

Mt. Stirling, Victoria

By Colin Wyatt

THE snow seemed to be lying right to the level of Woollybutt Saddle and below, and the open slopes of Mount Stirling looked so tempting that we decided to go there next day, August 18th. The party consisted of Dr. Robin Orr, W. Tyrwhitt-Drake, R. Macdonald, and the writer.

We left Mount Buller Chalet at 9.20 a.m. and climbed up over One Tree Hill and up the glade from the Traverse to the top ridge in half-an-hour. The running along the serrated backbone looked far more open than we had thought, and we had glorious fast-running through steep, open glades down to the saddle at the foot of Tabletop, at 5,000 ft. There was heavenly powder snow here, and a dingo had passed early that morning, chasing a rabbit. The climb up the ridge to Tabletop was hard and icy, and we were glad of a rest when we arrived on top, 5,350 ft., at 10.35 a.m. Stirling looked even better from this viewpoint, and there were obviously at least three good runs-off it, some of which, however, would involve a climb back up the creek to Woollybutt Saddle. If a hut were built near the saddle one could have grand fun for a few days exploring the mountain, for there is water just below, and plenty of wood.

We had a bit of bush-whacking through black-wattle scrub off the far side of Tabletop, and then a series of long, gentle schusses along an undulating "arterial road" that ran along the ridge for a good mile. The dingo had been going the same way as us and had unerringly picked the best line, and we soon found ourselves following his tracks round blind corners in complete confidence. It was very pleasant and peaceful running, and the few little rises gave one time to look out over the great valleys that lay on either side; on the right the valley ran along the foot of a saw-toothed range of rocky cliffs. The last few

hundred feet down to Woollybutt Saddle were fast and exciting, for the "road" had dwindled to a steep and narrow track with lots of sharp corners, and even the good powder snow did not help much. It was too narrow to stem, except here and there, and one whizzed round corners with "Lifted-skid-prod-oh! God" Christies with one's sticks whacking the great trunks that flashed past.

The saddle itself is a heavenly place, a great, wide, open glade surrounded by huge woollybutts, and much patronised by the local wombats. Our aneroid showed 4,550 ft. It was now 11.10 a.m., and the snow was warming rapidly, so we decided to put on skins for the long, steady climb ahead up to Stirling. We climbed through long, open glades in the tall timber, with very little scrub, to the snow-gum belt. The snow was now perfect spring snow, and we cheered ourselves with the thought of the grand wood-running we would have coming home. It was getting very hot indeed, and we were glad when we reached the first nob on the long, slowly-rising ridge that led to the foot of the last steep climb. It was very open going up here; we reached the second nob at noon, and had a nice gentle schuss off the far side. The steep climb up the final ridge was broken by big rock outcrops that forced us along the side on to steep traverses, but we regained the ridge near the end, and reached the East Top of Stirling at 12.35 p.m.

The top of Stirling is a huge plateau with a dip in the centre, over whose edge there is lovely running on both sides. We were very taken with the slopes to the north, but as we were uncertain as to how long we would take to get back to Buller, we decided that we had neither the time nor the energy to climb back from their foot. The East Top is about 5,750 ft., and the West Top, across the plateau, about ten feet higher. We lunched there on some rocks, and had the whole of the Mount Buller massif spread out before us like a relief-map, miles away across the deep valley. We could pick out every run and glade, and spent a long time taking bearings and trying to work out new possibilities for runs.

We left at 2 p.m., and schussed down across the plateau to the edge of the snow-gums. The glades were full of powder snow, and the going very easy. And then we set off down the ridge, schuss after schuss, little steep ones, and along the main backbone to the First Nob. Now the fun started, and we had the most glorious wood-running in spring snow, on an average gradient of at least 20 deg., down to Woollybutt Saddle. I got off the ridge to the left, lower down, and had an exciting run through the woollybutt forest, between huge black boles that towered up into the dark roof of branches. It was almost twilight down here, and the colouring a sombre black and white. We were back on the saddle at 2.45 p.m., after a most enjoyable 1,100 feet of broken running, and then put on skins for the climb to Tabletop.

We decided not to climb over Tabletop, but to take the long, white traverse track, cut across its face, that can be seen from Buller; a most unfortunate decision. This traverse faces almost due north, and large bits of it were completely bare. In places we had to take off our ski because of the stones. However, this was at the end of a notoriously bad snow winter, and in a good season it might be easy. Still, we saw more possibilities of runs down ridges to our right that would be good, once access was cut to their feet from the top hair-pins of the Buller road. We reached the saddle west of Tabletop at 3.45 p.m., and the ridge above Buller, about 5,350 ft. at 4.25 p.m. Then, after a final look round, we ran down to the Chalet and clocked-in at 4.45 p.m.

We had taken things very easily throughout, and stopped often for photography and discussions, plus a long rest for lunch, and our total time was 7 hours 25 minutes; total climb, 3,300 ft. Stirling is a very worth-while trip, and gives far better running than would appear from a distance. All it now needs is a hut somewhere around Woollybutt Saddle, and I am sure that it would become a very popular and easy tour, and give plenty of variations.