

NOTES OF A JOURNEY.

Through parts of the Counties of Devon and Wellington, Tasmania, undertaken in 1865, by J. E. CALDER.

Conformably with instructions, I examined much of the country between the Forth and the Leven Rivers, early in 1865, and immediately afterwards made the journey from Emu Bay to the village of Chudleigh, about one hundred and thirty miles. In this excursion I necessarily crossed several of the rather imperfectly known estates of the Van Diemen's Land Company, then occupied by the Messieurs Field, as cattle runs, and beg to hand you my original notes, written at the time, for publication in the "Tasmanian Times" if suitable for its columns.

Before making this journey I visited the plain or plains, between the Leven and Forth rivers, and remained there a few days, exploring the country round about to see if there was no more open land, but I had not much success. The principal plain is very beautiful but small, indeed a square mile would cover the whole of it or even more. There is a very considerable quantity of excellent land round about them, lightly timbered (that is for scrub land) which will prove very useful hereafter. I must, however, own that I am somewhat disappointed with the area of Dooley's plains, which I thought to have found more considerable.

Having travelled the dreary road between the Forth and Deloraine so often as to be quite sick of it, I resolved on returning to Launceston by way of the Hampshire and Surrey Hills, Middlesex plains and Gad's Hill, and thus escape the monotony of traversing the bush roads of Devon, where the forest scenery soon becomes almost as dreary as Goldsmith's plains of Campania, "a weary waste," indeed and almost as interminable as weary.

To avoid the tediousness of the Mersey road, we (that is Dooley and self) turned our horses heads towards Emu Bay, on Sunday last, where we slept at Wiseman's Inn, and pushed forward to the Hampshire Hills &c. next day. The route thitherward lay for several miles through thick scrubs, growing on rich red soil, diversified a little at first by some rough clearings, and afterwards by some handsome plains.

Approaching Field's Station at Hampshire Hills, which we reached at about 3 o'clock p.m., we emerged from the gloomy scrubs of Devon, and found ourselves on extensive plains of excellent pasture land.

Mileboards at every mile on the road are set up indicating the distances to Emu Bay, the Hampshire Hills station being twenty one miles from that place. Here we secured the services of a person named Kettle, as pilot to Surrey Hills, which place we learned was about sixteen miles off.

It was late when we started from Hampshire Hills, much too late indeed: but as Kettle had no doubt about reaching Surrey Hills in good time, we trusted him and set off; but it fell pitch dark before ten miles of the journey was done, which made it very difficult to follow the rest of the road, only an indistinct one even in broad day. We had much trouble in tracing out the last six miles, and for the perseverance of Dooley, would never have got over it in the dark, but he would not give in, and we crawled on and on (slowly indeed as snails) by the light of bark torches, which he made, till it was midnight and past, when we reached "The Hills" at last.

Dark as it was our torches enabled me to see that almost every inch of our route lay through a grassy country, generally wooded, but seldom scrubby.

In this part of our journey it was that we passed the river Wey, near the old bridge, with which I understand the mournful narrative of poor Tellyer's suicide is associated. The story of the death of this old surveyor and explorer was told me by Dooley, but I shall not repeat it. In fact it will not bear repeating.

We reached Surrey Hills (the head station of the Messieurs Field) about midnight, and soon roused up its only occupant, the whole staff of riders being absent, gathering, on a distant part of the run. It was two o'clock at least before we got to bed.

The sun was very high before we were ready for starting, as both ourselves and nags were pretty well done up with yesterday's ride. We, however, tarried as little as possible, and were in the saddle by about nine o'clock, and then made a move for Middlesex Plains, about twenty-eight miles off. We had hardly gone a mile when we met Mr Sutherland (the head man of the Messieurs Field), accompanied by their entire staff of renowned riders, who have the reputation of being the best, the most fearless and dashing horsemen in Tasmania. They were escorting a small herd of wild cattle which they had captured on their ride homewards.

These men in travelling from station to station have more the appearance of a little colony than a mere company of horsemen. A dray with all their baggage follows them wherever they go; and they carry with them everything necessary for their wants. The mare I was riding had thrown a shoe somewhere between Hampshire Hills and Emu Bay, on account of which accident I feared she would fall lame before I could reach Chudleigh, which was still many miles off, where I hoped to be able to repair the accident. But better luck was in store for me than this. Mr Sutherland directed the Blacksmith of the party to do the needful thing for me on the spot (for a professional smith accompanies them in their wanderings) and never was horse shod quicker or better than mine was by this man. He had all his tools with him, including about a sackful of shoes of all sizes, ready to fit any horse that wanted his services. Now

at an ordinary forge this operation would have taken at least ten minutes, but here it was done in a quarter the time and as well as need be. There was no heating the shoe or burning the hoof; the rasp, the paring knife and the hammer did everything in a twinkling.

As we were ignorant of the route we had to take, Mr Sutherland kindly allowed one of his party to accompany us, a rough, hearty fellow of the name of Webb, but better known by the nick-name of Chumney. By his advice we this day travelled no further than "Thompson's Park," seven miles off only, as he wanted us to see more of the country than we could have made ourselves acquainted with by sticking to the track; and as this was just the thing for me, I adopted his advice by putting up at the Park. Here we took possession of an untenanted wigwam for the night, and then sallied out with our guide. We rode many miles hither and thither during the long afternoon, over gently undulating grass land, made up partly of plains and partly of open forest, which I believe may be taken as a sample of a most extensive country, at present not half stocked. This country is elevated, and it is said to rain here more frequently than usual in Tasmania, and that the night dews are also heavy: certainly the grass (to use a homely phrase) was everywhere "as green as a leek" though in all other parts of the north, it is just now so burned up and withered, as to be almost literally invisible. In all my bush experiences I never saw more kangaroos than I did during this day's ride; we started them everywhere, and there was seldom a moment when there were less than three or four in sight at once, and often eight, ten, or a dozen.

All next day's ride, twenty-one miles, was over good grassy land, except where we crossed the hill that separates the vale of Belvoir from the Surrey Hills, where the soil is a coarse sand, producing only button grass and such herbs as are always associated with it. This hill or ridge is called the "Bluff," and is a great spur of the Barn Bluff, the principal peak of which is about fifteen miles off.

Looking back from the Bluff in a north, north-westerly, and south-westerly direction, the view is excessively extensive, and the quantity of grassy forest and nearly level land within reach of the eye, is very great indeed. With the exception of Mounts Pearce, Catly, Belmont, and Valentine's Peak, which are isolated hills in an immense plain, the whole country looks like an interminable level, or more properly a sea of gentle undulations reaching to, and perhaps beyond, the very distant horizon of the quarters above named. I did not expect to see so much grassy and excellent land as lay in view of the Bluff, which indeed is little less extensive than that contained within the great vale of settlement that lies to the north of St. Peter's Pass, and between Dry's and Miller's Bluffs on the west, and Ben Lomond on the east; and I cannot help thinking that the crown is proprietor of no small portion of it; and I am pretty certain that no work of a more reproductive nature will ever be undertaken in Tasmania than the perfect examination of this great and grassy table land.

What may be its capacity for the support of stock I know not, but during a

coach ride I had yesterday in company with Mr Field, I took occasion to enquire the number of cattle he had there. He did not know, but thought about ten thousand. Such of them as I saw were generally in poor condition.

Crossing the Bluff, we at once descended into the Vale of Belvoir, which is a considerable valley, having much nearly level land in the bottom, but whereof hardly 2,000 acres are grassy. There were about two hundred of Field's cattle in the vale when we crossed it. At the north end of this place is a small lake, of very extraordinary shape, and it is only on the margin of this sheet of water that a few trees are to be found. There is abundance of lime stone protruding through the grass lands of the valley. It is thought that about 4,000 sheep could be kept hereabouts, and on the Crown lands between the vale and the nearest boundary of the Middlesex Plains block, which we searched for and found, about four miles from the Vale of Belvoir. How sheep would stand the winter here must be left to trial.

From here to Middlesex Plains, I saw nothing but good feeding land, both in the open forest and on the plains we crossed. We reached Middlesex early in the afternoon, and cruised about the beautiful grass land of the home paddocks till dark.

The Messieurs Field have a party of fencers here, and as the wife of one of them was going down to Chudleigh next day, we gladly accepted her offer to pilot us along the Company's road, which though it forms the boundary that separates two counties likely to be of much importance, is so indistinct in places that a stranger would have much difficulty to find it.

Indeed a few days before our arrival at this place, an unfortunate fellow—a stranger—made his appearance at Middlesex hut, after having been lost on this so called road for seven days, during the whole of which time he was without food. We left him there in a very doubtful condition, between life and death.

At this place we took leave of our companion Webb, exchanging him for a far more extraordinary rider than even him, and he was a perfect wonder on horseback. Dooley and myself were first in the saddle ready for an early start, waiving the company of our female guide; when forth she came leading her horse, which to our amazement she mounted astraddle, and thus rode the whole way to Chudleigh (about thirty-six miles) with an amount of unconcern that surprised us not a little; and as if determined that we should lose no part of this extraordinary feat of horsemanship, she rode in front of us almost the whole distance, smoking a dirty little black pipe from one end of the journey to the other.

We continued on grassy land for the next four miles, when we commenced the descent into the truly profound and formidable valley of the Forth river, by a steep and most barren slope called the Three Mile Rise. We led our horses down and down and down, till I was quite sick of descending, and it seemed as if we were never going to reach the bottom of this abominable ravine. The river Forth crossed, we commenced rising the famous Gad's hill, the ascent from the stream being as long and as steep as the hill on the

other side, the only difference between them being that the soil of the eastern rise is much better than that of the other. The table land on the top of Gad's hill (which is rather indifferent) is three miles across, and in the midway of it is a small plain where the Fields have a hut, at which we were most heartily welcomed, as indeed is usual at all their stations.

Having expressed a desire to visit a certain tree on which (so Webb told me) there was inscribed a record connected with the doings of the Van Diemen's Land Company's surveyors nearly forty years ago, old Mr Wood of the establishment, immediately volunteered to ride 6 or 7 miles to shew it me, himself standing a good chance of being benighted on his return. As it lay off the track at present in use (namely on the Company's old road) I could never have found it, if left to myself.

The descent to the Mersey, which is the next river we crossed, is as long, as bad, and as wearisome as that down to the Forth. The river flows over a bed of stones so polished by the chafing of centuries, that they are almost as slippery as ice. A couple of miles further brought us to "Black Heath," where we turned off to the tree I wanted to see. It was well that I had taken down the words originally inscribed on it, as repeated to me by Webb (who like many others had read them over so often while legible, that he had them by heart), for they are now so indistinct with age that I could not have made them out unassisted. The inscription was the commencement of a rhyming narrative, that, however, went no further than the first verse, either because something had occurred to interrupt the writer, or that inspiration ceased with the moment that called it into activity. It ran thus:—

"Underneath this lofty tower,
"Where I passed my Christmas hour,
"Along with those who took the pains,
"To cut the road to Emu Plains—
1827."

On reaching Chudleigh, I named this little-matter to the landlord of the inn we stayed at, Mr Daniel Pickert, who had also read or heard the verse till he like Webb had got it by heart. He assured me that it was written by the once well-known bushranger Britain (whose prisoner he himself had once been), before he took to the bush, and who, he told me, had assisted in opening this road.

We pushed on for Chudleigh, through a lime-stone country, but not a very interesting one, passing through only one or two small open spaces, one of which is called "Circular Pond Marsh," and would make a nice little farm. Soon after this, it grew quite dark, and rained heavily, so that I had no opportunity of seeing anything that lay between the last named spot and Chudleigh. I reached Deloraine next day, and Launceston yesterday, which I was not sorry for; as after five or six days on the saddle a little rest is always welcome.