

The Snowy Mountains Scheme

Edward Axford

THE invasion of Kosciusko is on. Not just the familiar thin file of skiers climbing leisurely upward to their sacred abodes in the snow, but great noisy hordes of engineers, tunnellers, dam workers and road makers — the Grand Army of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority — demolishing, boring, detonating, raising huge concrete dams, flooding mountain valleys, building underground power stations, scarring the hillsides with long crawling water races; and with bulldozers, mechanical scoops and charges of gelignite playing merry hell in what we have for so long hoped to preserve as the finest primitive mountain reserve in Australia.

From the momentous 17th day of October, 1949, when the Governor-General, Mr. McKell, pressed a button in the Eucumbene Gorge and blew up a rocky escarpment on the site of the projected Adaminaby Dam all hope was abandoned of keeping peace in the mountains. For the next twenty years skiers, hikers and bushwalkers will roam the hilly solitudes to the accompaniment of a shattering symphony of explosions, stuttering drills and the rumble of heavy machinery. Even that somewhat aloof body, the Kosciusko State Park Trust, may find itself a futile spectator on the fringe of a mighty battlefield.

Confronted by the feverish energies of 16,000 men working on a top priority national project, to cost the nation some £200 million, Kosciusko skiers may well look upon the years ahead with mild apprehension. For make no mistake. We are to get no time for reflection, no breathing space in which to adjust our fevered minds to the new order of things. The job has begun. A new town is already springing up on the outskirts of Cooma, the headquarters of the Constructing Authority; a big construction camp to hold 1000 men is going up at Jindabyne near the site of the projected Jindabyne Dam; the road from Cooma to Jindabyne is being straightened and concreted; the road between the Hotel Kosciusko and Spencer's Creek is being widened in readiness for tarsealing; the Cooma-Klandra road is being

brought up to the standard of a first-class highway; and a new road will shortly be built from the Hotel Kosciusko to Island Bend, the site of one of the sixteen underground power stations which, in the next twenty years, will convert the Snowy Mountains into another Tennessee Valley.

But from the ski-ing point of view prime interest attaches to plans for the early construction of a high-altitude dam on Spencer's Creek and the consequent flooding of the Chalet Plains. So, far from this being a long-range project, it happens to be the first on the list to be started and the first to be finished. According to the latest schedule laid down by the Authority, boring and blasting will begin before Christmas and the dam should be completed in three years, which means we can expect the valleys to start flooding some time in 1953 or 1954.

It will make some big changes in some of our favourite ski-ing terrain. Present intentions are to raise a dam nearly 200 feet high in the gorge of Spencer's Creek just below the new two-storey hut built last year for the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission. This will back up the waters of Spencer's Creek and its tributary Bett's Creek and form a lake holding 15,000 acre feet of water, flooding the whole of the Chalet and Bett's Plains, submerging Bett's Camp (which will be demolished) and creeping up to within 6 feet of the Chalet door.

The purpose of the lake is to provide water storage for an underground power house to be built under the Snowy River at Island Bend, and to get the water there a tunnel nine miles long will be bored under the Perisher and Blue Cow Mountains. There may even be a second underground power station somewhere near the lower reaches of Piper's Creek.

Thus we shall have a dam, a lake and a tunnel. But besides these works there are going to be open water races, or channels, skirting the contours of the hills in the Upper Snowy region beyond Charlotte's Pass. It has already been mentioned that the lake will be fed by Spencer's and Bett's Creeks, but as the flow from these two

streams may not be sufficient to keep the lake always filled the Authority plans to bring in a further supply by tapping the waters of the Upper Snowy somewhere below Cootapatamba Saddle and running the water into the lake via an open concrete-lined race and a tunnel under Charlotte's Pass. Later on, another race will be built to tap the waters flowing into the Blue Lake under Mt. Twynam. Later still, an even longer race, some 20 miles long, may bring water from the Murray catchment on the Victorian side of Mt. Kosciusko right round the southern slopes of the Ram's Head Range and into the lake near the Porcupines.

Engineers of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority tell me that because of the depth of the snow at Spencer's Creek and the severity of the weather, work on the dam will cease each year after the first snowfalls. But in summer the dam site will be the home of about 500 workers housed in huts and barracks with their own recreation hall and cinema. The possibility of the Tourist Department and the ski clubs acquiring some of these buildings when the work is finished in three or four years is an alluring prospect.

Despite all these threatened changes in our Kosciusko topography, there are no grounds for supposing that the Chalet will lose its attraction as our No. 1 ski-ing resort. The access road will be diverted, but not unduly lengthened; historic Bett's Camp will disappear, but the nearby construction camp will offer suitable alternative buildings, perhaps providing a ready-made alpine village with excellent ski-ing slopes right to hand on the Paralyser and the eastern slopes of Guthrie; the lake lapping the Chalet door

may even be a picturesque asset, offering open-air skating in winter and magnificent fishing and boating in summer; while the open water races in the Snowy Valley could easily be crossed with a few wooden bridges if they are too wide to leap over. So let us not be disheartened by the juggernaut march of progress. We may even like it better than ever four years from now.

One thing is certain. There's going to be a mighty trek of novice week-end skiers in the years to come. The Snowy Mountains Authority is already buying ski clothing on the assumption that some 3000 men working at Cooma, Jindabyne and Island Bend will be trying their hands at the sport each week-end. This, in fact, is to be actively encouraged on the principle that ski-ing is a good tonic for camp morale.

Something has been said about roads; new roads and the modernisation of old ones, particularly in the Cooma-Jindabyne-Adaminaby regions. There will, of course, be others, notably a high-standard access road about to be built from Adaminaby in a north-westerly direction, passing the Three-Mile Dam, round the head of Nine-Mile Creek, over a 530ft. plateau and into Tumut Ponds, the site of one of the underground power stations, about twenty miles north of Jagungal. From there it will be continued some years hence due west to Tooma and the Geehi, thus making a complete crossing of the Dividing Range from N.S.W. to Victoria. This road will obviously open up some interesting ski-ing country virtually unknown today. The fact that the Authority has already ordered snow ploughs and "snow cats" from Canada suggests that a determined attempt is to be made to keep many of these roads open all winter.