

## **BUSH RAMBLES**

By

A.G. HAMILTON

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### **A NATURALIST'S NOTES FROM ILLAWARRA**

Since the completion of the South Coast railway, the portal to what residents of Illawarra district delight in calling "The Garden of New South Wales" is the big tunnel. After passing through that grim gateway glimpses of fairyland begin to appear on the right hand and the left. Perpendicular cliffs rear themselves up from the yeasty sea, with a narrow ribbon of road winding round near their base, and a misty coast running southwards on the left; glorious tropical greenery, with tall cabbage-palms and graceful bangalows rising up out of it in the night, making a picture unequalled in any part of New South Wales. Farther on, the iron way passes across undulating meadows, backed by the blue ridge of the Illawarra range, and crosses watercourses, the devious windings of which are indicated by the tea-trees and other shrubs on the banks; it passes trim little cottages embowered in flowers, smoky mines on the mountain-sides with clustering villages near, and lines of rails which cross the track at right angles and make down to long spidery jetties. Here and there belts of gum and turpentine-trees, straight and slim, intervene, so that only glimpses - but such

glimpses - can be had of curved white beaches, with snowy-topped emerald breakers rolling in ceaselessly - "the long wash of Australasian seas." Such a combination of mountain, jungle and sea is nowhere else to be found in our beautiful land.

The aspect of the vegetation differs entirely from that of the Blue Mountains and the tablelands, and even from that of the coast district lying westward from Sydney. Still, by climbing to the top of the Illawarra range, something may be found resembling the Blue Mountains, for the Hawkesbury sandstone extends there, and it is the vegetation arising from such soil which is so characteristic of the Blue Mountains. The forest "brushes" are found only in the neighbourhood of basaltic outflows; but these occur so frequently along the range that the whole eastern slope from Clifton (Scarborough) to Kiama is clothed with their luxuriant drapery.

The occurrence of cappings of basalt on some seven peaks of the Blue Mountains determines the growth of vegetation which closely resembles the brushes of Illawarra, although the forms are not all identical. Such patches are found at Mount Wilson, Mount Tomah and other points in the mountains. On Lord Howe Island, which is largely basaltic, a rich sub-tropical flora exists, with many plants common to Illawarra. Yet, strange to say, no such vegetation is to be found where basalt occurs on the western slopes of the tablelands. Near Mudgee, certainly, in a gully cut through basalt, grow several trees common in coast and mountain brushes, which are not found elsewhere in the district; but the area they cover is small indeed compared with that of the igneous rocks. The occurrence of the blue gum with them points to some other reason for the existence of this strange flora so far from the ordinary habitat.

Among the trees from Scarborough southwards which attract the attention of strangers are the two palms, the cabbage-palm and the bangalow. The former has fan-shaped leaves, while the latter has long feathery leaves. The bangalow is comparatively rare, which is a matter for regret, as it is a most graceful plant, much more so than the cabbage-palm. Young cabbage-palms, which are low enough to allow the brilliant colour and graceful fan shape of the leaves (or hands, as they are locally called) to be seen, are very beautiful; but old and tall

specimens are very suggestive of a gigantic mop. The cabbage-palm flowers in October, and the fruit of the previous year ripens at the same time, so that flowers and ripe fruit may be seen together. The flowers are small and ivory-coloured, like the stalk on which they grow; they are borne in immense numbers on a much branched stalk, which comes out of a spathe of protecting leaves. One tree will bear eight or ten such spathes. The quantity of blossom on the tree may be imagined. The fruit is spherical, coated on the outside with a prune coloured skin, which appears to be edible, as large numbers of birds resort to the trees when the fruit is ripe; inside is a hard nut which, when broken, reveals a hard milky-white kernel resembling vegetable ivory in colour and texture. On the edges of the leaf-stalk are formidable hooked thorns and, as these are larger and stronger in the young plants, they probably act as a deterrent to marauding animals. The stems of the older trees, on account of their roundness and perfect taper, look rigid and unyielding; but they are built up largely of fibre and are extremely elastic, bending and swaying in the faintest breeze, and their heads almost touch the ground in a heavy gale. Notwithstanding their toughness, many were snapped off short in the big gale of May 1889. In exposed places, the direction of the prevailing winds may be discovered by the aspect of the heads of leaves, the side from which the wind blows being thinner and flatter, and the ends of the leaves being frayed with threads.

The stems, when cut down, were once greatly used by small farmers for fencing and pig troughs. When cut into short lengths they were made into flower-pots, and when split, into walking-sticks similar to, the Katool and coco-nut sticks once sold about the wharves by Lascar seamen. Brooms, too, are made of the fibres. The young leaf midribs were once plaited into cabbage-tree hats, now seldom seen. The terminal bud or cabbage was eaten either raw or roasted in the hot ashes. It is white and crisp and has a nutty flavour. But the cutting out of this terminal bud means the death of the palm.

For the most purposes, the bangalow is superior to the cabbage-palm. The trunk is thinner, rounder and smoother, and it may be that this superiority for fencing purposes is the cause of its comparative rarity; but I fancy it was never so common (on the South Coast at least) as the cabbage-tree. I do not know

the regular flowering-season of the bangalow, having seen it in bloom only once in June, at Scarborough. One remarkable feature is that the cluster of flowers emerges from a spathe on the trunk some distance from the crown of leaves, whereas in the cabbage-tree the flowers come from the centre of the leaf clusters.

Notable among the brush trees are the figs, of which at least three species are common, the best known being the Moreton Bay Fig-tree. A very fine specimen of this can be seen at the village of Figtree (named after it) about two and a half miles from Wollongong, on the South Coast road. It is about one hundred and forty feet high, with an immense buttressed trunk, covered with a climbing species of pepper, the large glossy dark green leaves of which form a capital substitute for the ivy which takes its place on the English trees. Standing as it does in a cleared area, it is easily seen from any eminence for miles around. From the summit of Mount Kembla-1700 feet-it looks like the shadow of a cloud projected on the ground. It is very irregular in shape, and has apparently been much damaged by storms. In October, when the fruit is ripe, the flying foxes resort to it for food and after dark they may be heard squabbling in the tree, giving vent to their weird gurgling screams. The seeds are distributed in the droppings of the foxes and thus often reach the fork of a branch where they grow, sending long roots down to the ground. These roots expand and form a network around the trunk of the host and strangle it; they flatten on its corpse, in time covering it completely, so that the fig looks like an ordinary tree growing out of the soil. But through chinks in the network the rotted remains of the victim may be seen. The fruit also affords sustenance to some small wasps which lay their eggs in it; the larvae develop inside, and incidentally pollinate the minute flowers in its interior. If a nearly ripe fig is cut open many larvae will be seen, and probably a few of the perfect insects also; but they are so small as to need a powerful magnifying glass to show their strange shapes and the beauty of their golden-bronze colour. The Moreton Bay Figs in the brushes are usually loaded with epiphytal ferns, the Hare's Foot and Staghorn being the commonest.

In the creeks and gullies, the Port Jackson or small-leaved fig is very common.

The trunk is usually contorted and twisted in curious folds and from its grey colour and plastic look it always suggests cooled lava streams to me. This formation is said to arise from its having grown parasitically on another tree and covered it with its own growth. The buttresses which run up the trunk are often prolonged radially outwards along the ground to a considerable distance; I have seen one extend fifty yards, four feet high for a considerable distance, and five inches thick. I have read of their being sixteen feet high, but have not been fortunate enough to see such an extraordinary development.

The third common fig-tree is the Rough-leaved Fig, locally known as the "sandpaper tree." This is easily recognised by the curious asperities on its leaves, on both upper and lower sides. These are so plentiful and hard that the leaf may be used to smooth timber. The leaves really make a good substitute for sandpaper and will polish bone or ivory readily. Another peculiarity of the tree is that the fruit often grows out of the trunk, a peculiarity which I have not met in any other fig.