

Ski Exploration of Victoria

By W. Bertram.

Victorian and Australian ski-ing owes much to the early ski-tourers. This body of adventurers underwent many strenuous excursions to open up the vast snow areas of Victoria, but they have been amply repaid for any of their discomforts by the knowledge that their actions undoubtedly greatly furthered the sport. One name stands out among the pioneers, that of Mr. R. W. Wilkinson, a past president of the Ski Club of Victoria. Others who ventured into the unknown hills on more than one occasion were Messrs. G. Rush, K. Gibson, and E. Robinson, who are still doing great work for the sport in all its branches.

For the foundation of ski-touring in Victoria we must go back to pre-war years, when in 1911 Mr. Wilkinson and Mr. Connell visited the Bogong High Plains from Mount St. Bernard. The return trip was made in one day, surely a great feat, one that many could not make even now. From Mount St. Bernard, also, was made the first crossing of the Razorback by a party led by Mr. Fay, then the Norwegian Consul in Melbourne.

Together with most other sports, ski-ing languished during the war years, and it was not until 1924, upon the formation of the Ski Club of Victoria, that any further exploration was undertaken. On June 9th of that year, Mr. G. V. Rush, accompanied by Messrs. G. Langridge, C. Morrish and B. Walker visited Mount Buller. Later in the same year, Mr. Rush again visited this mountain and stayed about one week. He was accompanied on this trip by Drs. Yoffa and Fenton and Messrs. A. Sudecum and K. Rush. Buller was now well explored, and interest turned to the Bogong High Plains. Drs. Yoffa and Fenton, Messrs. Wilson, J. Docherty and G. Rush made the first extended stay on the plains during August, 1925, and thoroughly explored the western section and as far eastward as Wallace's Hut. This trip was made by Dungey's track, necessitating a twenty-five mile horseback ride from Bright.

Great advance was made in 1926. Messrs. Wilkinson, Gibson, Robinson and Vanderstoel visited the eastern end of the plains, climbed Mount Nelson and reached Wallace's Hut from the east, thus linking up with the previous year's endeavours. This party was then joined by Dr. Yoffa and Mr. G. V. Rush, the entire party making the first trip across the plains from Kelly's Hut to Dibbin's in one day and on to Hotham and St. Bernard the following day. About one month later the plains were again crossed in the same direction by Messrs. J. Docherty, Haydon MacPherson, Olsen and Wilson. This party concluded its journey by Blair's Hut, the Diamantina Spur and Mount Feathertop.

1927 saw the heaviest snow year within ski-ing memory. In August of that year, Messrs. Waters, Stewart, Gibson and Robinson made the first west-east crossing, via Hotham, Blair's, Tawonga and Kelly's Huts. Upon this occasion Tawonga Hut was completely covered and access was gained by the chimney. On this trip food arrangements broke down, due to the unprecedented snowfall, and the last half of the journey was made on starvation rations. In October of the same year, R. W. Wilkinson and J. Docherty made the first ski ascent of Mount Fainter, making the journey from Dibbin's Hut and back the same day, another man-size trip. However, with all this good work, Victoria's highest mountain, Bogong, still remained unconquered by ski. Establishing a base at Kelly's Hut in 1928, Messrs. Waters, Stewart, Gibson and Robinson made the first ascent of this summit. Camping one night in the Big River valley, the mountain was climbed on August 18th and the return journey to Kelly's made, again camping by the Big River.

During early 1928 a hut was erected by the Government Tourist Committee

near Mount Cope in the centre of the Bogong High Plains. This hut opened up many miles of excellent country, and ever since has been the most popular of Victoria's snow huts. Mount McKay was ascended in 1929 by a party using Cope Hut for its base. This party consisted of Messrs. Wilkinson, Gregory, Dyason, Mommsen, McNabb and Vanderstoel. During this year the Mount Buller Chalet was opened to skiers, and from here Mount Stirling, a prominent double summit in this locality, was visited by Miss Nankivill, Mr. and Mrs. Dyason and Drs. Brown and Trumble.

Following all this explorative work covering the years 1924 to 1929, no important excursions to any new locality were made during 1930 and 1931. 1932 brought a renewal of the wanderlust. Mount Bogong had reigned in uninterrupted majesty since the 1928 party had planted its ski tracks on his crown, but his isolation was soon to be disturbed. Messrs. Bertram, Robinson and Tulloh ascended the mountain from the plains, via the Big River, hoping to stay a few days on top and then descend into Tawonga village, on the north side. Unfortunately, when the party reached the summit bad weather forced it to descend immediately. However, this was the first ski traverse of Bogong. Later in August, Mr. C. J. M. Cole made the first ascents of both Mount Bogong and Mount Fainter from the Tawonga side. Nearer Melbourne, Mount Federation (4,900 feet) was skied upon for the first time by Messrs. Gurdon and Higgins, who visited this mountain from Lake Mountain, beyond Marysville.

During 1933 two trips of some importance were made in the Mount Buller sector of our Alps. Mr. J. Tulloh visited Clear Hills, beyond Mount Stirling, and Mr. C. Buckley climbed Mount Howitt. Although ski were not used on this latter trip, it marked a definite step away from all previously explored snow areas. Mount Bogong was again visited in 1934 when, after much useful reconnaissance work during the preceding summers, Messrs. Cole and R. Weston spent several days in an old hut close to the summit, thoroughly exploring the mountain's skiing area. Later, Messrs. Robinson and Tulloh spent a few days there, leaving by the Big River and the High Plains.

Eleven years have now passed since the formation of the Ski Club of Victoria. These years have seen the exploration of the major portion of the north-eastern Alps and of the area in the vicinity of Mount Buller, but many large areas in mid-eastern, and possibly far-eastern, Victoria are still unknown under winter conditions. The mid-eastern section, embracing the area between Mount Wellington and Mount Howitt, including the Wellington, Benison, Holmes, Snowy and Howitt Plains, all about 5,000 feet elevation, should give excellent touring country with quite a few good short downhill runs, although descents of more than 500 feet may be rare. This area should be the next opened up.

A large factor in the comparatively rapid exploration of the Victorian ski country is the prevalence of mustering huts. These huts are scattered about our high country, there being no less than nine or ten on the Bogong High Plains. They are always open and, provided they are kept clean and well stocked with firewood, no objection is made to their use by skiers. The owners of these huts deserve great thanks for their help in the opening up of our ski areas. Another contributory cause to Victoria's touring history is that many of the early explorers were also walking enthusiasts and knew the country well, following summer tours. Summer excursions also give much good experience in the technique of pack-carrying and camp-making.

Any skiers who intend making an exploratory tour of any portion of the Australian Alps would be well advised to go over the country first in summer, picking out landmarks, making notes of hut locations, positions of springs and many other points that will add to the safety and enjoyment of the winter excursion.