

Early Naturalists in Wellington Park



Wellington Park and particularly Mount Wellington has played an important role in the discovery and understanding of natural history, and Australian fauna. The first collected specimens for at least two hundred species of invertebrates and numerous other faunal species were sampled from the Mountain. A handful of enthusiastic local naturalists and part-time scientists collected many species, with the occasional visit of a notable expert.

Local and visiting naturalists explored, sampled and considered the area, including Robert Brown, John Dalton Hooker, Ronald Campbell Gunn and Ferdinand von Mueller. Robert Brown collected over 500 plant specimens on over 10 excursions on what was then called 'Table Mountain'. These specimens were sent to Sir Joseph Banks for further consideration. When Brown returned to England he took over 700 plant specimens collected in Van Diemen's Land, most of them from the Mountain. Using these he privately published *Prodromus Florae Novae Hollandiae Et Insulae Van Diemen*, a flora of New Holland and the island of Van Diemen. Although not commercially successful, the book inspired other botanists in their explorations of the area.

Acclaimed botanists and naturalists are recognised in the scientific names of several species found on the Wellington Range as illustrated:

- *Rubus gunnianus* (Alpine raspberry) – after Ronald Campbell Gunn (1808-81) botanist, arrived in Tas in 1830, worked as Superintendent of Convicts and Police Magistrate, then became Deputy Commissioner of Crown Lands. His interest in botany was inspired through a friendship with R.W. Lawrence of Launceston who was in correspondence with British botanist W.J. Hooker. Gunn travelled around the island collecting specimens to be sent to Hooker, and was commemorated in Hooker's introduction to *Flora Tasmaniae* (1860). Originally over 50 species of Tasmanian plants contained Gunn's name. In 1854 he became the first Tasmanian to be elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London.

- *Eucalyptus johstonii* (Yellow gum) – after Robert Mackenzie Johnston (1843-1918) trained accountant and auditor, migrated to Tasmania in 1870 from Scotland. Johnston became the Government's main financial and economic policy adviser and gained a reputation as an expert on federal financial matters during negotiations leading up to federation. His wide ranging interests included botany and geology, fish and molluscs.
- *Nothofagus cunninghamii* (Myrtle beech) – after Allan Cunningham who visited Tasmania with King 1819-1820 during a hydrological survey of the Australian coast. He made valuable observations of Mount Wellington flora (then Table Mountain) and Macquarie Harbour, particularly Huon pine. In his ascent of the Mountain he recorded that the weather was 'alternatively fair, with snowstorms'.

Charles Darwin was one of the most prominent scientists to visit Mount Wellington during his two week trip to Hobart in February 1836. Over two days on Mount Wellington he collected specimens of rocks and fossils. Darwin identified six species of lizard, one species of snake and collected at least 119 insect species, and a range of free-living flatworms. By comparing his geological findings in the area with his observations elsewhere in the world, Darwin was able to outline Mount Wellington's geological history. From the *Voyage of the Beagle*, 1839, Darwin wrote

'...I ascended Mount Wellington; I took with me a guide, for I failed in a first attempt, from the thickness of the wood. Our guide, however, was a stupid fellow, and conducted us to the southern and damp side of the mountain, where the vegetation was very luxuriant; and where the labour of the ascent, from the number of rotten trunks, was almost as great as on a mountain in Tierra del Fuego or in Chiloe. It cost us five and a half hours of hard climbing before we reached the summit. In many parts the Eucalypti grew to a great size, and composed a noble forest. In some of the dampest ravines, tree-ferns flourished in an extraordinary manner; I saw one which must have been at least twenty feet high to the base of the fronds, and was in girth exactly six feet. The fronds forming the most elegant parasols, produced a gloomy shade, like that of the first hour of night. The summit of the mountain is broad and flat, and is composed of huge angular masses of naked greenstone. Its elevation is 3100 feet above the level of the sea. The day was splendidly clear, and we enjoyed a most extensive view; to the

north, the country appeared a mass of wooded mountains, of about the same height with that on which we were standing, and with an equally tame outline: to the south the broken land and water, forming many intricate bays, was mapped with clearness before us. After staying some hours on the summit, we found a better way to descend, but did not reach the *Beagle* till eight o'clock, after a severe day's work.'

The Mountain has also been an important site for the understanding of invertebrates. In 1893 G.M. Thomson discovered the syncarid crustacean *Anaspides tasmaniae* in tarns near the summit. This group was previously only known from ancient fossil material (230-330 million years old) from other parts of the world. The species represented an early stage in the evolution of crustaceans and the discovery caused a sensation in zoological circles world-wide at the time.

In 1890 Edward Meyrick, a renowned butterfly and moth authority of the day, visited the area and discovered the moth *Dirce* near the summit of the Mountain. This species provided the first proof of a southern connection, via the ancient continent of Gondwana, for the geometrids, a vast family of moths.

Beetle expert Arthur Lea also visited many times between 1894 and 1911, discovering and naming many new species.

Lubbock, a neighbour of Charles Darwin in England, described the first collembolan (springtail) from Australia from a specimen obtained on Mount Wellington. Other early zoologists to visit and collect on the Mountain included the Frenchman Le Guillou and the Italian Beccari.

Sourced from:

- Wellington Park, Values, Use and Management Inventory, Jan 1996
- From Along these Lines – from Trowenna to Tasmania, at least two centuries of peripatetic perspectives in poetry and prose, edited by C.A. Cranston, 2000
- The Companion to Tasmanian History, edited by Alison Alexander, 2005
- Wellington Park Historic Heritage Inventory and Audit Project, A.. McConnell and L. Scripps, 2005