

Chapter 4: Botanical Exploration, the Lighthouse and Skye Crofters

As already indicated, there was plenty of activity on the Promontory during the years immediately before and after the middle of the 19th century.

One visit of some significance to those interested in its natural history was that of Ferdinand Mueller—explorer, geographer and the first Government Botanist of the Colony of Victoria. In the autumn of 1853 he was nearing the end of his long and arduous exploration of the Australian Alps and, on the homeward journey, he made what might be termed a detour which brought him to the east coast of the Promontory, where he spent some time collecting botanical material. It was on this occasion, near Sealers Cove, that he spent a miserable four days with little food, drenched by incessant rain and, by unhappy chance, reduced to his last match.

In his report of September of that year to the Colonial Secretary which was duly tabled in Parliament and printed, mention of this visit is made in one what for Mueller is an unusually terse sentence: “After several weeks’ travelling in the neighbourhood of Port Albert and many excursions through Wilson’s Promontory, I quitted Gipps Land, returning homeward along the coast.” The full written account of the whole journey was contained in despatches written en route and addressed to the Colonial Secretary but such accounts as are now readily accessible derive from references in papers and journals which appeared in the years that followed.

Mueller was certainly impressed with the richness and variety of the vegetation he noted at Sealers Cove, so much so that in the following year, he despatched John Walters, foreman of the Botanic Garden, to the cove to collect specimens for the Paris Exhibition.

Two years later Walters was once again on the Promontory “to obtain, on a large scale, ferns and young plants of the indigenous evergreen beech, ... of the native Sassafras ... and other trees and shrubs of the locality, either rare, useful or ornamental.” Thus wrote Mueller in his report of August 1857. He added—“Through the aid kindly offered by the owners of the sawmill at Sealers Cove he [Walters] has been enabled to secure, besides a collection of timber specimens, a large number of young plants of forest trees not only as valuable acquisitions to our Garden but, also, for mutual interchange with similar institutions.”

This statement seems to place the resumption of milling at Sealers Cove at some date prior to his visit in 1853.

The mill’s logging tracks are said to have penetrated for a distance of some three miles to the gullies at the foot of Mount Ramsay. Thirty years later little trace of the mill remained.

Before the 1840s, and to a lesser extent during the

1850s, Sealers Cove and its adjacent forests must have been supremely lovely to behold. The forests have been described as “park-like”, a description which might well have applied to those of the lower slopes of the mountains, but the type of vegetation in the gullies would have more nearly resembled what we call “jungles” with tall straight beeches, sassafras, blackwoods and lilly-pillies, festooned with lianes and epiphytic ferns, overshadowing musk, blanket-leaf and tree fern, all with their foliage so densely spread as to reduce the penetration of sunlight to a point at which few herbs and shrubs can survive; where ferns, fungi and mosses are about the only impedances to easy walking; where the winds move only in the treetops above; where the temperature varies little from day to day and from season to season—delightfully cool places on the hottest of summer days.

Except in a very few isolated pockets no trace of such forests and jungles now remains. They have been destroyed by a succession of bushfires, and in their place have arisen forests of stunted and fire-scarred trees which shelter an almost impenetrable “scrub” of undergrowth—a sequence which has been not at all unusual in the burned-out mountain forests of Victoria.

Lilly Pilly Gully, the haunt of earlier generation of visitors to the Park, was just such a “jungle”. Its loveliness was destroyed by fire and hurricane in 1943.

For some years the old familiar foot-track to it was closed to visitors so that natural regeneration could proceed unhindered by the disturbances caused by trampling feet.

The complete restoration by natural processes of an area ravaged in this way takes a long while although Nature is quick to heal the superficial scars of axe, fire or tempest by clothing them with a mantle of green foliage. However, given freedom from fire, one may expect the present widespread tangle of undergrowth to endure for no more than a generation or so. In time there will gradually emerge once more a clean, park-like forest of straight-boled trees of the stature of those which graced the slopes and valleys more than one hundred years ago.

Is it too much to hope that fire can be outlawed for so long? For the present, although the scenery of the Promontory may have changed, its foundation of rugged mountains remains impregnable.

The timber mill operating at Sealers Cove in 1856 no doubt left its mark in broken forest giants, scoured wagon tracks and all those things that go with logging and milling, and it may be concluded that the mill ceased to operate only when accessible and utilisable timber had ‘cut out’.

Thirty or forty years passed before regeneration provided more timber of merchantable size, quality and

quantity. At the end of these decades milling, in fact, was resumed.

At Sealers Cove the millers laid down tram tracks which reached across the rugged country towards Refuge Cove and deep into the valleys of Mount Ramsay and the Wilson Range, extending even as far as eastern slopes of Mount Oberon. The now vanished jetty, once a feature of the cove, was rebuilt by them.

A story is told about a large stack of blackwood logs near the jetty, awaiting shipment to the mainland. The milling rights expressly excluded blackwood but the manager of the mill, operating so far from the purview of officialdom, considered the risks of breaking the agreement worthwhile. Fate was against him. A Departmental officer chanced to visit the scene, saw the huge dump of logs and promptly ordered the lot to be burned!

A few years after the dedication of the Promontory as a site for a National Park the mill ceased to operate and the timber tracks were, once more, abandoned.

Specially favourable circumstances are in the high summer rainfall of the Sealers Cove area and its remarkably sheltered situation.

In 1928 a party of bushwalkers from the Field Naturalists' Club and the Melbourne Walking Club found traces of one of the old timber tracks. They followed it with difficulty to the foot of Mount Wilson and located the site of the mill which had operated there almost a quarter of a century earlier. There, also, were found the remains of the timbermen's huts, some derelict machinery and relics of the loading stage.

How much of it all now remains, after the passing of more than 80 years?

But to return to the botanical collectors of that era. One, M.C. Wilhelmi, was there in either 1859 or 1860. He is known to have collected in the Corner Basin area and to have been on Citadel Island—one of the Glennie Group which lies off Oberon Bay. Another botanist, believed to have been Carl Walter, collecting for Mueller, came in 1869 but, unfortunately, neither left anything in the way of a published record of his travels which could shed light on the contemporary scene.

There are only occasional references which speak of "park-like" forests on the eastern side of the ranges, lush river flats and heavily timbered valleys as the normal environment of Wilsons Promontory.

In 1874 Mueller once again visited the region, this time by boat to the Lighthouse from whence he examined the country in the vicinity of Mount Oberon and the telegraph line.

With him were W. H. Tietkins and Carl Walter, the former, under Mueller's tutelage, undergoing a course of training in botanical collecting in anticipation of the



Mr Audas of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria examines a grass-tree during an excursion to Wilsons Promontory, 1905. Photo courtesy Historic Places, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria

task he was to undertake in the following year when he was to accompany Ernest Giles on his memorable expedition through Central Australia to Perth.

Again no record has been located of what was actually collected on that occasion, although one may be sure that the indefatigable botanist added to the tally of plants new for the State.

The vegetation of a region is of never-ending interest to those who study ecology and, although far from pretending to be one of them, the present writer [Ros. Garnet] thought it worthwhile to gather together as much information as has been available about the plants that have been found on the Promontory. It was duly assembled and published in 1971 under the title *The Wildflowers of Wilsons Promontory National Park*. It may be added that the book was conceived as a chapter in this present work but it seemed a pity to deny visitors to the Park such information as had been assembled to some indefinite time in the future when this present book might be published.

The Lighthouse

In 1859 the lighthouse on South East Point, almost at the extreme south of the Promontory, was put into operation.

It was built of very fine-grained grey granite which happened to be present at the site in a thick, horizontally-bedded band between strata of the much coarser stone. The quarry was located below the lighthouse.

The circular stone tower of the edifice is 19.5 metres high and its pinnacle 84 metres above sea level. Its light flashes every 15 seconds and is visible at a distance of 42 kilometres.

For those who like to have such details at hand it may

be added that its precise location is given as longitude 146° 25' East and latitude 39° 08' South, giving it the distinction of being the southernmost building on the Australian continent. The actual southernmost part on the continent is South Point—about 4.8 km west and south as the crow flies.

There is something fascinating about lighthouses and the Promontory lighthouse has been a veritable magnet to visitors. It is permanently manned by a team of officers and their families whose only personal contact with the outside world was when the lighthouse supply ship *Lady Loch* called or when a telegraph lineman or a walker from the Darby River arrived. Such visitors were always welcome.

Officially the lighthouse is out of bounds to unauthorised visitors but the Commonwealth, which owns the 73 acre (29.63 ha) reserve on which it stands has, naturally, never objected to the small community there enjoying such social contacts as chance provided. Even in this present era of 4WD vehicles access to it by land is limited.

Although many present-day visitors to the Park would welcome a public motor road through to the lighthouse it is improbable that one for public use will ever be constructed at the direction of the National Parks Service. Such a road would be extremely costly and it would fail to provide the motorist with what he would most want—freedom to visit and inspect the lighthouse. If the place were to become a tourist rendezvous one can be certain that the Commonwealth authorities would insist on the property being rigidly closed to unauthorised visitors. Cars would have to stop at a point half a mile north of the lighthouse—at the boundary of the reserve.

Because there is now a 4WD track leading to it the lighthouse keepers are no longer isolated from social contact. The arrival of an overland visitor is of little more interest to them than the meeting with strangers in a city street.

At the time of its establishment the staff lived on what was indeed a lonely outpost. Signals to passing ships would have been their only means of contact. However, almost immediately, erection of the overland telegraph was commenced and, in the following year (1860), the lighthouse was linked to Melbourne by a line from Foster via Yanakie, the Darby River and Mount Oberon. The job was carried out under contract to the Ports and Harbours Branch of the Victorian Customs Department and its route became, for most of its length, the track to the lighthouse.

One of the sub-contractors for the Promontory section of the line was a local character, Bob Curran by name. He, with the help of his two young sons, completed the job under some difficulty.

Packhorses were used to carry the rolls of wire and the constant jolting over the granite boulders chaffed the straps which held them in place. On several occasions the rolls cut themselves free and went bounding down the mountain side like sturdy hoops, leaping and crashing until they landed in the ocean far below where they probably remain to this day.

Curran himself was injured by a pole which rolled on his leg. In the absence of medical aid of any sort he set about curing the injury by immersing his leg in the sea. Despite the prolonged salt water treatment he continued to suffer from the accident and it seems to have given him more trouble than usual on the occasion of the visit of the Bishop of Sale to the Alberton district. After the service old Curran emerged from the church and retired to a nearby log where he sat alone in his misery until the Bishop joined him to enquire after his health. Curran explained his conversational style by mentioning his regret that “the swears will slip out” and went on to say that “me bloody leg is bothering me and now the other bastard has let me down”. The Bishop hastened away, murmuring “Too bad, too bad my poor fellow.”

For the benefit of the telegraph linemen a hut was built along the route, at Titania Creek. A test house was erected at the Darby River in a small allotment which was temporarily reserved in 1892 for the use of the Post and Telegraph Department. It was “temporarily” reserved for something like 26 years and then finally, around 1918, reserved permanently as part of the National Park. In the intervening years the State Department had gone out of existence, its functions having been taken over by the Commonwealth PMG’s Department.

The line maintenance men had no further use for the hut or for the small reserve. Both huts gradually became derelict and one of them finally disappeared. While they stood and remained habitable they were often used by the walking fraternity as they made their way from Yanakie (and later, the Darby River) to the lighthouse.

The track they followed varies little from that now in use. After fording the Darby it skirted Darby Hill on the east and climbed the saddle of the Leonard Range, descended into the valley of Whisky Creek and then on to Tidal River.

From here it wound its way across the Oberon Saddle between Oberon and the Wilson Range from whence were to be seen lovely vistas of Oberon Bay, the ocean and little islands dotted here and there. It then made its way down to Growler’s Creek, then south easterly for a couple of mile to Martin’s Hill; southward for another mile to the pass between Adam and Eve and Mother Siegel after crossing which it turned easterly through

the well timbered area of Roaring Meg, Picnic, Ferres and First Bridge Creeks (three of them spanned by very rustic bridges); skirted South Peak and dropped steeply down to the boundary of the lighthouse reserve.

Between Growler's Creek crossing and Martin's Hill another track went west through some sand hummocks to a pleasant camping spot on Oberon Bay near the mouth of Fraser's Creek. By following this track north along the general direction of the coast the traveller emerged onto the slopes near the mouth of Growler's Creek and could make his way to Tidal River by the route which, today, is one of the favoured walks of those who visit the national park.

The telegraph line is no longer used, radio communication having superseded it, but back in 1860 it represented one of the great advances in scientific achievement. Morse's electric telegraph was a novelty which had come into use only a few years earlier and the Victorian government was among the first to use the system for long distance communication.

Although the Commonwealth had no further use for the old Darby River reserve, the 73-acre reserve at South East Point was taken over and, in more recent years, another area on the summit of Mount Oberon was acquired in exchange for the site at the Darby. Here has been built a radio-telephone relay station to facilitate interstate communication with Tasmania and the islands of Bass Strait and the southern Ocean. The road leading to it is open to private vehicles as far as the turntable some distance from the top but the actual summit of one of the Park's high mountains—a peak renowned for its unexcelled vistas—is denied to all but those who are capable of hill climbing.

However, walkers are well rewarded for the effort of following the rest of the well-graded road to its terminus at the top. The panoramas which they will see spread before them are magnificent. As Gregory once remarked: "He who has stood on the top of Mount Oberon...and watched the clouds gather...and disperse about Mount Wilson...has enjoyed a sight not easily surpassed."

The lighthouse track is part of the story of Wilsons Promontory. But the origin of another favourite tourist track (or what is known of it)—the bridle path to Sealers Cove—is worth recording.

There is good reason to believe that it was first cut by a government survey party when the Promontory was being surveyed for settlement away back in the 1840s. It was to have been the route linking Sealers Cove with the other future settlements at Oberon Bay, Mount Singapore, Corner Basin and Yanakie. Others have surmised that it was made for the use of shipwrecked sailors in an age when shipwrecks were not uncommon on the east coast of the Promontory. From the quiet

waters of Sealers Cove a short overland journey along this bridle path would bring rescue and relief.

However, it should not be forgotten that human enterprises were operating on those eastern shores in the years before and after the middle of the 19th century and it is not unlikely that the track was on of the routes used by the loggers who were extracting timber from the then well-timbered gullies west of Sealers Cove and in the vicinity of Refuge Cove. At Sealers the last lap of the track ran straight to a jetty the remains of which, up to a few years ago, were still to be seen. Even today, at low tide, a line of stumps show where the jetty once stood.

By the end of the 1870s many of the various phases of activity on the Promontory were drawing to a close. The days of the sealer had long since passed. The fur seal had been practically exterminated years before that time although relics of the occupation by those industrious folk were still to be seen.

Timber logging had not yet been resumed.

Tin mining and squid fishing as major industries were yet to come.

The quietude was broken only by the lowing of grazing herds and the crackle of rifles and guns.

There was plenty to shoot and trap. Dingoes had a price on their scalps and "bear" [koala] skins and wallaby pelts were always in demand. The tracks were in frequent use.

A Christmas Walking Tour

During the Christmas holidays of 1884 an event occurred which was to shape the destiny of the Promontory.

Three men, Messrs J. B. Gregory, A.H.S. Lucas and G.W. Robinson, undertook a walking tour from Trafalgar to the Lighthouse by way of the Yanakie Isthmus, the Darby River and Mount Oberon.

Lucas collected specimens for subsequent identification by the now-famous Baron von Mueller and later, in collaboration with Gregory, published an account of the trip in the second volume of the Victorian Naturalist, the journal and magazine of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria. The series of papers makes fascinating reading.

It was they who suggested that the Promontory could be regarded as an ideal resort for tourists and fishermen. They considered that it had little to recommend it for commercial development. Indeed, it is in no small measure due to them that Victoria now has Wilson's Promontory as a national park permanently reserved as a refuge and sanctuary for our country's wildlife as well as a resort where may be seen some of

the most entrancing of Victoria's coastal scenery.

Their account of its potentialities as a tourist attraction aroused widespread interest but the very remoteness of the place from populated centres and the difficulties of access suggested that, for a long time to come, there would be little effort to develop them.

In their account of it they wrote:

"We may safely recommend the Promontory as full of interest to naturalists of all persuasions. Practically inaccessible as it is at present (1884) we believe that a future yet awaits is as a summer haunt of lovers of nature and lovers of scenery. In many respects alike, we prophesy that, as the Cornish Peninsula was later to be discovered by tourists, not many generations will pass before means of communication will enable Victorians to find out and do justice to this noble granite promontory—the Cornwall of Victoria."

The three men observed emu tracks and claim to have seen "Love Birds" (a common name for budgerigars) on Martin's Hill. It would be most surprising if they did indeed see budgerigars because they are birds peculiar to the dry inland regions of the Continent, but still, the Promontory is notable for the odd and unexpected plants and animals which have been found there. One may suppose that they saw Grass Parrots—birds which are common enough in various part of Gippsland.

The existence of emus anywhere on the Promontory was not confirmed by subsequent observers although they were known on Yanakie Isthmus further north. As the big birds are quite capable of swimming they could well have crossed the Darby River and actually been on Martin's Hill as accidental visitors at that time.

At any rate, years later, when the place finally became a national park, it was considered necessary to introduce them into the Promontory.

The Skye Crofters

In 1887, three years after this notable walking tour, the government was being pressed to interest itself in the welfare of the fishermen operating in Bass Strait and off the coast of South Gippsland. From Western Port to Port Albert they were experiencing lean times. Transport of their catches to the metropolitan market was slow, uncertain and generally unsatisfactory. Sometimes on arrival the consignments were condemned as unfit for use.

On such occasions, instead of receiving a cheque for his produce, the unfortunate fisherman would get a bill for freight and other charges incidental to the receipt (and rejection) of his fish. Local demand was, of course, limited by the sparseness of population, and those engaged in the industry needed either an

assurance of a fair share of the Melbourne market of some other occupation which could supplement their income to compensate for the deficiencies caused by unsatisfactory transport or bad weather.

In the hope of maintaining good catches the more intrepid fishermen set up bases in various isolated places along the southern coast of Gippsland. One such place was Billy's Cove in Waterloo Bay where, in 1886, some had built themselves huts and laid down moorings. Other bases were in Oberon Bay, Refuge Cove and Sealers' Cove—a fact which, in some measure, accounts for the number of well-defined tracks which used to exist on the Promontory in the early days. Graziers and their cattle, timbermen, prospectors, construction gangs, all helped to make them and the visitor helped to keep them open.

As one will have already gathered, the Promontory, even so long ago, had its devotees some of whom obviously knew the place much more intimately than most of its present-day visitors.

The straightforward campaign for assisting and developing a big fishing industry in Victoria got rather complicated when a Mrs Gordon Baillie persuaded the Minister of Lands (Mr Dow) to look favourably on her scheme for settling a thousand impoverished Scottish Skye crofters on the South Gippsland coast.

The crofters were to be brought to the colony at the Government's expense, each given a small block of land where he could dwell with his compatriots in tight little community and fish to his heart's content. When not so occupied the crofters would work industriously on their colonial croft and so add to the prosperity and productivity of the province and the development of the colony.

There was plenty of Crown Land available since, by that time, most of the big pastoral runs had been abandoned or forfeited and subdivided for closer settlement.

The idea appealed to the Minister and his department was instructed to draw up plans for a land subdivision in which was to be included 45,000 acres of the Promontory.

Township sites were to be dotted here and there along the coast from Liptrap to Entrance Point. They were to be an integral part of the grand plan for the fishing industry and its associated canneries.

The scheme was dropped but not before the public and the Press had a lot to say about it. It seems likely that the main reason for its abandonment was not so much adverse public opinion but the fact that the land regulations then in force failed to provide for the subdivision of the big runs into small blocks.

By the time the publicity had subsided

Parliament was not in the mood to amend the Act.

The newspapers of July, 1887 dealt with the subject at some length. At first they thought Mrs Baillie's idea was a good one but, after a spate of letters from the already-established fishermen and their well-wishers which presented points of view not obvious to the Minister, their enthusiasm waned and eventually waxed to downright opposition.

Sixteen years later, when the matter of the permanent reservation of the Promontory was again being vigorously pursued, a sub-leader in "The Argus" included the following trenchant comment: "The reservation of Wilsons Promontory is not a new idea. Mr JL Purves, K.C., some years ago led a successful opposition to its proposed alienation, when the adventuress Mrs Gordon Baillie humbugged so many public men and one particular Lands Minister with her schemes for settling Highland crofters in Victoria. After her romantic plans had been shown-up, it was generally understood that the area would be reserved as a National Park."

The passing years had reduced the status of the lady to that of romantic humbugging adventuress and Mr Dow (the "particular Lands Minister") was seen to have been nothing less than what we now colloquially term "a sucker".

Purves, on the other hand, was raised to the rank of leader of the anti-crofter element!

In 1887 Purves had a lot to say. He was at one time a member of Parliament and, on other counts, a prominent citizen of the times. A long letter of his in "The Argus" of the 16th July described the Promontory as he knew it from regular and frequent trips made over a period of several years. Parts of the letter are worth quoting for the picture they give of the place as seen through his shrewd and observant eyes.

"The peninsula consists of a backbone of mountains whose valley-seamed sides run down to an indented coastline providing an eastern and western water-shed.

Down each valley runs a stream of greater or less magnitude which, in some cases join, and so provide a considerable creek, which debouches in one of the numerous bays or coves which abound in the locality.... The interior is more difficult of access because of the almost tropical richness of the vegetation in the bottom of these...although the mountain tops and ridges are barren and useless for present agricultural and pastoral purposes yet there is a very considerable area of country which, when cleared, would be of great value. No doubt there are heathy plains lying between Cape Singapore and Banner Creek, draining Vereker Range but, with this exception,

almost all the land is heavily timbered which in my experience is not a sign of barren soil.

As a contrast to these heathy plains at Chinaman's Bend or Station Bight¹, take the rich bottoms at Sealers' Cove, Refuge Cove, the lagoons at Five Mile Beach, Biddy's Camp and on the eastern watershed at Oberon and Norman Bays. The jungle at these places consists of swamp tea-tree, tree ferns, bracken, sword grass, musk, supplejack and similar scrub, which I think does not indicate feeble soil.

Above all this towers a forest of gums which extends to the mountain tops.

A few words now with regard to the coastline.

Its beauty is undeniable..... To the west we find Oberon and Norman Bays — the former well named so far as its beauty is concerned and affording a safe harbour for craft of all sizes in most weather. To the east there is hardly a mile of coast which does not afford a good and safe shelter for small craft and, besides, there are several harbours fitted for large ships.

Starting from the Lighthouse there is Waterloo Bay, well known as a harbour of refuge for ships navigating Bass's Straits. Within its bounds are several convenient coves, notably Billy's Cove..... Three miles northerly is Refuge Cove, named by the pioneers of Gippsland "Lady Bay" from its loveliness — a perfect little gem of a harbour whose land-locking shores provide a frame worthy of the picture. Here are two beautiful beaches behind which extend valleys such as I have already mentioned.Thence rounding Horn Point the visitor sails into another charming bay, Sealers Cove, whose shallow waters teem with the choicest fish. Thence rounding a bold headland one reaches the Five Mile Beach, where either extremity provides an excellent anchorage in most weathers and, when a south-eastern necessitates a change, shelter is to be found either under Rabbit Island or in one of the aforementioned coves.

Leaving Rabbit Island, the coastline is a series of harbours under Mount Hunter, at Cape Singapore; thence southerly in any of the numerous bays and bights which line the Inlet. From each of these the land rises rapidly, providing admirable township sites. The summer climate is superb and those who know the miseries of a December night in Melbourne would relish one between blankets in Waterloo Bay or Sealers' Cove."

His letter was written not merely to extol the scenic attractions of the Promontory but as a kind of counterblast to the publicity being given to Mrs Gordon Baillie's plan.

Purves was not objecting to settlement on the Promontory but to the proposal to alienate it in the interests of monopolies, “be they philanthropists or speculators”.

Another correspondent held a different view of its potential for the proposed scheme. He claimed to have “traversed the Promontory on foot from end to end and to have had a bird’s-eye view of large part of its surface.”

He observed that “the greater part of it consists of granite mountains covered with masses of rock which must be forever impossible to plough.”

He went on — “there are great morasses in which a horse would founder. There are very few sandy flats on which there is some pasture but so light is the soil that the beasts which depasture on it pull up by the roots the herbs they eat and so, year by year, render the feed poorer. Moreover, beasts left long on these pastures die of coast disease so that it is impossible to breed livestock. It is not to be wondered at that the Station [no doubt referring to Yanakie] has been abandoned and no one else is disposed to take it up again.

Mr Purves says that parts of the peninsula are heavily timbered and part covered with dense scrub.

What timber I saw was in the distance, growing on very steep slopes, especially those on Mount Latrobe. I skirted dense scrub of great extent of the sort described by Mr Purves on the Darby River and approached such a scrub on the Tidal River but in both cases it covered a swamp. I doubt therefore whether there is land of any appreciable extent left for agricultural purposesthe only possible roads are very steep pack tracks”

After alluding to the certain disabilities which the scheme would impose on the settlers the correspondent (who signed himself “G” and probably was J.B. Gregory, the walking tourist of 1884) went on to describe the scenery of the place in lyrical terms:

“ It is a delightful place for a tourist.

The granite mountains, so unpromising to the settler, are eminently picturesque and from the barren tops and sides of many of them is to be observed that look-out so commonly wanting among the wooded ranges of Victoria. And what a look-out; sea and sky, bays with pearly beaches, rocky headlands and islands with a background of timbered or stony peaks.

There are not many places in Victoria where one can find a summit rising 2,000 feet from the water’s edge. I think anyone who has stood on the top of Mount Oberon or the brow of Mount Southern or has sat on the shore of the Great Bay and watched the clouds gather and disperse about Mount Wilson will bear me out that he has enjoyed a sight not easily surpassed.

There are many other beauties on the peninsula.

Plateaux with lumps of granite standing round like a natural Stonehenge; streams of crystal clear water falling through delightful rocky and wooded gorges. The place, moreover, is a paradise for the naturalist. The native fauna abounds in great variety. I know nowhere within easy reach of Melbourne where one may see the walk of an emu and, so soon as the Great Southern Railway is completed, Wilson’s Promontory will be within easy reach of it. I hope, therefore ... that following the example of the Americans, steps will be taken to preserve Wilson’s Promontory for the purpose for which it is eminently fitted—that is, a national park. To do so would not only preserve a source of healthy recreation for the vast population of Melbourne [it was 405,520 in 1887!] but be of eminent advantage to science in preserving the native animals from extinction. Wilson’s Promontory, being separated from the mainland by a long, narrow isthmus covered with hills of shifting sands is perhaps the only place where they could be left unmolested without the risk of injuring the selectors.”

This “long narrow isthmus covered with hills of shifting sands” comprised the southern end of the Yanakie Run which, like the several Promontory Runs, had been abandoned after more than 25 years of occupation by a succession of optimists. In the circumstances, this was hardly to be wondered at. What was reason for wonderment was the optimism of Smythe and Black, Bennison and their several successors and pioneers like Baragwanath and Fraser who believed they could profit handsomely by occupying the country. The aetiology of coast disease was not then understood; nor were the other consequences of mineral deficiencies of those almost sterile coastal sandy soils.

Opinions about the peculiar merits of the Skye crofters were at variance too. Mrs Gordon Baillie could think of no more industrious and deserving people. Although it is safe to say she had not consulted them, she was convinced that they would jump at the opportunity of departing from their homeland to make a fresh start in a new country even though they might have to endure hardships as many and as severe as were their lot on the Isle of Skye.

One correspondent to the daily paper pointed out that they might not want to leave Skye anyway and, as for being industrious, he could say, from and intimate acquaintance with them, that “the ordinary Skye crofter nowadays is a man who will do no work of any description if he can manage to exist (or he is supported) without it, and much prefers to loaf around with his hands in his pockets, occasionally condescending to walk complacently smoking beside his wife or sister, giving her the privilege of carrying a huge close-packed creel of peats on her back.”

He didn't think much of the crofters.

And the local fishermen. What did they think of the scheme?

If there were going to be any handouts by a beneficent government there were scattered about the coastal settlements plenty of deserving cases who would be glad to receive them. These folk were already contributing to the development of their country and getting mighty little in return. The menace of competition from a thousand fishermen from overseas was like adding insult to injury.

All this publicity stirred Gregory and Lucas to action and, through them, the Field Naturalists' Club organised a deputation to the Minister seeking the reservation of the whole of the Promontory as a national park.

The Minister assured the representatives of the Club, the Royal Society of Victoria, the Royal Geographical Society and the Academy of Arts that there was every possibility that the greater part of it would be reserved. But nothing came of it.

Footnote

¹ Station Bight is a locality name not now used. The writer has not been able to determine its precise location but he believes the word "Station" to refer either to the station or homestead associated with one of the old pastoral runs in the locality. If so the Bight would be a small cove at the foot of Mount Singapore or else that section of the Inlet shore where Barry's Creek empties. "Banner Creek" is doubtless Barry's Creek.