

TASMANIA'S MOUNTAINS

By M. TATHAM

'The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion : the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood.'

WORDSWORTH.

IT is perhaps something of an anomaly to write for the ALPINE JOURNAL a description of any portion of Australia, that one continent that has no great mountain system. Geologically Australia is old and worn out ; its ranges for the most part are respectably clad and only here and there thrust out decayed ruins above the vegetation. It has no permanent snowfields, no glaciers.

Yet its dependent island Tasmania which, taking its share of marsupials with it, dissociated itself from the mainland not so very long ago as geologists reckon time (though before the arrival of the dingo) contains in an area less than the size of Ireland a generous measure of mountain beauty. It has many peaks of over 4000 ft. ; a few of over 5000. It has rivers, lakes, sea lochs and forests. It is not unlike Scotland. And yet if you look at it closely you will find that it is very unlike. The vegetation is vastly different both in kind and in degree. Except on the plains and in the valleys there are few open spaces ; there are no moors, no bleak glens. Where there are neither paths nor tracks you cannot walk but only struggle until the bush is left behind and you are on the last thousand feet or so of naked mountain.

That is why there is such a surprising amount of Tasmania that remains unexplored.¹ There are large sections of the island towards the west where ranges of hills are so defended by trees and undergrowth that their final ridges defy assault. A singularly beautiful peak is Mt. Anne, visible from the range that rises behind Hobart or from the Mt. Field massif in National Park. Yet in this region as well as in others in the S. and W. there are large portions of the map devoid of detail and the courses of such streams as are marked are drawn suspiciously straight. A phenomenal rainfall and a climate free from extreme cold foster a barrier which has kept the colonist at bay.

Mt. Anne was conquered on the fifth attempt at Christmas 1929. Mr. V. C. Smith of Hobart, who took part in all the expeditions, has written of the last assault : ' On this occasion we took four pack horses from Fitzgerald, and although there was much timber over the tracks which had to be cut around, we reached the usual point on the track

¹ See *A.J.* 37. 44-46.

beyond which horses cannot pass at 4.30 P.M. on the second day. . . . On the third day we reached our first base camp for climbing Mount Anne. On the fourth day, in beautiful weather, we succeeded in reaching the summit at the second attempt. On the fifth day (rain all day) we blazed and cut some seven or eight miles of new track towards the Anne Gorge. On the sixth day we again climbed Mount Anne. On the seventh day we moved our camp into the Anne River Valley. On the eighth day we visited the Anne River Gorge, explored the tarns to the south of Mount Anne and visited Lake Judd. Commenced to rain again on the seventh day and continued throughout the remainder of the trip.'

An English visitor who was a member of the second expedition in 1921 shared the hardships and the disappointments of the pioneers. After struggling for several days through the tangled bush carrying a 45-lb. pack (at times also the pack of one of the axe wielders) with the danger of crumbling prostrate tree trunks, with the fear of being lost for ever if he got out of touch with the party, he and his companions emerged above the tree level on the sixth day only to see Mt. Anne separated by a valley filled with vegetation as thick as that through which they had passed. Food was running short and the party had to return by the track it had blazed.

The disheartening thing about such approach to the bare ridges is the complete absence of view beyond the immediate bush. Western Tasmania achieves in places an annual rainfall of 150 ins. and vegetation is luxuriant. I understand that there are some trees which prefer to grow horizontally. Perhaps it is to escape the competition for the upright sites, but it impedes progress. The kangaroo and wallaby which abounded in the Anne Valley were found to be not at all timid, probably never having been disturbed before. The final cone of Mt. Anne offered some good rock scrambling, perhaps of no great degree of difficulty, but an interesting finale to the undertaking.

An account of the dangers of the S.W. bush was printed in *Blackwood's Magazine* for October 1927. Mr. P. Ormsby Lennon, a prospector for that valuable metal osmiridium, wrote of the horizontal growth:

'This dreadful species of plant is peculiar to the west of Tasmania and is dreaded by travellers. It is a tall slender tree growing to a height of 60 feet or more. When it reaches a certain stage in its development, it seems to become top-heavy, and bearing down to the ground, again takes root like the banyan of the tropics. From there it throws out secondary and tertiary branchlets which behave in a like manner to the parent stem and carry on the vicious circle. The inevitable result is the formation of a chaotic mass of tentacle-like limbs which it is almost impossible to break through. In fact, the only way in which we were able to negotiate beds of this scrub was to walk along the top of it, often at a height of 10 or 15 feet from the ground. We had to be very careful when doing this because these horizontal tentacles were generally clothed with a thick velvety covering of damp green moss

which made it difficult to tell a rotten limb from a sound one. A fall from such a height might easily result in a broken neck.'

Such is Tasmania's gloomy substitute for the tight-rope negotiation of crevasses. Even above the tree level there is often an unyielding scrub, knee-high, before bare grass or rock is reached. Some of it is distressingly sharp and mountaineers in Tasmania, like the explorers of another enchanted island, have struggled through

'Tooth'd briers, sharp furzes, pricking goss, and thorns,
Which enter'd their frail shins.'

By contrast with the Anne range Mt. Wellington is almost too accessible, for it rises directly above the capital city of Hobart, nearly 4200 ft. straight out of the harbour. The suburbs straggle a few hundred feet up the mountain's side, and for many years there has been a road to the Springs Hotel about half-way up. More recently the road has been continued to the very top and makes a transverse scar across the mountain's brow. To the right of the summit as you view the mountain from Hobart there is a precipice of fluted rocks known as the Organ Pipes which offers a number of routes with almost vertical rises. Here undoubtedly is the most accessible rock-climbing in Tasmania, but the cliff is not high, and the general impression of the mountain is that of a great lump with a huge flat and stony top which gradually tapers to the W. towards a ridge leading to its neighbour, Collins Bonnet.

Next in accessibility for the inhabitants of Hobart comes the Mt. Field group in National Park rising to a height of over 4700 ft. The approach is by the road or railway which follow the pleasant Derwent Valley through New Norfolk. On entering National Park (a reserve of 39,000 acres) one plunges into a woodland of singular beauty where tree ferns grow beneath the forest giants. A recently constructed road winds steeply up to Lake Fenton, a great boon to the members of the Ski Club, a small but enthusiastic body which by labour which must have been extremely arduous in the days before the road was prolonged, established a hut yet further up the mountain a short way below the level where the bush gives up and yields to the bare flanks of Mt. Field. The hut, which I have visited in summer, is beautifully situated on the edge of a tarn. After a morning start one is soon enough free of the forest to have a whole day to explore the bare upper flanks and ridges of the range. It is a fine region of streams and tarns and rocks, as good as anything one would find in the British Isles. And yet one has the feeling here, as elsewhere in Tasmania, that the mountain is aged and has decayed. Where the ridges rise to rocky peaks they just miss the finish which a younger mountain might possess. There is plenty of scrambling to be found, and no doubt some more serious climbing could be discovered here and there. But one is scrambling among ruins, magnificent ruins amidst solitude and grandeur.

From this stony ridge over 4000 ft. high there is an enthralling view



Photo, M. Tatham.]

THE RIDGE OF CRADLE MOUNTAIN.



Photo, A. Hackett.]

TASMANIAN BUSH.

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over the western half of the island, enthralling not only because of its beauty but because one knows that the successive ranges that rise above the bush are divided by valleys wherein no human being has set foot. One may safely hazard that not even the primitive aborigines penetrated their fastness, those pathetic savages clad, if they were clad at all, in unsewn skins, who knew no agriculture, whose weapons were wooden spears and clubs, whose dwellings were but shelters from the wind—a race nearly extinguished in the first thirty years of the last century by the misguided fear and cruelty of the early settlers, whose remnants were unable to survive the efforts to preserve them beyond the eighteen-seventies. Those valleys of Van Dieman's Land knew perhaps only the tread of the kangaroo, the wallaby, the opossum, the bandicoot and the wombat, the Tasmanian devil and the marsupial tiger-wolf, or the creeping of the venomous snakes. Their streams knew but the splashing of that strangest of all animals, the egg-laying mammal with the face of a duck and four webbed feet.

If you travel, as you are likely to do, across the island from S. to N. by the road or the railway which leads from Hobart to Launceston, you would have on your left perhaps two-thirds of the island where the rainfall is plenteous, where there are many large lakes and rivers, where the vegetation is luxurious. A large part of this western area is covered by an extensive plateau some 3000 to 4000 ft. high. Geologically it is a sheet diabase and dolerite, and at its edges it often descends by prominent scarps known as 'Tiers.' On the eastern side there are isolated plateaux of a somewhat similar character, but here the rainfall is much less and the bush yields to more open country where there are roads, townships and farms. Yet towards the N.E. of the island, not far from the branch line that leads from Conara to St. Mary's near the E. coast, Tasmania achieves its greatest elevation in the isolated massif of Ben Lomond which descends in precipices on the S. and culminates at the N. end of its ridge in Legge Peak, 5160 ft. above sea level.

The claim of Legge Peak to be the island's highest point has, however, been challenged by the late Mr. Yelland Richards, who has left a record of some exciting ascents made in October 1934 in the neighbourhood of the Du Cane Range to the N. of Lake St. Clair, when virgin peaks were conquered and much good rock climbing was encountered. He states that from the top of Mt. Ferguson, where his aneroid barometer recorded 5100 ft., the neighbouring Mt. Isola appeared to be obviously a great deal more than 50 ft. higher. Later measurement may have proved or disproved this (my own map is silent about the heights in this little known region), but the account makes it clear that in this middle W. portion of the island there are many rock faces and ridges offering long stretches of difficult climbing.

In the course of my three visits to the island I have had little time for mountaineering. But I was fortunate in my first visit many years ago to have the opportunity of the midsummer Christmas holiday when business could be laid aside to make an expedition to a peak 5069 ft. high which is acknowledged to be the most beautiful in all

Tasmania. I know of no mountain in the British Isles which has impressed me more by the solitude and the grace of its setting than Cradle Mountain.

Cradle Mountain lies at the N.W. corner of the great plateau within the Tasmanian Scenic Reserve of 150,000 acres. It must be approached from the N., from the fertile country that lies behind the harbours of Burnie, Ulverstone and Devonport. My own route started from Launceston, to which the steamer from Melbourne comes some forty miles up the tranquil Tamar. In a Ford of a once famous model I drove myself past the Great Western Tiers that guard the tableland, through Westbury, Deloraine, Elizabeth Town and Sheffield, small collections of wooden houses and shops in a single street. In the evening I reached Wilmot, which was as far as it was prudent to proceed by car in those days. Here I was introduced to Bob Quaile, who ran the service to Cradle Mountain. The service consisted of a four-wheeled vehicle of the wagonette species. We left at 6.30 the next morning drawn by three horses. We started on a track which was good at first, intermittent later, and finally when we crossed the Middlesex Plain hardly discernible. We jolted and bumped over rocks and through streams. I reached the end of that journey at 4 P.M. bruised and sore.

During the drive Bob Quaile told me something of the lonely guardian of Cradle Mountain who was to be my host for the next two days. Herr Weindorfer, at one time in the Austrian Consular Service in Melbourne, retired on the death of his wife and with his own hands built himself Waldheim, a wooden house a day's journey from civilisation. Here he lived often for months alone, taking in visitors in the summer but in the winter only occasionally walking in to Wilmot. He grew vegetables in a railed-off patch; he trapped or shot wallaby or wombat for meat, hunting in winter on ski. It was before the days of wireless. He was a man of culture and of some scientific attainments, and he was engaged on a study of the botany and of the animals of his lonely domain.

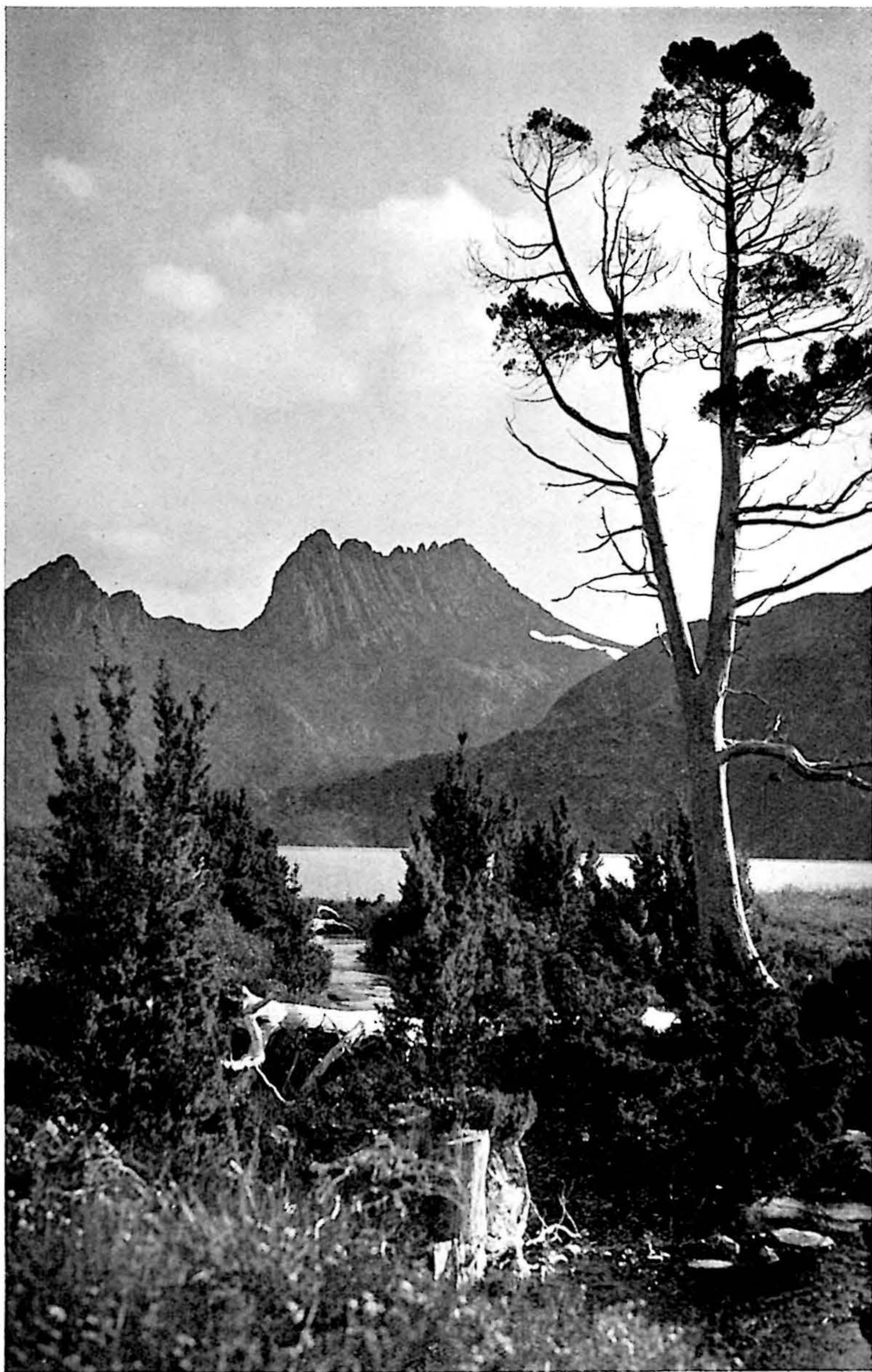
I was the first visitor that summer. Bob Quaile had not driven up for months, and Weindorfer had not come down for an unusually long time. My driver speculated whether we should find the Austrian alive, and was inclined to wager that it was an even chance that we should discover a corpse. Horrid thoughts about decomposition kept knocking at the door of my brain. When that evening we at last reached Waldheim, to my relief the strange gaunt figure of the hermit came out to greet us. The stores we had brought were unloaded, the horses unspanned and turned to graze, and in a short time a welcome tea was ready.

Quaile and his equipage left the next morning and Weindorfer and I set out for Cradle Mountain. Waldheim is at about the highest level of the trees, hidden by a spur from the mountain it serves. An easy walk takes you round a bend where suddenly the arc of the Cradle ridge is disclosed behind a foreground of lake. It is more complete



Photo, M. Tatham.]

BARN BLUFF FROM CRADLE MOUNTAIN.



Photo, M. Tatham.]

CRADLE MOUNTAIN.

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and compact than any other Tasmanian peak, and it seems to have survived more successfully the ravages of time. Its lower flanks are not lost in forest, for its whole structure stands up clear out of treeless country.

I was fortunate on this the last day of 1923 in having perfect mid-summer weather. I followed Weindorfer up and along a spur that finally abutted on to the mountain below the rocky ridge. Here and there patches of snow still remained; the air was clear and the rocks dry. An interesting scramble up a broken precipice amid weird turrets of rock brought us to the ridge only a short way below the summit, and a few minutes later we were on the highest point gazing across to the mountain's square neighbour Barn Bluff and to the ranges that stretched into the blue distance beyond. Here for me was solitude; for my companion after his months of loneliness my presence must have seemed like an invasion.

How good the climbing is on the Cradle ridge I do not know. It had then been traversed but once from end to end, but probably often again in the intervening years. I hinted at an exploration of the rocks for the following day, which had to be my last, but Weindorfer seemed reluctant and was not himself, I think, a climber. It seemed unwise in that remote region to try any gymnastics alone, and I had to be content to imagine that with a companion and a rope one could spend many days investigating the faces and ridges of this fascinating peak.

We came down by a route that gave us a glimpse into the dark hollow in which lies Crater Lake. I was feeling stiff, but more from the tossing on the rough passage in the Quaile wagonette the day before than from the scramble on the Cradle. That evening I had a long talk with my host, telling him the news of the outside world and hearing of his strange existence. The next day I explored alone, looking in vain for wallaby; I bathed in Lake Lilla; I fled from a snake. Weindorfer was busy preparing for six guests arriving that evening by the Quaile express. When they reached us, a merry party of holiday makers from Melbourne, Waldheim, which for so long had had but one occupant, became a teeming hotel.

Since 1923 Cradle Mountain has become more accessible. The track was improved and Weindorfer acquired a motor bicycle. Some years later he was found dead beside his machine. Had illness overtaken him in his mountain fastness and had he tried too late to reach help? Waldheim remains as a monument to this remarkable man.

From time to time I have been asked by mountaineers if Tasmania is worth visiting for climbing. If you, who have read this far, are still inclined to ask the same question, I would reply that the answer rather depends on what you mean by climbing, and I would add that Tasmania is a good long way off.

Let me assume that we have got over most of the difficulty of distance by meeting in Australia. We have as it happens a week or two at our disposal, and either because the time is too short or because we are a little beyond the age when we wish to tackle Mt. Cook (and in any

case New Zealand is a thousand miles distant) we decide on a less arduous mountain holiday. We can reach Hobart by direct steamer from Sydney in a couple of days and if we take that route we shall be able to see the magnificent basalt cliffs as we come round the island's S.E. corner. Or we can cross from Melbourne to Launceston in an afternoon and a night, though we may repent if the Bass Straits are rough and wish we had flown in a few hours direct to Hobart. Once we were there I would take you by motor car and without shame straight to the top of Mt. Wellington and show you the distant ranges, the countless indentations of the great bay that eats into the island and further to the S. the open Antarctic Ocean. Then I think we might beg from the kindly members the loan of the Ski Club's hut and get into training with a couple of days on the Mt. Field ridges. After that we should be ready to have a look at the precipices of Ben Lomond, and should be well advised to take a rope in case we decide to try an unorthodox route.

We shall, as one always does in imagination, have the most perfect weather, so we can safely go across to the western side and devote at least four days to Cradle Mountain and Barn Bluff. Here we shall be glad of our rope and we may be lucky enough to work out a new route up on to the Cradle ridge, or we may even start on something that defies our efforts. Anyhow we shall be assured of good fun here and we shall be able to exercise our arms as well as our legs.

After that I think we ought to visit Lake St. Clair and Mt. Olympus. I should like also to take you up Frenchman's Cap, or equally logically you could take me, for I have never set foot on the mountain. It is a striking peak of 4700 ft., its bonnet set at a rakish angle, and unless its outline is deceptive, there ought to be some abrupt routes up the final cone. The new road to the W. coast may have made it more accessible than it used to be.

But I don't fancy that we would try and penetrate any ranges that have not been reached before. It would involve the organizing of a party; we should have to carry enormous loads, tents, ground sheets, food, and the rest of the paraphernalia. We should hate the days in the dark damp forest and we should be nervous about snakes. Bush craft is a very expert business and we could rest content to admire without emulating the exploits of the hardy pioneers.

In the course of our holiday we shall have achieved a good deal of walking, and most of it in wild and lonely places. From the ridges we shall have looked down upon a fair island whose plains and lower valleys are homely with villages and farms and orchards. We shall have got some climbing, none of it very long, some of it very steep, and unless we have chosen unwisely it will have been on firm dependable rock. And what more could one desire?