

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (March 2004)

By Rob Upson

THE MAJOR MITCHELL EXPEDITION INTO VICTORIA (Part 1)

Towards the end of 1835 the NSW Surveyor General, Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell, received orders from the then Governor, Richard Bourke, to complete a survey of the Darling River, previously explored by Charles Sturt. One of the objectives was to confirm that the Darling River flowed into the Murray River.

This was to become Mitchell's third expedition into inland Australia and this journey was to take him into regions south of the Murray known then as the Port Phillip District. He described these regions as 'Australia Felix' (fortunate land) and within months of his return to Sydney settlers were making their way south with sheep and cattle.

Before describing this journey, a brief portrait of Thomas Mitchell would be appropriate. He was born in 1792 in Scotland, the son of a Harbour Master. Educated in Edinburgh he then joined the Army in 1811 as an officer, where he developed skills as a surveyor. Mitchell saw service during the seven years Iberian Peninsular War, a war in which the British helped the Spanish drive the French out of Spain. He had a natural flair for drawing, painting and writing and had a keen interest in botany and geology; all of which he put to good use during his explorations. He spoke Spanish, Portuguese and French.

The Peninsular War ended 1815 and in 1817 he married Mary Blunt in Lisbon and they ultimately had twelve children. In 1827 he was invited to take up a position as Assistant to the NSW Surveyor General, John Oxley. He succeeded to the position when Oxley died the following year; a position he was to hold for the next 27 years. He was knighted in 1837. Often described as a fair and trusted leader by his contemporaries and subordinates, he nonetheless displayed a notorious temper and a spirited opposition to those in authority over him.

The expedition that Mitchell undertook in 1836 was the largest and most costly yet to be undertaken in Australia so far. He assembled his men and equipment in a valley near Mt. Canobolas, just south west of present day Orange. In addition to 25 men, the party included 11 horses, 52 bullocks, 100 sheep, 22 wagons and a large boat carriage. His Second in Command was Assistant Surveyor, Granville Stapylton and 22 of the men were either convicts or ex-convicts. Each man carried a firearm and ammunition. Several aborigines also joined the expedition to assist in liaising with the aboriginal tribes they were likely to encounter.

Every night a military style camp was set up based on his experiences in the Peninsular War. Mitchell was to name geographical features after aboriginal names, soldiers and places prominent in the Peninsular War and people from Greek history. The 'Australia Felix' expedition will be briefly described over the next two editions.

(To be continued)

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (April 2004)

By Rob Upson

THE MAJOR MITCHELL EXPEDITION into VICTORIA (Part 2)

Major Thomas Mitchell's third expedition into inland Australia commenced on the 17th March 1836. The party had assembled just south west of present day Orange and travelled west until they reached the Lachlan River. They followed the Lachlan to the Murrumbidgee River then followed the latter down to the Murray River where, at Boundary Bend, a base camp was established. Mitchell then took a small boat party down the Murray to its junction with the Darling River, near present day Wentworth. He followed the Darling upstream for 50 km and having proved his theory that this river flowed into the Murray, returned to Boundary Bend.

Once the expedition had completed the crossing of the Murray they set out on the 16th June and followed the direction of the river upstream to a lagoon that abounded in swans and wildfowl. He named it Swan Hill. From present day Kerang they headed south, naming Pyramid Hill, and crossing the Loddon River near Serpentine.

Now heading southwest, they camped for a few days on the Richardson River not far from Callawadda. Mitchell then took a small party on horseback and headed towards a distant mountain range he was to call the Grampians, after their Scottish counterpart. They spent a cold night on the summit of Mt. William, naming it after King William IV. Mitchell collected a number of plant species, some of them new, before heading back to the base camp.

From the Richardson River camp the expedition continued west and crossed the Wimmera River 20 km southwest of present day Horsham. On the way Mitchell made a diversion to Mt. Zero that he so named because of the cold weather he experienced. (Not surprising as it was the middle of winter) Mitchell climbed and named Mt. Arapiles after a village in Spain, near where the Battle of Salamanca was fought.

Heading south, the expedition explored the Glenelg, Chetwynd, Wannon and Crawford Rivers. Leaving Stapylton in charge of a camp he called Fort O'Hare, near present day Dartmoor, Mitchell took two boats with 16 men and sailed down the Glenelg River until he reached the sea at Nelson, near the South Australian border.

On their way back to Fort O'Hare, the party headed southeast to Portland Bay, where to their complete surprise they encountered the Henty brothers and their growing settlement. For the past couple of years the Hentys had been importing sheep and cattle as fast as vessels could be found to bring them over Bass Strait. It was now the 29th August 1836 and after receiving some Henty hospitality and extra provisions, Mitchell resumed his journey the following day.

(to be concluded)

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (May 2004)

By Merlot

THE MAJOR MITCHELL EXPEDITION into VICTORIA (Part 3)

In last month's edition, Major Thomas Mitchell's journey into Australia Felix had taken him south to Portland Bay where he had encountered the Henty brothers' settlement. The country he had traversed to date was full of promise from a pastoral point of view. On the 30th August 1836 Mitchell and his party took their leave of the Hentys and continued their journey.

The expedition then headed northeast via present day Hamilton and Dunkeld where Mitchell climbed and named Mt. Abrupt. Continuing in the same direction they camped one night at Newstead and then on through Expedition Pass to set up a brief base camp near Faraday. From here Mitchell climbed Mt. Alexander, originally naming it Mt. Byng after a Field Marshall in the Peninsular War. He then took some of his men on an excursion to Mt. Macedon, which he could see from Mt. Byng, and from the summit of Mt. Macedon he had an uninterrupted view to Port Phillip Bay. (Mitchell later named Mt. Alexander after Alexander the Great and Mt. Macedon after Philip of Macedon, the father of A the G). On returning to the Faraday camp the expedition then headed east via the Coliban Falls and Mitchellstown, crossing the Goulburn River near Nagambie.

Moving on via present day Euroa, Violet Town, Benalla, Glenrowan, Wangaratta and Chiltern they finally recrossed the Murray River back into NSW near Gooramadda on the 19th October. Leaving the boat carriage behind, the expedition hurried on back to Sydney arriving on the 3rd November 1836. Mitchell's expedition into Australia Felix had covered 1700 kilometres in about 230 days. Mitchell described the character of the country covered in his expedition as follows.

The land is..... open and available in its present state, for the purposes of civilised man. We traversed it in two directions with heavy carts, meeting no other obstruction than the softness of the rich soil; and, in returning, over flowery plains and green hills, fanned by the breezes of early spring, I named this region Australia Felix the better to distinguish it from the parched deserts of the interior country, where we had wandered so unprofitably, and so long. (the latter referring to his two previous expeditions).

Within months of his return to Sydney and after giving such glowing accounts of the country beyond the Murray, settlers began making their way south with their families and stock. This combined with settlers sailing north from Van Diemen's Land ensured that the settlement of Victoria was well under way. However, the biggest influence on its development and expansion was yet to come.

Reference: The Major Mitchell Trail, Exploring Australia Felix, by the Department of Conservation and Environment, Victoria.
