"THE FIRST EXPLORATION OF ILLAWARRA BY LAND"

Notes of Address given at the Society’s March meeting by Mr. Edgar Beale (member), illustrated by slides, many of which were prepared by Mr. W. G. McDonald (Vice-president).

I

For some reason or other, in the Society’s previous assessment of early explorations of the Illawarra district, there has been a blank of some years. Previous accounts have covered Cook’s attempted landing in 1770, the 1796 exploits of Bass and Flinders, the traversing of the district by the survivors of SYDNEY COVE resulting in the discovery of coal, and the confirmation of the existence of coal through Bass as a result of that report. Thereafter, the blank existed until 1815 when Dr. Charles Throsby brought his cattle overland to be fattened in the lush coastal area.

The journey of G. W. Evans in 1812 was never appraised, although he traversed the area from Jervis Bay up the coast and then overland to Appin. Possibly the misunderstanding arose from the fact that until comparatively recently the authorship of the original journal, which tells the history of the expedition, was not established. Such authorship is now authoritatively ascribed to G. W. Evans.

The paper is referred to very briefly by Mr. James Jervis in his “Illawarra: a Century of History 1788-1888” in the R.A.H.S. Journal Volume 28 page 74, but under the heading, “The Exploration of the Shoalhaven”. Evans’s Journal was also the subject of a paper by Mr. M. H. Ellis before the Campbeltown and Airds Historical Society in 1948, and latterly it has been covered by a paper by Mr. A. K. Weatherburn in R.A.H.S. Journal Volume 46 page 83 under the heading “Exploration of the Jervis Bay, Shoalhaven and Illawarra Districts 1797-1812”. Full acknowledgement must be given to Mr. Ellis and particularly to Mr. Weatherburn; as also to the holders of the manuscript, the Trustees of the Mitchell Library, who furnished a photo-copy of Evans’s Journal and slides to illustrate.

II

George Williams Evans was born in England in 1775, and obtained a degree of training as a Surveyor. At the age of 21 he went to the Cape of Good Hope, whence he moved in 1802 to Sydney. He occupied various Government positions, including Acting Surveyor-General, until 1810, when he was moved to Tasmania. He returned to Sydney prior to making his 1812 expedition through the Illawarra district, but later that year returned to Tasmania, only to be brought back at the end of 1813 to extend the discovery of Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth in penetrating the barrier of the Blue Mountains. Evans did fine work across the mountains, returning later to Tasmania to enjoy a grant of 1,000 acres by way of reward.

Governor Macquarie’s opinion of Evans was high enough to bring him back again to Sydney in 1815 to act as guide for Macquarie in his journey to inspect the area around Bathurst and beyond. In 1818 Evans then returned to Tasmania from which he returned in 1825 on the grounds of ill-health and a certain amount of trouble arising out of his official duties with some colour of justification but
with no real stain on his integrity. He returned to England in 1826 but emigrated again to Sydney in 1832 where for ten years he conducted a circulating library until 1842, when he finally returned to Tasmania, dying there in 1852.

III

The expedition was designed to make an overland trip from Jervis Bay to Appin, the plan being that the mountain should be ascended just north of the Shoalhaven to find out the nature of the country on the tablelands. In other words it was proposed to travel inland some miles, and not along the coast.

The party consisted of Evans himself, an aboriginal named Bundle, and other men, the total strength being unknown. No horses or carts were taken, the expedition being obliged to travel on foot from Jervis Bay whither they were conveyed in the Lady Nelson, the famous survey ship.

Leaving Sydney on 25th March, 1812, the ship arrived in Jervis Bay on the 27th and anchored within the south head, not far from the present naval station. Filling in time first with fishing, the party commenced exploration of land on the 28th. Evans made a survey of the shore of the greater part of the bay, eventually completing a map with observations of the nature of the country. Whilst walking through long grass Evans was bitten on the leg, presumably by a snake, and was incapacitated, suffering excruciating pain. Evans was not at all impressed with the quality of the country he inspected.

On 3rd April the party left on the journey overland. The point of departure was approximately the site of the present township of Huskisson, where some friendly blacks were encountered. The party then travelled in a generally north-westerly direction along the southern bank of Currambene Creek, which they ultimately had to cross. On Saturday the 4th the party constructed a canoe and conveyed the baggage over the creek in their frail vessel. The creek in this part was about 22 yards wide so that this was not an easy undertaking. They were then able to continue to the north-west, camping that night to the north of Nowra. On the following day they proceeded about due north to a large river (the Shoalhaven), which Evans correctly surmised to fall into the bay known then as Shoals Haven. The point of crossing was something over two miles to the west of the present town of Nowra.

To cross the river, here about 100 yards wide, the party had to make another canoe which was apparently sufficient to take the baggage and the rest of the party across; but Evans, being a big man, had his doubts, for which purpose he remained until last, "fearful if I had used it first my weight might swamp her, as it was very bad and leaked much... I ventured into the canoe and brought it down within two inches of the water, thank God I landed safe, we were six hours making the Bank and conveying ourselves and baggage over." The crossing of the river was completed on Monday the 6th.

Evans was more impressed with the land on the north of the river. He travelled somewhat to the east of north towards the Cambewarra Range, which was ascended with considerable difficulty. Evans was most impressed with the view, which would correspond with that from the present Cambewarra Lookout. This he could see on Tuesday the 7th, and on the 8th, his heart must have sunk to see the nature of the country over which he was supposed to travel; his route would lie through Kangaroo Valley northwards, thence through the present Robertson area and the mountainous country beyond, an extremely difficult terrain covering the site of the present Avon and Cordeaux Dams, before he hoped to reach Appin. Evans had a stout heart and stated that he would have kept to that route if he could see the least practicability of making a straight course to the Appin district. As it was, however, he concluded that he could do nothing but descend the mountains and make for the coast, which he did. The descent of the mountains was appallingly difficult, and eventually the party struggled down the valley of Bundewallah Creek, travelling eastwards somewhat north of the present town of Berry across magnificent country to the beach between Gerroa and Gerringong.

Summing up here, Evans concluded that the area he could see from the mountains on the coastal side to the north of the Shoalhaven appeared to be particularly rich, and he named it as the site of a settlement, singling out Mount Coolangatta for the centre. (In 1822 this area was to be occupied by the famous Alexander Berry).
From south of Gerringong, the party continued up the coast through the sites of the present towns of Kiama, Shellharbour, Port Kembla and Wollongong. They camped somewhere near Towradgi Creek on 12th April. Unfortunately, however, the description of the country just traversed along the coast is quite sparse. Evans states that the underwood on the mountains continued across the plains to the shore. He noted that cedar grew there, as he had noted also in parts of the Shoalhaven district. He noted also that the surf "breaks very heavy, it would be hardly possible for boats to venture to land on any part I have yet seen." He had noted also "large salt-water lagoons" to his left as he travelled up the coast, these of course being such places as Lake Illawarra, Tom Thumb Lagoon, Fairy Creek, etc.

No doubt Evans was induced to make his departure from the coast overland to Appin from this point at Towradgi, by the dip in the mountains approximately where the present Mount Ousley Road goes over the escarpment. The ascent of the mountains was not easy, but they hoped to make Appin fairly soon. This hope was not realised, unfortunately so, because their food supply was reduced to a quart of rice and a pound of biscuit. The difficulties confronting the party can be imagined from the fact that there were no accurate charts, and Evans had to guess the bearing on which he would have to travel to reach Appin; anyone with any knowledge of the area beyond the mountain ridge could imagine how difficult it would be to travel.

So the party travelled about north-westerly on the 14th, 15th and 16th of April, by which time Evans was convinced that he had overshot the farm of William Broughton in Lachlan Valley, Appin, which was his objective. Consequently he altered his bearing to about north-east and eventually made Broughton's farm, but not before encountering further extreme difficulties in crossing Cataract River.

In all, the journey was a most arduous one. Evans showed qualities of real leadership and endurance. He had in fact to cope at one stage with what appears to have been something in the nature of despair in his party when some of his men declined to go any further.

IV

As a matter of historical perspective, although the journey was in a sense negative in the information it was able to impart as to the nature of the Illawarra district, the crossing of the coastal plain at Berry and Fairy Meadow must have been sufficient to show that the district was fertile. This expedition therefore seems to suggest that when Charles Throsby brought his cattle down in 1815 he was not relying entirely on reports given to him by blacks. Further, it is known that Throsby's servant Joseph Wild claimed, as reported in Backhouse's Narrative, to be the discoverer of the Illawarra district. It is known that Wild accompanied Robert Brown, the famous botanist, on various expeditions of plant and bird collecting, and it is known also that Brown found a rare bird inland in the Illawarra district in the early 1800's. From these and other sources, but notably from Evans's 1812 expedition, it seems that between 1797 and 1815 there was a gradual piecing together of information as to the Illawarra district, which must clearly have stood Dr. Charles Throsby in good stead when he made his 1815 overland expedition to this locality. In the result, although credit must be given to Throsby for having been the person who specifically initiated development in this area, it seems that he was not without some foreknowledge of what he would find here, so that his achievement was not so much a discovery of information for himself as a utilisation of information gleaned from others. In the acquisition of this prior knowledge, the 1812 journey of Evans must have constituted an important element.

W. A. BAYLEY, MISS P. de JERSEY, A. P. FLEMING,
President, Hon. Secretary, Hon. Editor. B 4142.
17 Point Street, Bulli. 17 Corrimal Street, Wollongong.