort Wills. . . The country we crossed consisted in great part of earthy plains, cracked and fissured in all directions, and often without any trace of vegetation; while in other places the dried stalks of plants, higher than a horse, showed what the country would be like after floods . . .

I turned towards the river, and came to it near the lower end of a very large sheet of water, and where I saw, on the opposite side of the dry channel, a number of native huts. . . (My) blackboys . . . rode toward me. As we met the elder one said, "Find em whitefella; two fella dead boy and one fella livo." Hastening on and crossing over to the native camp, I found John King sitting in one of the native wurleys. He was a melancholy object, and hardly to be distinguished as a civilized being by the remnants of the clothes on him. He was not only very weak, but much overcome by our arrival, and it was at first difficult to make out what he said. . .

It was Mr. Welch who, riding in the lead, first saw a strange figure sitting on the bank and said, "Who are you?" To which the reply was, "John King, the last survivor of Burke's party. Thank God, I am saved!"

In 1863 Howitt was appointed Warden of the Goldfields and Police Magistrate for North and East Gippsland, and he lived in this district subsequently for more than 30 years, until 1899. He travelled continuously, furnished geological reports to the Victorian Secretary for Mines, collected botanical specimens for the Govern-

ment Botanist, von Mueller, studied the customs and religions of the aborigines. His books, 'Kumlaroi and Kurrai', and 'The Tribes of South-East Australia', record this anthropological work. He became a member of the Royal Society of Victoria 1876 and contributed many papers to the Proceedings. In connection with his drawings, it is interesting to note that Eugene von Guérard, well-known landscape painter and first Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, was a friend of Howitt's and his companion, at times, on exploratory travels in the East Gippsland area. Other friends and associates were Sir Baldwin Spencer, who recognized the prime value of his anthropological work, and Baron von Mueller, to whom he sent botanical specimens. In 1899 he was appointed Victorian Secretary for Mines, and lived briefly in Melbourne, until 1901. He visited England 1902-3, and after this returned to Metung.

In his later years, Howitt received many honours: honorary Doctorates of Science from both Cambridge and Melbourne Universities; a Fellowship of the Royal Anthropological Society; C.M.G. in the Birthday Honours, 1906; the Clark Medal presented by the Royal Society of New South Wales; the von Mueller Medal presented, inaugurally, by the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science.

We still acknowledge him today. Apart from Mount Howitt in Gippsland, which bears his name, a proposed new water storage planned by the Victorian State Rivers and Water Supply Commission on the Mitchell River is to be named Lake Howitt. During 1969 Melbourne University Press will publish a book on Howitt's life, written by his grand-daughter, Mrs. Mary Howitt-Walker, who lives at Lakes Entrance. Contributions to this publication will be made by two members of the Royal Society of Victoria: Mr. John Mulvaney of Australian National University, and Dr. John Talent who writes also, in this Symposium, on the Geology of East Gippsland.

References

- HOWITT, A. W., 1876. Notes on the Devonian Rocks of North Gippsland. *Vic. Geol. Survey. Progress Report No. 3*: 181-249.
- , 1907. Personal reminiscences of Central Australia and the Burke and Wills Expedition. *A.A.A.S. Adelaide. Inaugural Address*. 1-43.
- HOWITT-WALKER, MARY, 1966. Alfred William Howitt, Explorer, Scientist, Public Servant. *The Gap. A school magazine produced by the teachers of the Bairnsdale Inspectorate. Bairnsdale. Victoria*. 5-11.
- POBJOY, H. F., 1968. New storage to be named Lake Howitt. *Aqua. (Victoria. State Rivers and Water Supply Commission)* 19 (11), 239-240.

G.M.



1969. "Alfred William Howitt." *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria. New series* 82(1), 3–5.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/260106>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/302745>

Holding Institution

Royal Society of Victoria

Sponsored by

Atlas of Living Australia

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder.

Rights Holder: Royal Society of Victoria

License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Rights: <http://biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.