HOLIDAY AT THIRROUL, CHRISTMAS 1890

Fred Jeater — the unlikely surname is the most likely reading of an indistinct signature — was an English immigrant of 1887, settling in Sydney with his family, who kept a shop, while he became a book-keeper in letters to his friend Alfred Marsh in London he wrote of full life, long hours of work and fairly satisfactory pay. Fred was active in Chapel affairs, singing bass in choirs, and was a Sunday School teacher of an evangelical leaning. A particular interest was sport; he gave long descriptions of cricket matches, including Australia-England tests. In politics he seems to have inclined towards a very mild form of socialism. His life emerges from these letters which, written between 1887-91 in a good, clerkly hand, are all now in the Mitchell Library (ML MSS 1051), to which thanks are due for permission to publish the following extracts.

On 29th December 1890, writing from Abercrombie Street, Sydney, Fred described Christmas Day, spent on a picnic in National Park. With appetite whetted, a group of young people went to what we now know as Thirroul, but then known as Robbinsville. Fred tells his story:

"On Boxing Day five young men were safely ensconced in a 2nd Class Carriage (there are no third) of a train bound for Robbinsville in the Illawarra District. The town which is comprised principally of miners and men connected with coal mines, is named after an old resident named Robbans, and is situated at the foot of some large hills about a quarter of a mile from the sea shore. The place being rather full, we had to suffer a little inconvenience in our lodgings but that was no serious obstacle to our enjoyment. The day we arrived we took our dinners with us and proceeded to climb the mountain up what is called the Bulli Pass to the Look out, a tramp of about 4 miles or more uphill all the way. At the lookout the view is a splendid panorama of water and land. The coast line extends as far as the eye can see and forms by its large headlands several bays, here and there though very rare are cultivated plots although the greater part of the district is virgin forest. To our left a large volume
of smoke arises caused by what is known as a bushfire. At the foot of the mountains between them and the sea for some miles can be seen the towns and villages of Robbinsville, Bulli, Woonoona, Corrimal and Wollongong in the distance, most of these places are supported almost entirely by the mining industries, the mountains being rich with coal. The mines are not like the mines in England with shafts letting them down into the earth, but are boreing like railway tunnels; the coal is extracted and put in trucks which are rolled down an incline on to the jetties out into the sea. We returned to our home for the time being by a track through the bush which abounded in ferns of all descriptions, some of which we took for transplanting. In about another month, blackberries will be as common as dirt almost, in this part and while we were walking another time through a part of the bush we came across good passion fruit, the only fault about them being that they were not ripe enough to eat.

“The day after (Saturday) we hired a buggy and drove into Wollongong, visiting the beach and a neighbouring park, besides strolling through the town. Our evenings were spent principally on the verandah, discussing the merits of single tax, whether American democracy has been a failure, and Bellamy’s ‘Looking Backward.’ (This was a Utopian romance of 1888 which for many decades to come served as a fillip to socialist thinking.) Our landlord who was a Yankee born gave us a vivid description of the decisive battle of Gettysburg, which he saw.

“On Sunday we went to the Presbyterian Church with another young fellow who was staying at the same place, and astonished the rustics by taking possession of the two front pews, and helped the choir which consisted of 4 children about 11 years old; our landlady presided at the organ and after service the parson thanked us for the great help we had given the singing. We returned to Sydney on Monday morning just in time to get me to work ½ hour late. While staying at Robbinsville I also saw one of the largest trees in the Colony, a large Black Butt Gum Tree measuring 57 feet round the trunk with a tape measure as high as an ordinary man can reach and rising in a straight stem for about 100 feet before it starts to branch forth. Standing in all its strength the tree looks like a king of the forest and inspires the looker on with awe as he stands and thinks of the great might of God that planted ‘in such a small seed the possibilities of so large a result, and ‘if God so clothes the trees shall he not much more cloth us,’ If he plants in a perishable substance such great possibilities what shall be implanted in an immortal soul’.

On that high plane ended Fred’s account of his holiday and, virtually, the correspondence. His search for the lovely, the pure and the true led him to find those qualities in a young lady. Fred was in love, and after a few more bits of news and more elevated thoughts, he ended his last letter. The rest is silence — on Robbinsville, as on everything else, for we know no more of Fred Jeater.