

Tasmania, a Week-end on Ben Lomond

T. W. Mitchell

"THERE'S snow on the Ben, let's get get cracking," Bill Mitchell—no relation, but staunch friend—was welcoming me at the Western Junction aerodrome just outside Launceston. An alluring white gleam showed between a slight layer of cloud and a green surge of grassland topped off with dark trees. The date was Friday, 4th August, 1950. Two hours before. I had boarded the aeroplane in Melbourne. One hour later I was changing into ski clothes in the thickets at the 2500 foot level on Ben Lomond. Down where the lethargic waters of Phillips Creek slipped slowly past the tree ferns, Bill, his wife, and Boo collected gear and rucksacks and locked up in the car my garments of another world. We left the car at 5.30 p.m., and were at Carr Villa (known as the Lower Hut) fifteen hundred feet higher up the mountain an hour later. An otherwise rather stiff ascent was mercifully tempered by a well-graded footpath. Bill and I chatted about old times as the darkness welled up around us, stopping only to play our torches

on a smug ring tail possum roaming about in an effortless but purposeless way on the lower branches of a peppermint. Two eyes of red fire, a white belly, a white tail tip and the rest brown. Lower down we had seen a wild deer. We spent an hour resting in the lamp-lit gloom of Carr Villa while a hoarse primus made us tea. Ski boots and skis cluttered the round timber rafters above our heads.

At 6.30 p.m. we set off in Indian file to climb the Ben proper. The Ben is a mountain possessed of a captivating magnetism. It has a strange weird beauty. Its general character is of a huge rectangular tableland eight miles by four that bursts up some four thousand feet above the surrounding countryside. The first three thousand feet up the sides are timber-clad and steep enough, but the last thousand feet is formed of a really steep naked cascade of boulders that came thundering down in a bygone spate of geological fury from the selvedge of peaks along the edge of the plateau above.



Chateau Dumitchmill, Ben Lomond, Tasmania.

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The plateau is cut transversely about a third of the way down its long axis from the northern end by a deeply incised valley called the Rodway. The northern segment thus formed is the main ski-ing grounds and is in its turn cut longitudinally by a valley known as the Borrowdale. The northern end of this valley forms the gateway through the columnar bastions to the snowfields and also a through passage from the Carr Villa slopes into the Rodway Valley. The north-eastern section again is cut longitudinally by a valley running parallel to the Borrowdale and called the Strickland. The plateau is devoid of trees.

We climbed up and up into the upper strata of the night. An artificially constructed path made the going nothing like the hazardous proceeding it would otherwise have been. Thus we passed up into the open mouth of the waiting Borrowdale. After a while, we swung left up one of Borrowdale's sides and then up and up through the Land of Little Sticks and the Kicking Horse Pass to the freedom of the plateau top. The snow was fairly thick here, while the night, though intensely black, was nevertheless fresh and sweet. A non-aggressive but fairly steady wind blew on our right ears. It was the wind

which suddenly changed from our right ears to our left eyes that made Bill and me simultaneously realise that somehow or other, do not ask us how, we had, despite the kindness of the night, turned completely round on the snowpole line. "I've never done that before," Bill said as we swung round back into the right direction. We paused for a few minutes rest in the porch of the N.T.A.C. Upper Hut and then set off up the Summit Pass to the Chateau Dumitchmill—our destination—which we reached at 9.50 p.m.

Next morning, as soon as the light began to spread itself in slow seeping greyiness over the interior of the lodge, I scrambled out into the snow with all the eagerness that the prospect of viewing new snowlands. Straight opposite, a giant heap of boulders—known as Legge's Tor—formed a soft black eclipse to the pale yellow blur of the dawn. The mists, that were shortly to blot out all view for half the day, were now lying parked in long yellow-grey rows between the undulations of the country below the snowlands where the dark shades of the pre-dawn still lay undisturbed. I then took a good look at the Chateau Dumitchmill. This remarkable building squats comfortably snuggled down within a tight crescent of time-scarred

boulders. It can only be approached from one side, where there is a break in this natural protective wall. With its stone walls and roof well garnished with snow, it blends so admirably with its immediate surroundings that it appears more a natural part of the landscape than an artificial intrusion.

The Chateau was built in 1939 at a price of only £60, which includes all equipment. It is 17½ feet by 11½ feet and consists of a living room (14ft. x 11½ft.) plus a lobby. There are six bunks which are cunningly arranged so that they over-lap at certain ends and thus save space. There is a store attic over the lobby. Equipment features include a water well under the floor. This is also a feature of the N.T.A.C. Upper Lodge and also the McWhiggs Lodge. All that is necessary to obtain water is to lift a trap door and either lower a bucket or the end of a pump. Bright boys, these Tasmanians. Another feature of the Chateau is the electric light obtained from three two-volt batteries and charged by a home-made wind device consisting of a two-blade propeller some six feet in diameter which drives a windlight generator. It only works fairly well because difficulty is experienced with the icing-up of the propeller blades. Apart from kerosene radiators and a primus, the hut is equipped with a stove, the fuel coming from the club's own private coal mine down in the Rodway.

The Chateau forms, with the N.A.T.C. Upper Lodge and the McWhiggs Lodge, a triangle. These lodges lie about one-third of a mile from each other. An ex-disposals telephone connects all three. The summit of Ben Lomond consists of a saddle hung high between the two tors of the Giblin (sheltering the Chateau) and Legge's Tor (sheltering the McWhiggs). Until recently Legge's Tor was held to be the highest point in Tasmania, but now Mt. Ossa is said to be slightly higher. The N.A.T.C. Upper Lodge is lower down below the saddle and is at the foot of the Summit Pass.

After breakfast, Bill, Inez (Mrs. Bill), Boo and I set off through intermittent mist round Legge's Tor to the McWhiggs Lodge. On the way, we passed the main nursery slope known as the Big Ben. Further on we crossed the head of the Thirty Second slope which is where most of the championship slalom's are held. A muted wind was playing fitfully with mist tendrils around a stippling of dark rocks on the snow flanks of

Legge's Tor as we skied up to the McWhiggs Lodge.

The McWhigg's Lodge (called, like the Chateau Dumitchmill, by a name combining fragments of the names of the syndicate which built it) is a neat wooden lodge measuring 14 feet by 10 feet, outside measurements. The bunks (six) are in a very neatly and conveniently arranged interior. It was built in 1949 at a cost of £200. Reg Hall's cheery voice told us to come in and for goodness sake shut that — door. Introductions were made and steaming hot cups of tea produced. In an easy effortless way I was made to feel at home. I do like sincere and uneffusive hospitality and I certainly got my wish that week-end amongst those Tasmanians. Later on that day, I was entertained at the N.A.T.C. Upper Lodge. This lodge houses twenty-five and is about the only corrugated iron lodge I have ever seen that looks really attractive. The usually severe lines are broken by neat wooden gables, while the building is painted in a pleasant shade of dark green with windows picked out in orange. All this is set off by the towering white cone of the Ben and the white staircase of the Summit Pass leading up to the Chateau.

We skied back across the slopes that slip down into the Strickland — a rumbled, churned up rockland, probably the playground of many summer lightnings. We skied for some time on the Thirty Second slope and inspected the site for the ski tow to be built there next summer. The Tasmanians, like us Mainlanders, are feeling the shame at being outclassed by the New Zealanders in this respect. The tow will be about 250 vertical feet and cater for practically all standards. This treeless snowscape with its frequent rock-eruptions reminded me a great deal of the volcanic snowlands of Ruapehu in New Zealand. A few more schusses, a few more turns, a few more plans for "next year," and then it was back to the Chateau for lunch.

That afternoon, fortified with an excellent kedgereed of Bill's making we skied carefully down between the half-hidden boulders and bushes into the wide white expanse lying behind the Giblin. Half-way along, the mists, after several hesitant attempts, lifted disclosing the weirdest scene I have ever witnessed on the snow. To the left the valley plunged down through dark cliffs to the Rodway's lonely depths. To the right the

scene was uncanny. The valley was a sea of snow stirred up by the restless jumble of rocks. Gyration whirlwinds of mist flew like silver ghosts hither and thither against a back-drop of threatening black clouds. With the angular rocks looking like broken open coffins, the whole scene looked like a crazy combination of Walpurgis Night and the Valley of a Thousand Smokes.

We skied on to inspect the Ghiblin downhill course. This is a course of about 750 vertical feet starting from near the summit of the peak and dropping off down to the valley. Some of the upper slopes would give interesting running. The two girls at this juncture retired to the lodge, but Bill and I—ski-ing together for the first time for eleven years—went on out towards the Little Hell downhill course which runs off the rump of the northern section of the plateau for about 1000 feet down into the Rodway. Then we swung back along the edge of the Strickland and across the Thirty Second Slope to the McWhiggs Lodge and then, after a few cheery words, on past where Von See and his syndicate will build their lodge next summer, to a cup of tea at the Upper Lodge.

We reached the Chateau as the blue silvering of teh shadows finally drove the fading crimson of the sunset from the snows.

Next morning the sunlight came flooding joyously in a surge of gold over the plateau. A few bodies looked in to say ski heil and good-bye as they skied over to the Big Ben slopes. At 10.10 a.m. we closed the door and skied off to Carr Villa and to the car and to waiting realities and responsibilities.

On our way we paused often to absorb even more of the strangely elusive glories of these sunlit snowfields. From one point, not far from Mt. Misery, I saw a golden gleam which Bill told me was the seas of the north-east. Behind it he showed me the misty but yet sharply delineated peaks of Mt. Strezlechi and the mountains of Flinders Island. To the left the seas of Bass Straits showed as a dark blue half circle, while away, far away, to the right a blue-black splodge was an outflung tendril of the Pacific Ocean striking in by the Eddystone light.

And so to the car, Launceston, the plane and Melbourne at 6.40 on Sunday evening.

