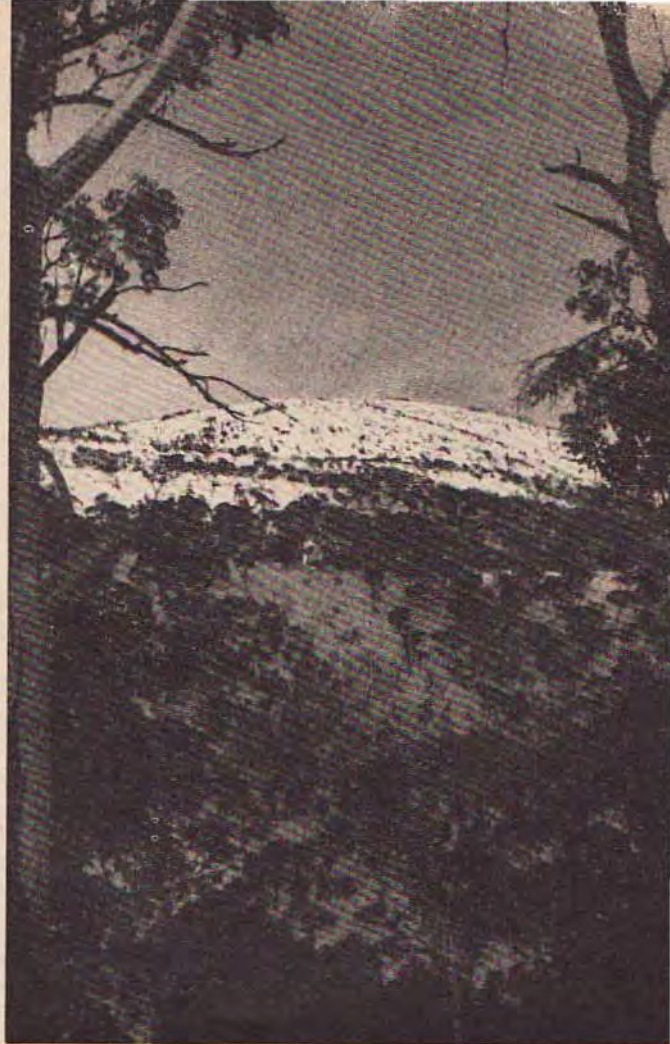


Hither and Yon

T. W. Mitchell

MY ski-ing last season—my first since the war—made a pleasant mosaic in the N.S.W. and Victorian snowlands. The first highlight was an overnight trip to White's River Hut with Dr. E. W. Gibson and Dr. Peter Blaxland. This trip was important because of a really bad navigation mistake made by both Gibson and myself. We had crossed the Consett Stephen and were on the edge of what I always knew as the Rolling Grounds; in other words, the high, tilting wedge of snow country between the Guthega River and White's River. Wyatt's ski map shows the Rolling Grounds as lying more to the west.

The afternoon was clear enough, but detached envoys of the cloud banks marshalling heavily over the dark intricacies of the Murray Valley kept the sunlight to a succession of transient flickerings over the snow and there seemed a strong possibility that we might be immersed in cloud before we reached the hut. I therefore took out the map and with my circular transparent protractor got a bearing on it. I reduced this to the magnetic bearing, and handed the map and protractor over to Gibson to check. Gibson made it the same as I did, but Blaxland differed. He had the Wyatt map, while I had the N.S.W. Lands Department lithographic map of the snow leases. We thought the maps must be radically different. Being two to one, Gibson's and my route was chosen, but after a while, the weather remaining clear, we saw that we would miss the hut by about half a mile down White's River. We apologised to Blaxland and skied on down through those lovely little hanging basins to the hut. We were puzzled because we could not see what we



Findlay's Lookout

T. W. Mitchell

we could have done to mess up our navigation. We were still arguing about it days later back at Charlotte's Pass, when suddenly we saw the solution. Both of us had misread an accidental spot of ink on the map for the spot marking the hut. We know we ought to be shot for making such a stupid mistake especially in clear visibility, but these things happen—goodness knows how, but they do happen—and, thoroughly ashamed though we both are, we feel we should record this stupidity as a warning to others.

On our way to White's on this occasion

we noted some rather queer-looking tracks on a particularly steep and tricky slope across the Munyang River. At first we thought that they were ski tracks, but then decided that they must be animal tracks. However, later on that evening the mystery was solved when first one skier and then another staggered out of the gloom. They were the makers of the tracks, and had come over from the Alpine Hut intending to have lunch at White's, and then go back to Alpine that night. One man had got well ahead of his friend, and then had waited over an hour before going back to find out what had happened. He had found his friend with a broken ski. They had contrived to fix this, and had then descended into the Munyang Valley (thus making the tracks we had seen) where they had turned downstream instead of up. After a long time had passed they realised their mistake, and had turned back upstream to the hut where they found us. Confident that they could use the wireless to tell Breakspear at Alpine that they were all right, they decided to stay the night. After dinner we connected up the wireless according to the almost illegible directions written on a sheet of paper and pinned to the wall, and gaily set off to tell Breakspear that all was well. But that was as far as we got because, although we could hear the Hotel announcing that Australia had beaten Czechoslovakia in the Davis Cup (cheers); that the barometer was 29 point something and rising (terrific cheers); that snow was falling on the Blue Mountains (hoots); and Breakspear calling these two men by name over and over again, we could not make anyone hear us. Time and time again we tried, but nobody could hear. Finally we gave it up. It seemed highly dangerous to put wireless sets in that either cannot be kept in good order or are not reliable. Such sets only encourage people to take risks and thus defeat the intention to make ski-ing safer.

I dislike intensely ending my ski-ing holiday with that awful finality in the Hotel Kosciusko front entrance. Thus I looked in on my sister and brother-in-law at Tumut on the way home. Next morning we did station chores until 11 a.m., and then set off in the Yellow Peril (my station utility) up the Monaro Highway towards Rule's Point. An hour and a half later we were driving along between banks of snow and looking out for some nice ski-ing slopes. We finally saw one about a mile beyond the Rule's

Point House, and bundled out of the Yellow Peril. We had some very pleasant ski-ing on firm, packed snow, coasting on and on down the rolling slopes towards the Murrumbidgee River. The slopes were not steep, but the sunshine and the warmth and the entire absence of wind made the ski-ing far more pleasant than many a day on the better slopes of the Kosciusko Main Range or on Hotham or on Buller. At lunch time there was a patch of heath and snow grass under a Black Sallee gum where we lit a fire and gorged ourselves on grilled steaks, grilled chops, grilled sausages, toast and tea. After this there were some positively divine moments stretched out in the restful springiness of the heath lazily, but very contentedly contemplating the crazy blue segments of the late winter sky appearing through the erratic grille of the upper limbs of the Black Sallee. Then it was a stretch, a yawn, some klister, and skis on and off again down the hill to the tune of the snow swishing past and blending with the cheerful garrulous chatter of the reappearing creeks.

We drove back in the rich glory of the sunset, dropping down the three thousand feet or so of the Cumberland range into the quietly thickening darkness of the Tumut River valley.

It seems a pity that the Monaro highway, now snow-ploughed in as far as the second Yarrangobilly Caves turn-off on one side, and into Kiandra on the other, should not be snow-ploughed completely right through like it was before the war. The present unploughed hiatus is only eight miles and its clearance would not only be a boon to Victorian skiers going to Kosciusko, but also to the skier of the Tumut Ski Club and the potential skier of such places as Yass, Gundagai, Wagga and Holbrook. Clearing the road and also building a small lodge possibly in the Bogong Mountains or the Fiery Mountains would give a tremendous flip to the sport in this area, especially now that country ski clubs are beginning to play such an important part in Australian ski-ing.

The first Sunday at home when I had planned a day ski-ing was spoilt by heavy rain streaming down in masses of unrelenting grey rods, but the second Sunday dawned with that exquisite beauty of colour that makes you miss a breath or two. I got a pair of langlauf skis out of the ski room, a rucksack, and the necessary bits and pieces and drove the jeep across into New South

Wales to Boardman's farm at the foot of Bradney's Gap beneath the serrated peaks of the Dargal mountains.

Here I was to get a horse. The horse—a dark chestnut with a disconcerting gleam in its eye—did not want to be caught and dodged all over, first the paddock, and later the horse yard. It definitely did not want to be caught and I, at first hoping that it would, then, having seen a bit more of the gleam, hoped that it wouldn't. It wouldn't have, either, if Mrs. Boardman had not come out of the cow bails brandishing a broom and with this domestic weapon coralled the brute in a corner. I bitterly regretted this because a few minutes later my fears were realised all too well when the chestnut demonstrated its intransigence by pitching me. Those of you who sit back at ease in the Kosciusko or Buffalo buses have no idea what it is to begin a day's ski-ing by being thrown all ways through the air and landing in a spreadeagle tangle on the hard and unsympathetic earth. It really inspires you. Although the day began thus inauspiciously, it got better and better. I hate langlauf and langlauf skis, but I must admit the latter have one commendable attribute and that is that they are easy to carry when on horseback.

I left the horses at the snowline just where the aloof majesty of the ash gives way to the plebian tangle of the snowgums and climbed up the remaining few hundred feet of the Long Spur to the summit of the level wall four miles long known as the Broadway Top. I turned to the right and swung off along the Broadway Top doing an easy three-step. An hour later I had reached the summit of Findlay's Lookout (5400), that knob where the Strumbo Range turns at right angles and, becoming the Dargals Range, sets off to the north. The all-round view is superb. The Victorian Alps were thickly covered and my eye crossed the blue-brown hiatus of the Murray River, pausing for a few moments where the snow-capped summits of Pinnabar and Davies Plains make white islands in the sea of tree-crowns, and then ran on eagerly and lovingly over the well known contours and delineations of the Kosciusko main range, resting finally on Jagungal's dominant summit.

I ate my lunch in the sun bath formed by circular wind-scours in the snow round the trig cairn. I know it is not wise to ski alone, but what else can I do? There was no mate available, besides no one on this earth can

resist the lure of snowfields close at hand on a sun-filled day. There is also the added feeling of satisfaction inevitably associated with something almost falling within the classification of stolen fruits. Coupled with this feeling was the intense satisfaction of being so situated that ski-ing is not just an annual stunt at a remote and impersonal governmental hotel, but an integral part of the way of life.

I skied through the grey, spindly tangle of the dead snowgum woods on the ridge of the Scammel spur and off into yet unskied snowfields hanging over the twisted cleft of Bourke's gorge. A solitary wedge tail chaperoned me, flying easily and quizzically close over head. At frequent intervals he would sit on a dead limb and speculate about me. I felt flattered.

I skied home, weaving my tracks across the warp of the lengthening tree shadows where they stretched their long blue-black lengths towards the sunset-tinged glory of the snowlands to the eastward.

The next week Elyne and I rode back up the Long Spur and pitched the tent on a small patch of grass in the icing of snow of the Broadway Top. The snow was covered with shreds of bark and looked like a department shop basement after a bargain sale. The glass was medium when we went to bed, but at 5 a.m. the tent was flapping madly in a series of fierce windy bursts. Rain was falling on the Murray while the head of the Dargal trig across the head of the Khancoban creek was buried in grey, racing clouds. Everything looked set for a first-rate storm. Action stations was sounded immediately. Elyne, somehow or other, got a fire going in the teeth of the wind and set to work melting snow (we were far above the nearest creek) and cooking extra food before the rain forced us into the tent and we would have to make do with the meta cooker. I got out the thirty-foot plough rein and anchored the tent fore and aft to snowgums. I got another length of strong line and fixed up a cross bracing to two other snowgums. I dug extra storm drains in the snow. However, by the time we had done all this and eaten some breakfast the storm had changed its mind and had vanished, letting the sun shine in practically an empty sky. Grabbing some lunch we skied off northwards to enjoy a day of most cheering and invigorating ski-ing down the convex south-western slopes of the Ink Bottle. We had a drowsy

lunch where a small creek broke free of the snow in the rather lonesome ash forests on the southern feet of the Ink Bottle. The only blemish was my brilliant effort of up-setting a full quart pot of tea into our fire. We stayed there some time lulled by the anaesthetic effect of the combined smells of klistar, eucalyptus smoke and aromatic ash.

That night the glass fell more although the sunset was both brilliant and evocative. At midnight the tent, a desert military model and not intended for snow use, was flogging to and fro against the plough rein. We woke up, had a biscuit and some chocolate, and then lay in our sleeping bags listening to the positively vicious howling of the gusts of wind coming up from the depths of the Howling Dog Gorge in tumbling successions of gust after gust to break across the tent, setting it off into fresh paroxysms of wild dancing.

We speculated on the tumult and decided that we would just about get away with it. We went to sleep. At 4.30 a.m. I woke up lying hard against one wall of the tent. Elyne was crowding down on top of me, while Roley, the sheep dog, who had, as a great concession, been allowed during the height of the blitz to come in to the door of the tent, was sleeping the sleep of the just with half the tent to himself, having somehow managed to push us both across the tent.

The glass was even lower, but the weather was still fine, so we set off over the Broadway Top to Findlay's Lookout, and then dropped down in a series of very pleasant christies to the floor of the Pretty Plain Valley. We had had a bath in the river and were boiling the quart on a patch of snow grass beside a snowgum when suddenly we saw a black bulge of cloud easing up the sky above the white snow wall of the Broad-

way Top. The rest of the sky was clear and sunny, but we hastily collected quarts, rucksacks, waxes and bindings, and, putting on skins hurriedly, set off up the ridge to the tent. By the time we reached it an hour later, the whole sky was completely black and the air was a violent jumble of conflicting currents. The weather still did not look like degenerating completely, but our minds were made up for us when we saw that the tent had collapsed completely due to the snapping of the ridge pole. It slumped forlornly in the wild flurry and confusion. We decided we would walk out and not wait for the horses to come for us the following day. Half an hour of hasty packing followed, and then we set off, leaving all the gear, except the shovel which we took with us, under a tarpaulin and weighed down with rocks. It went against the grain to leave all the firewood I had cut and stacked.

Heavy rain began to fall through the fitfully tossing tree tops while we followed the thin trail along the bottom of the Khancoban creek gorge. It was raining even more solidly when we sat on a log to take off our ski boots and socks preparatory to wading the grey rushing Khancoban Creek at the foot of Bradney's Gap.

The jeep, parked in the open, in the first of the cleared lands at the edge of the forest, fortunately started at the second attempt. We raced off through the early night made even darker by the sheet after sheet of rain. Elyne worked the wind-screen wiper while I drove with one hand and operated the spot light. Roley whined on the back seat.

We raced across the Bringinbrong bridge back into Victoria with the rapidly rising water already lapping and leaping at the flooring of the bridge. Next day we looked at the storm-shrouded Alps across a great lake. We were cut off from New South Wales for a week.

