BRIEF NOTES ON ROBERT BROWN AND ALLAN CUNNINGHAM

Over a period of years there has been some discussion as whether or not the early naturalist, Robert Brown, actually visited this district and collected the type specimen of the bird, the Spine-tailed log-runner, at Mount Kembla or Mount Keira.

The following extracts are taken from "The Emu," official organ of the Royal Australasian Ornithological Union, Volume XXXIII, Part 4, 2nd April, 1934, p. 258, "The Spine-tailed Log-runner" by K. A. Hindwood, Royal Australasian Ornithological Union:-

"The first specimen of this bird to be taken appears to be the skin mentioned by Vigors and Horsfield when describing the Australian birds in the collection of the Linnaean Society of London. The skin in question, that of a male, was collected by Robert Brown from near Hat Hill, New South Wales, in 1804, and later presented to the Society.

"Robert Brown, the renowned botanist, was born on December 21, 1773. At the age of twenty-seven he accepted the post of naturalist on board the Investigator, which exploring vessel was then about to proceed to Australia, under the command of Captain Matthew Flinders, on coastal survey work. Brown’s activities centred around Botany, though he did not neglect other departments of natural history. The actual number of birds numbered about 150 specimens (Historical Records of N.S.W., Volume 6, 1898, p. 17). Some time after his return to England, Brown held the position of botanist-librarian to Sir Joseph Banks, and when Banks’s collections (among which were many of the birds collected by Brown) were handed over to the British Museum in 1827, Brown became the first keeper of the Botanical Department of that famous institution. It appears that duplicate specimens of the birds were donated to the Linnaean Society of London, either by Brown or Banks."

There appears to be no evidence that Brown actually visited this district. Rather, the indications are that he did not.

Some differences of opinion exist as whether or not the bird was collected at Mt. Keira or Mt. Kembla.

Hindwood states: "Reference to the chart of the east coast of Australia (sheet 1) in Flinders’ Voyage to Terra Australis fixes the location of Hat Hill some fifty miles south of Sydney, directly behind Tom Thumb Lagoon, on the Illawarra Range. It is now known as Mount Kembla."

Surely Brown, who voyaged with Flinders, would ensure that a bird collected even by someone else, under his name, would have been correctly labelled. Brown appears to have been a very capable scientist.

Spine-tailed log-runners today are far more easily encountered near Mt. Kembla than near Mt. Keira.

Some differences of opinion exist as whether or not Allan Cunningham climbed Mt. Keira or Mt. Kembla first, as some believe he was under the impression that Hat Hill was Mt. Keira.

There are several reasons why I believe Cunningham in fact correctly recognised Mt. Kembla as Hat Hill and Mt. Keira as Cap or Molle Hill.

On 27th October, 1818, Cunningham spent the afternoon at Tom Thumb Lagoon, not far from the home of his host, David Allan, in the vicinity of Red Point. The next day he moved his headquarters to the stock-keeper’s hut “near the mountain.” Allan’s Creek was about the northern boundary of Allan’s property so it seems logical to assume the hut was on Allan’s property.
Cunningham said, "About 8.00 a.m. we left the hut, with an intention, if possible, to reach the summit of Hat Hill, bearing about 8 or 9 miles (apparently) W.N.W. . . ." Mt. Kembla is about that direction from Allan's Creek, while Mt. Keira is well to the northwards.

Later that day he recorded, "... springs . . . particularly from one that has its rise near Hat Hill, which, falling over rocks, passes through this channel into lagoons at the foot of the range." These "lagoons" were probably the swamps that would have been found around and west of Kembla Grange and south of Farmborough Road. The mountain was climbed from the back of the lower part of the range, on the south.

On 29th October he descended in a direction northward of east. He wrote: "About one p.m. we arrived at the summit of Molle Hill, which, by no means as elevated as Hat Hill . . . Being much more to southward, the true formation of Lake Illawarie . . ." Hat Hill (Kembla) is over 200 ft. higher than Molle Hill (Keira). This is acknowledged here. Cunningham means that the formation of Lake Illawarra is much further south of Molle Hill than Hat Hill, not that Molle Hill is south of Hat Hill. It is logical to assume that Cunningham would have climbed Kembla first, the closest to his starting point.

Hopefully these comments will clarify some points not previously clear.

—NORMAN ROBINSON.