ILLAWARRA'S LOOKOUTS: Two New Projects

Our Society has decided through its Council to ask the Lord Mayor of Wollongong to initiate action for the reinstatement of two old lookout as tourist attractions. Both are of historical significance, so the time is opportune for a review, however scrappy, of some of the more prominent of such places, even if two have become forgotten in recent years. It may serve as background for the jobs in hand.

The Oldest Road. Early travellers were uniformly ecstatic about their first oversight of Illawarra, most of them being from Throsby’s track, the story of which is told in Mr. W. G. McDonald’s engaging monograph, The Oldest Road, which the Society has just published. This tells about all that is likely to be known on the subject. It remains only to stress that from the time of the very first organized settlement of Illawarra, travellers using this, the first route, assuredly stopped where the overland track from Appin came upon the top of the escarpment; on the outward journey the magnificence of the outlook and the horror of the impending descent would have vied for place as reasons for a halt; and on the return, the sharpness of the ascent must have made everyone pause for breath and, no doubt, a last backward look. The location of this spot having now been definitively fixed, what better place could there be for a tastefully planned lookout, with parking area and an appropriate monument? After having been lost to us for upwards of a century, its accessibility must be restored and its prime historic importance celebrated.

Perhaps we should begin thinking even now of a name. Throsby’s Outlook? Pioneers’ Rest?

However, though the first of Illawarra’s lookouts, this was not one in the accepted sense of a bluff at which people could gather for social rather than utilitarian outings. The first of this type was probably Mount Keira Lookout (Victoria Rock). In my recollection the first reference to this is in the journal of that world-famous economist-in-the-making, W. S. Jevons, in 1857 (see I.H.S. Bulletin, July 1978). His difficult ascent to it makes it clear that this conspicuous feature was nevertheless already well known. Yet twenty years later Rachel Henning found that she and her visitors could not ride all the way there; they had to tether their horses at the end of a steep road and, in heavy riding habits, scramble as best they could the rest of the way to Victoria Rock, there to take in the “glorious view” she describes in her letter of 26 June 1877.

As late as my own boyhood in the 1920s, there was still no proper road to the Rock; there were only tracks from the back of the mountain or, if you were disposed to climb, you could clamber up the eastern face of the mountain, which was shorter but harder. By the time of arrival at the Rock cobs of corn pinched from farmlands near the foothills—sometimes a few eggs too—and boiled in the inevitable billy-can, tasted particularly good. It was a popular objective for outings, and perhaps a personal reminiscence may be forgiven. This relates to a day when a very strong south-easterly wind was blowing. Hitting the cliff, the wind was converted into a powerful up-gust. One of the boys in our group happened to throw a small leafy branch over the cliff: or at least he tried to, because to his surprise the up-gust swept the branch swiftly in a parabola.
over our heads into the bush behind us. Other branches performed the same weird acrobatic. Confidence grew, until we found we could safely throw our hats with gay abandon into the invisible column of wind in perfect reliance on retrieving them fifty yards or so to the rear. We had a grand time. But on our next visit one of the boys, whom we regarded as a bit of a ninny, sought to impress a Sydney visitor with this local magic, not realising it was a still, hot day. He airily "showed off" by chucking his hat into space. Ruefully did he watch it waft irretrievably downwards, knowing full well what he would cop later from his parents because, however venerable his old hand-me-down hat happened to be, his parents were painfully if needlessly thrifty. But that was his problem; the rest of us, totally unsympathetic, had the laughs of our horrible young lives.

To return to more serious historical fact, the present-day road system and the latterday predominence of the lookouts on the eastern edge of the top of Mount Keira are all post-World War II developments. Memorials there tell their story.

Much later than Victoria Rock, I gather, was Sublime Point. I do not know when this feature first began to acquire its renown. Probably it began as a detour from Sir Thomas Mitchell's road, roughly the line of the present Princes Highway. If I am wrong in this, others will have to correct me, as also in my information that it became rather notorious as a spot to which many motorists would drive their old but well-insured cars. There they would park them with brakes unaccountably ill-applied. The result was that the cars would some-how of their own volition get a slow run-up until, while their owners were innocently drinking in the beauties of the scenery, they would crash down the precipice. The insurers, wincing at their frequent losses, found it expedient to donate a car-proof railing and wall. If this, as I believe, is true, then the cliff-base must be a rich archaeological graveyard of what would now be veteran or vintage cars.

Robertson's Lookout must have been well known in the last quarter of the last century, when it was a picnic place favoured for its breath-taking views from its bold, beetling rocks, high above the Mount Keira Scout Camp of today. Its location is near the coal chute, only a few hundred of yards off what used to be called Soldiers Road, now Harry Graham Drive. When the modern road was reconstructed the bush parking area and signposts disappeared before the bulldozers. Nowadays you must search for a track, and therefore this vantage point for sightseers has been virtually lost.

I have often heard my mother and my step-father, the late Hector Robertson, tell how the lookout derived its name. The story begins with a family picnic there, perhaps in the 1870s or 1880s. Old Watty Robertson (Hector's father; officially Walter Graham of that name, Manager in Wollongong of the Commercial Banking Co. of Sydney), ever given to horror and alarm yet devoted to the public weal, was not unnaturally petrified to see some of his nieces, named Sheaffe, daring each other how close they could teeter at the edge of the jutting boulders. Their disappearance would have been no mystery at this picnic at Hanging Rock. It was all too much for old Watty, who used his influence to have protective iron fencing installed. Thus it became known as Robertson's Lookout, even though the credit belongs ultimately to the airy insouciance of the Sheaffe
girls. They might have disappeared much quicker than an old hand-me-down hat.

Keira and Sublime Point can now look after themselves, so to speak. The other places should be restored to public access and enjoyment for the love of Old Illawarra.

—Edgar Beale.