

"Where the Cobbler Stands Defiant . . ."

By Nial Brennan

Some mountains are just bumps on a landscape; others, ostensibly higher, are just bumps on a plateau, from which they derive a height far exceeding their due. These are the placid and matronly mountains, the calves and cows of the topographical cattle-yard, stereotyped elevations in a prosaically flat world, which, even if they have an undulating charm, are nevertheless domesticated.

Even Australia's highest peak is little more than a bulge on a high level skyline. An air-hostess once tried to point it out to me, and her task was made easy only by following the line of an almost level horizon to its highest point. Mt. Hotham, by the very fact that it is a skier's paradise, is a round and buxom mountain, full bosomed and motherly, in spite of her occasional meteorological tantrums. Buller, graceful pinnacle though it is from the Merrijig road, conceals with shame a road that runs up its back skirts, while Sydney's Blue Mountains have to endure the final ignominy of a railway line.

Australia has few fighting mountains left untouched by the hand of the tourist agent or the orange peel of the tripper. Most of them have roads to the top, or nearly so, and what does it profit a man to struggle up a mighty escarpment to find a trio of maiden aunts who have already arrived by car. The fact is that if mountaineering is to be regarded as a spiritual as well as a physical exercise (and its spirituality cannot be ignored, however self-conscious it makes some of us blase moderns feel), there is little satisfaction in meeting the aunts on top. One prefers the easiest course up a difficult mountain to the hardest ascent of a tamed mountain. And though difficult mountains are rare now, there are a few left.

Speaking of Victoria alone, Bogong has been put, temporarily, on the danger list of the Ski Club, and even in summer, only the best horsemen can take their horses to the door of Summit Hut. For those who seek the ski-ing slopes of Camp Valley, the final 500 feet of the Staircase may

prove a serious obstacle. For a mad mountaineer, bent on the hellish delights of self-immolation, the last 500 feet can often provide a problem that gives more than a passing satisfaction in the solution thereof.

Then there is the Cathedral. Not, of course, the Cathedral at Buffalo or the Cathedral at Bunyip Creek, or the other at Woop-Woop, or any of the other Cathedrals which dot the countryside in perpetual tribute to man's lack of originality, but the razor-back range north of Buxton, with its sheer cliff faces, its fluted gothic spires, and its ragged, untidy and dangerous Sugarloaf.

But the mountain which has always remained in my mind as Victoria's No. 1 peak is Cobbler. I have seen the Blue Mountains, the Grampians, and the Alps in summer and winter, and none has left the same impression of wild scenic grandeur as that lonely spot where the horny head of Cobbler rears defiant over its foothills. It is the embodiment in mountain form of the cliché, "rugged individualism."

I first saw Cobbler many years ago, when, from a point on the Wombat Ranges north of Mansfield, we surveyed the grand skyline of the Divide, out of which one peak stood, not, perhaps, much higher than its neighbours, but with far more vigour. Our escort identified it as Cobbler, and regaled us with stories of the wild country where there were people who had lost touch with civilisation, where there were fabulous beasts and incredible etceteras, and other details designed to impress the gullible.

He exaggerated, of course, but such is the privilege of the story teller. Many people had been there, and many still go there. There are not many mountains on which the officials of the Depart-



Rockey Face of Mt. Cobbler. Trevor Davy
By courtesy Melbourne Walking Club.

ment of Lands and Survey have not erected their tin-plated trig. stations to assist them in their computation of the country's ups and downs. Nor are there many mountains in the north-east over which the cattlemen have not ushered their bellowing charges en route for the slaughter house or another season in fattening green pastures. Nor are there many mountains over which the indefatigable elders of the Melbourne Walking Club have not strode in evidence of man's innate superiority over nature, and the Walking Club's superiority over other clubs. But while it was clear that to these people, Cobbler was just another mountain, perhaps a slightly greater nuisance than most, it was equally clear that Cobbler was no place for a Sunday School picnic.

It stands about 5,600 feet above sea level, roughly north-east of Mansfield, and visible from all the major Victorian peaks. The Divide prances down from its anarchic heights near the Snowy River until it runs into the clutches of man near Omeo and Hotham. From

there, sitting rebelliously under the Alpine Road, the highest road to Australia, it proceeds to Mt. St. Bernard, where, with a drunken whoop, it rushes off across the barren Barry Mountains, the north wall of the Great Unsettled Patch. At the end of the Barry Range, it meets Mt. Speculation, after having scattered various gestures of contempt for man in the form of the Razor, the Viking, and Selwyn, behind it. From Speculation south to Howitt, it takes the form of one of Victoria's most spectacular razor-backs, the Cross-cut Saw, flanked on the east by the aptly named Terrible Hollow. At Howitt, anarchy sets in again, and Buller, Magdala, and Clear are but a few of the many great peaks which begin to arise in profusion.

In the group comprising Speculation, Howitt, and Buller, some seven great rivers have their sources, flowing out like the spokes of a wheel to all points of the compass: the MacAllister, the Wannangatta, the Buffalo, the Eose, the Howqua, the King, and the Delatite.

From Mt. Speculation a spur branches off to the north-west, first flattening itself into a broad plateau which is renowned as a cattle pasture. At the end of the plateau, the spur coils itself in readiness for a final spring, which is the bombastic eminence of Cobbler, and after that the mountains collapse panting on all sides, leaving this prussian-helmeted harrikin of the ranges with the world at its feet.

It was named after Mt. Cobbler in Scotland, which derived its name from its likeness to a cobbler bending over his last. When a likeness is twice removed there is not much of it left, and Victoria's Cobbler is like nothing else. Mr. R. H. Croll has christened it "The Hunchback," which is certainly more appropriate, but one should not debate the merit of names, for they come to be things in themselves. The shape of Cobbler is unique. When you see it from the Wombat Ranges, you are looking at it end-on, and it is sharp and bony. From Buffalo and the Alps you are half behind it, and you see only a roughly rounded slope with a spiked head, a climax at the head of a long range. The best view is one of the rarest, from the south, on the ridge that leads to Mt. Sterling. This is one of the nearest views that can be obtained of the whole mountain, and no

picture or diagram can accurately portray the massive bulk of the mountain, with its roughly domed top, its rock faces, and the suddenness with which the whole range collapses about it.

Standing upon the slopes near Sterling's summit, there is a panorama that would be difficult to equal. The whole arc of range forms the valley of the King River, one of those crystal-clear mountain streams which abound with trout, and whose icy purity is the best thing known for a really dry throat. The King draws these waters from some of the grandest mountains in Victoria; from Cobbler to the Cobbler plateau, to Speculation, across the Cross-cut Saw to Howitt, and back to Sterling, the valley is a pattern of blue tonings, crowned in winter with white fringes, and always shaggy with rock and timber.

These mountains are not popular with skiers because skiing in Victoria is too often confined to downhill running. For the winter tourist of suitable experience, discretion, and with proper equipment and organisation, who is prepared to carry his ski for a part of the journey at least, there is in these mountains the essence of the sport of mountaineering—a mountain is a problem to be solved, and in the solution thereof lies the satisfaction of the sport.

Of course, there are some mountain tops that Nature has ordained shall simply be debarred to man altogether under their winter conditions; while the Cross-cut Saw serves as an example of what is essentially a summer trip. We have mountains in Victoria capable of pounding an individual very unpleasantly. But there are others that could yield the great joy of achievement to members of a well-planned and thorough expedition.

I know of only one winter visit to Cobbler. Certainly, on such a journey ski would be reduced to their purely functional origin, the means of facilitating travel across snow-covered country. Huts are few and far between, and none of them are very comfortable. The weather is as variable and cantankerous as anywhere in the Alps.

But do not misunderstand me when I say that if skiing is reduced to a matter of tobogganing with two toboggans instead of one, the skier loses much of the best that mountaineering can offer. "A knowledge of ski-ing better equips

the skier to fully appreciate all the mountains have to offer," said my friend Harold Gibbs in this regard, and with that I agree; if, that is, the skier is interested in mountains, and not merely in slopes. And even if the ignorance of the toboggan skier is bliss, and there is little value other than social in observing the European Alps from the window of a funicular or the cushions of a car, it is well to remember that experience is not won cheaply. The real magnificence of Australia is reserved for private exhibition to those who are prepared to pay for it in sweat, possibly tears, and, in the case of the intemperately enthusiastic, blood as well. For the first two categories, their reward is so much the greater.

[Compare this point of view with that expressed by the late Cleve Cole. In the 1936 Year Book, at page 75, he emphasised the joys of touring, and added, apropos of downhill-ites: "A regrettable spirit of competition, which will eventually compare with the making of mechanical speed records, is creeping in. Limited satisfaction is the reward for this narrow outlook."]

Advocacy of touring, of course, must be coupled with emphasis on the need for the soundest possible planning of these ventures, in accordance with the safety code, and the reduction, to a minimum, of danger either to the party or to others who might have to search for them.—Editor.]

A New Badge

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The S.C.V. has established a fund to furnish and equip this skiers' Lodge. The response to date is very satisfactory, and investigation for a suitable site has been commenced, while plans for the building are taking shape, so that the Lodge may be established at the earliest opportunity.

The completion of the S.C.V. Memorial Clubhouse scheme and the Ivor Whittaker Memorial Lodge will be the S.C.V.'s great contribution to post-war ski-ing.

That is why you will see Victorian skiers wearing a new badge this season, because they have a war-time job to do, and intend to do it well.