JOHN LE GAY BRERETON IN THE ILLAWARRA

Brereton, a friend and contemporary of Henry Lawson and collaborator in poetry with Christopher Brennan, was widely regarded in Australia as a poet. Since his death in 1930, his poetic reputation has been eclipsed. Nevertheless, although there is little merit still to be found within his verses, his prose remains of considerable interest, particularly to historians of the Illawarra.

In 1899, Brereton produced a marvelous record of a walking tour of the Illawarra and the Blue Mountains entitled Landlopers. The IHS Bulletin will reproduce sections of this work relating to the Illawarra during the coming months.

By way of introduction to this material, I have decided to republish some of Brereton’s 1930 reflections on what time and technology have done to the Illawarra.

Brereton worked as a teacher, clerk and librarian before becoming Professor of English at Sydney University. Like all really important people, he of course kept a holiday cottage at Thirroul. This vital fact, however, has only recently come to the attention of your Bulletin editor. Back in my undergraduate days, I had cause to consult Brereton’s manuscript notes because of his interest in the Elizabethan dramatist, poet and novelist, Robert Greene - a writer whose poetry still holds considerable charm despite being known to few.

What will impress most readers, however, is Brereton’s credentials as a conservationist. Even in 1930, he could look back fondly to his walking trip in the Illawarra of the 1890s and see how tragically the ‘garden of the colony’ had been violated.

Joseph Davis

TRAV’LIN by PROFESSOR J. LE GAY BRERETON (1871 - 1933)

If you have only a little time to spare, and would like to travel through country where there is a greater variety and tenderer charm of scenery, I advise you to saunter down through the Illawarra and Shoalhaven districts. Tourists and manufacturers and other go-ahead people will have the place spoiled before long, so you had better go now. There you will find broad panoramic views as bright as ever painter dared to put on canvas - long stretches of coast with dazzling white lines of foam between a brilliant sea and beaches like golden sickles, and a series of headlands growing dim and more dim till the most distant fades into purple mist where the sea-line and the sky are blent in a region of dreams. You will see broad flat meadows with sleek dairy cattle luxuriously chewing the cud; green rounded foothills where the sunlight and shadow play over brown furrows, and chase each other across young crops that blaze like sheets of green fire. And on the higher slopes are the thick tangles of semi-tropical jungle, with cool shadows and dripping water, and graceful ferns and palms and festooned creepers, and fresh and sudden gushes of song from birds that flit like happy spirits through the fragrant dusk.

If you have more time, go northward along the coast, to the rivers that water some of the most beautiful valleys in the world. Do not waste your time and mine by getting me to babble about it. Find out for yourself.
Whenever the spring arrives the hunger of the trav’ler is upon me. Bricks and mortar are offensive, and yet certain bonds keep us tethered to the city, and I cannot drift away through the moist haze into the outer regions of "the track". I feel my chrysalis cracking down the back to let me out with quicker nerves for the new life. But what is to be must be. As I lie on the edge of a field to pencil down these few inconsecutive and lazy notes, I watch the illumination of the crimson leaves of some buckwheat which the frost has failed to kill (a branch of bush-apple overhung and protected the soft, sappy growth). A kind of wild bee or fly hovers motionless with triangular blurs in the place of wings - makes a horizontal dart of several inches, and again halts. Many spiders creep about under the shade of the weeds, and just now I had to flick away a scorpion which seemed determined to take refuge under my arm. I can hear a spine-bill singing in the bush; and a wagtail is chattering everlasting compliments to his mate - "$\text{Sweet pretty creature} - \text{sweet pretty little creature} - \text{pretty little, pretty little creature}$." Across the horse-paddock a pair of Jacky Winters are calling to each other. A few hundred yards away there is, I know, a yellow robin’s nest, containing three eggs, dull green speckled with brown. In the morning the swallows, which have built their mud homes under the veranda, sing like canaries about my window. As I think of all this - and of how much more! - a final crack of my shell follows on a vigorous wrench, and I stretch my wings to fly for the bush. Old clothes, familiar swag and nose-bag, battered billy and longing heart - to-morrow the open road!

So I wrote in the first year of the Commonwealth. Since then, an age of high-pressure and disastrous hurry has made many of our youth almost incapable of genuine indolence. Instead of enjoying happiness, the crowds are madly pursuing pleasures in the strange belief that they can be accumulated and that the sum of them will be abiding joy. The wayfarer can no longer slouch comfortably along the open road, but has to be on the alert and ready to jump from the course of swerving motor-cars. But the motor-car is a curse to its user as well as to the furtive pedestrian. Motorists believe that they have special advantages for seeing the country, and this strange deception persists till its victims become blind to everything but broad effects and mere dashes of colour. From a car, all the intimate detail of the landscape is obliterated, and the friendliness, the feeling of close kinship with what is gathered by the senses, is dulled and gradually lost. The loveliness of a tuft of grass, or the delicate mottling of a post with lichen, or the inverted depth of blue sky in a watery rut enters unbidden the consciousness of the man afoot, but is ignored by the motorist, to whom the passing beauty is a smudge. A road, to please the staring votaries of speed, must be black or grey and glassily polished by innumerable tyres. The old roads, which here were brown and there might be an earthy red that harmonized restfully with the green grass at its edges, must give way to the long unlovely streaks which are constructed without the slightest effort to meet the demand of the soul for what is beautiful.

It is impossible to saunter in a motor-car. Nobody in a car is free. I sit jammed between people for whom a general motion in any direction is insanely regarded as desirable progress. For a moment I see a clear stream with mossy rocks and smooth foam-fringed little falls, and I should like to follow it up in the deep shadows of overhanging shrubs, and rejoice with the ferns whose eager life is evident in the flush of uncoiling fronds. I see soft-looking leaves that I should
like to touch lovingly. I want to bathe all my senses in what is flashing back from our inhuman machine - to smell the warm moist earth, let the lapping water flow over naked limbs, put my tongue against cool aromatic growths, remain still to watch the birds and hear their songs. I could merge myself in this environment, and become a part of it. Phut! It's gone. We are aliens.

Where are we to find rest? The car penetrates everywhere. The fastnesses of the hills are invaded. The stillness of the valley is desecrated. The haunts of meditative fancy are bestrewn with tins and paper. Vulgarity is rampant in the sullen bush, and every quiet solitude has been transformed to a wilderness of monkeys.

from Knocking Round 1930

On a recent visit to the Powerhouse Museum I noticed a display of Australian violins. I noted that one was made by a Balgownie man, Mr. W. Auchterlonie. After some research I managed to turn up this article.

REQUIEM FOR AN OLD VIOLIN MAKER

These hills were not his hills, but for Wil Auchterlonie they became the hills of home.

He saw them first at the age of 22, a Scottish miner stepping into a new life and as yet unaware of his fitted ear for sound.

He settled in Balgownie and three months later he married a girl he had met by chance aboard the ship which had brought him to Australia.

She had gone to greet an aunt arriving from Scotland; they found mutual ground for conservation, she was from his homeplace, Dunfermline, and living at Balgownie.

In the years that followed he built her a fine home in Para Street, Balgownie, worked in Corrimal and the old Mt. Pleasant mines - and began carving violins.

He once estimated he had built 53 instruments altogether. He imported the timber from Switzerland and the German Tyrol, and during the war the curling Scottish voice swore that "Hitler may hack, wreck and destroy, but he will pass, and once again the forests of Tyrol will supply the world with wood for beautiful violins.

And so it happened.

Talking about Wil Auchterlonie yesterday his daughters said he had a pair of hands that could never be still. Even when he retired, a dusted miner, the busy hands searched for creative work.

"He would spend months on one fiddle," his daughters recall. "He would fit the back on, and plane the wood, and keep planing until it satisfied him. If his ear detected a fault he would destroy it and start again."

Always he fitted the strings on a Sunday. Others saw this gentle act as Wil Auchterlonie's personal thanksgiving for his gifted ear and marvellous hands.

The Scotsman seldom spoke of his work, but among his keepsakes lies a letter from Verbruggen, whose quartet delighted Sydney from 1915 to 1922, inviting Wil Auchterlonie to meet him at the Conservatorium to compare instruments.