Antipodean ventures

1 Western Australia

J. G. R. Harding

What has Australia—the oldest, driest, flattest and hottest of Continents—for the climber? Twenty-five times the size of Britain its changes of landscape are measured by thousands of miles yet lack conspicuously either variety or dramatic elements. Its Great Dividing Range, 2300 miles long, averages less than 3000 ft in height and not one of its peaks would feature in a catalogue of the world's mountains. For the rest, Tasmania apart, Australia's mountains are little more than the scoured roots of long-vanished ranges dissolved to the dust that lines the face of this most ancient land.

In Australia then, expect no Alpine spectacular. Yet, in this last refuge of primitive man, marsupial beast and primaeval vegetable works, there is much of special flavour for those with a bent for expeditioning and an appreciation of subtle and unusual country. And should you venture beyond the urban fringe into the brilliant light and illimitable horizons of the Outback, or penetrate those dark and silent eucalyptus forests of the coastal ranges, you must hazard that unique wilderness Australians call 'the bush' where European consciousness has still to find a place.

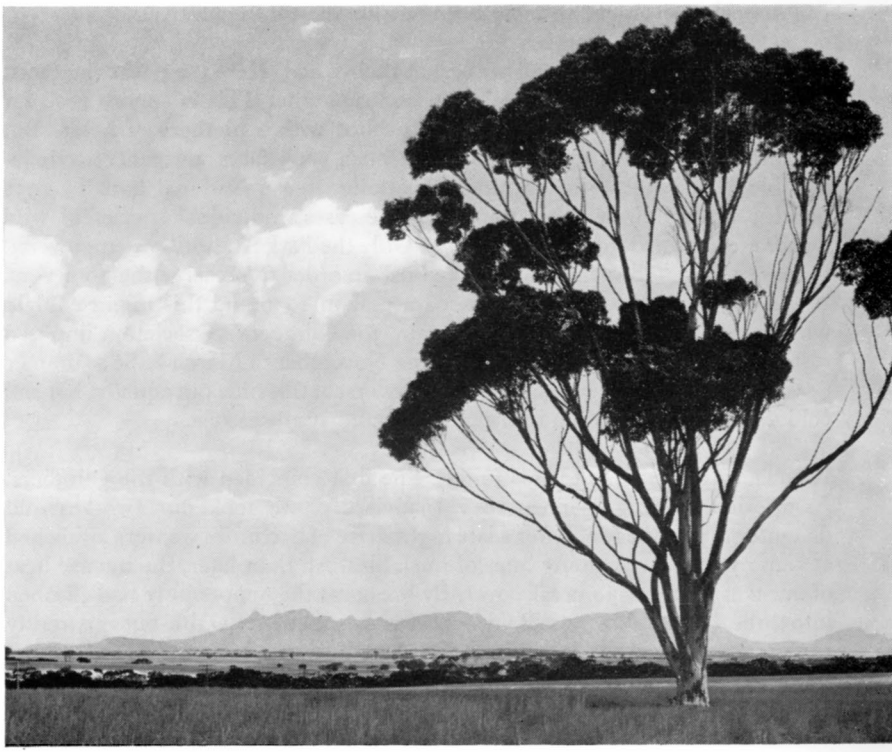
Between August 1969 and November 1970 my family and I spent a pleasant time in Australia. Landfall was in the deep SW but after two months on the land learning the ways of sheep I repaired to Perth for more gainful employment, there to discover two climbing acquaintances of E African days—Claude Girardin, a former president of the Mountain Club of Kenya, and Michael Adams whose *annus mirabilis* upon that mountain was 1959. In 1967 Girardin and Adams, newly arrived in Perth, founded a climbing club. By 1969 it had burgeoned into 'The Climbers' Association of Western Australia' with corporate existence, meets and meets secretaries, circulars, annual dinners and a youthful Grand Old Man. Members were culled mainly from the ranks of itinerant 'Poms' who litter this western shore of the promised land leavened by enthusiastic indigenes.

Rock climbing is well established in the E states where even in 1969, a gritty bi-monthly magazine *Thrutch* circulated and imported climbing equipment retailed at 150% above British prices. But in the Cinderella State of Western Australia, rock climbing—as opposed to the more serious pursuit of the bush-whacking—may well have come of age with the Climbers' Association. With Adams in the role of Chief Instructor, guide and mentor the Association ran lectures, train-ins and meets embracing the gamut of *avant garde* techniques and others still more *outré* in quarries round and about Perth. Thus tested and prepared, members would break out at the onset of the winter season for trysting in the Stirlings 240 miles to the S.

Within its coastal periphery Western Australia is characterised by space, size and uniformity. The SW tip however, is exceptional and though its climatic classification 'Mediterranean' is chosen to confound, it is indisputably less intemperate than the rest of the State. But what makes it an Australian miracle is that within a day's drive you can take in forests of 250-ft trees, a couple of mountain ranges, and an unrivalled stretch of granite coast interspersed with beaches of the most brilliant white sand fringed by the surf of the Great Southern Ocean.

For a climber, the Stirlings must take pride of place. First sighted by Flinders in 1802, the range is 50 miles long, has half a dozen summits of over 1000 m and is a landmark for thousands of square miles. Its name commemorates the founding father of Perth itself but Stirling apart, Aboriginal nomenclature generally persists. Unhappily, the names of the hills that people christened 'Coyanarup' ('Born of the Mists') and 'Pyongooup' ('The lump on your backside') are almost their only surviving memory. They are now dispersed and with them the explanation and translation of such Stirling worthies as 'Gerberiwelup' and 'Moongoongoonderup'.

Coming down from the N through the featureless peneplain of the W Australian Shield which at most times outside the short winter is burnished and feature-



7 *The Stirling Range* Photo: West Australian Government Office

less for thousands of square miles N and E, the Stirlings suddenly fill the S horizon as a series of great, rounded humps. From afar, these hills, of richly green raiment and gently modulated contours present another vision of the promised land. But in a way so typically Australian, the landscape flatters to deceive. Close to, the greensward becomes an intricate matting of plant, scrub and tree seemingly plaited together so close that in places only your machete will see you through it. The peculiar qualities which have enabled Stirling flora to evolve and survive the vicissitudes of a climate which in hours runs from sub-zero to over a 100°F, manifest themselves in a luxuriance of thorns, needles and spiney leaves guaranteed to shred any known fabric within a week-end and the skin of your hands, shins and knees in the same process. As testimony to the quality of this particular bush—with no rival outside Tasmania—the Head Warden gave us his time for the traverse of the seven-mile ridge of the highest peaks—two days and a half! There are no technical difficulties.

The absence of past record is a feature of Australia. So often you surprise yourself by being first—or almost first—on the scene. This is even true of the Stirlings only five hours from Perth. Early exploration and peak bagging fell to indigenous bushwhackers who in the E states were precursors to both climber and skier. 'Bush craft' is a pre-requisite to safety anywhere in the Outback and according to the native-born Australian, the full range of its skills can never be developed in those born outside the continent.

The Stirlings are highest and wildest at their E end. Here the peaks are faced with 700-ft bluffs of sheer sandstone and quartzite. This is superb rock for climbing combining the roughness of gabbro with a plethora of holds. But because so few paths exist through the bush such faces are generally inaccessible. The whole Stirling range was designated a National Park in 1957 because of its unique vegetation. In some cases, individual species of wild flower are confined to individual peaks. Only the Park Authority is empowered to make roads and tracks through the bush in order to preserve the flora. As a result, only four faces had authorised access in 1970 and this might explain why so much rock was virgin. But again, the Climbers' Association imposed restrictions upon themselves by declaring November to March—the S summer—a close season. The heat and flies can be worst at this time but equally, hot and cold days come at random in the Stirlings and at all seasons.

I managed three visits to this range. The first coincided with the Climbers' Association 'Spring manoeuvres'. Inadvisedly, we took our two-year-old daughter to join the fun. After a late night drive of 250 miles we were awakened at 5am by the crescendoing buzz of bush flies. An hour later, the intense heat of our tent forced us to break cover. By breakfast the temperature had climbed into three figures. To a mere Pom, conditions seemed intolerable but apparently a long time ago, Adams and Brian Lever had fixed this day of days, 11 October 1969, as the one to flex their muscles on the 700-ft N face of Bluff Knoll, at 1096 m the highest in the range. Their ascent of 'Hell Fire Gully', indisputably the best Stirlings climb to date, followed by a triumphal return to the Association's camp site that evening, made camp fire tales of lesser routes

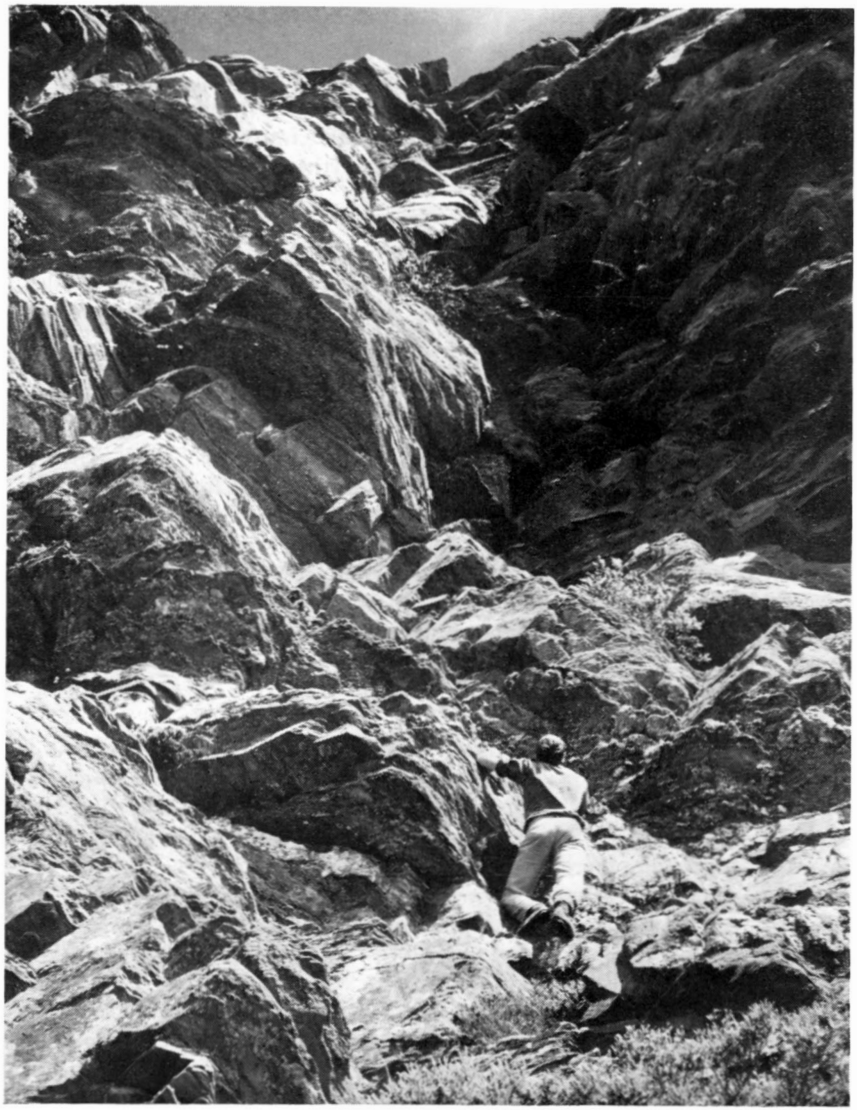
superfluous. Next day, having stolen the traditional route on 'Toolbrunup'—an Adams–Girardin classic and possibly the first pure rock climb in the range—my wife and daughter refused any further initiation into the mysteries of bush-whacking, bathing in sand holes lined with polythene and the like, so we fled to the sea.

By mid-summer, two months later, it was considerably cooler than it had been in the spring. Taking advantage of this climatic capriciousness, Peter Riddey, an ex-OUMC renegade, and I determined to breach close-season protocol with a week-end foray to the N face of Pyongorup the third peak of the range at 1036 m. From afar this 600-ft face appeared to rival that on Bluff Knoll. By way of bonus, this was territory untrammelled by the Climbers' Association.

On the morning of 20 December thick mist masked the tops of the E Stirlings making for classic conditions provided the climb could be found. We plunged through two miles of execrable bush for three hours only to find, when the mist lifted, that we were still far short of target and had strayed on to Isongurup (1006 m) a hill without vogue but with a virginal face. Our route on Isongurup took the only obvious line of weakness, but in compensation for one and a half hours on 250 ft of mild VS on steep but solid rock we spent seven hours in the bush. This is the measure of climbing in the Stirlings. Our climb had its moments and we christened it 'Redemption Groove'.

On 27 March, just before leaving Western Australia for new horizons in Canberra, Riddey and I reached the bottom of the Pyongorup face which had eluded us on our last visit, this time accompanied by a globe-trotting New Zealander called Robin Smith. As we revived our spirits after another three-hour bush encounter there was much speculation, in the neck-craned position, trying to work out where the obvious line of weakness might be on this cliff. We could see none and on the unanimous resolution to give it away, disappeared into a spectacular chasm splitting the main face from its NW facet. Two pitches later, a vaulted overhang disgorged us once again on to open ground. The thought that a rope might come in handy over this section evidently never occurred to Smith who was already too far ahead of Riddey and me to be leashed. The dodgey scramble neatly avoiding the main face gave way to 350 ft of Lakeland Severe via the crest of an airy edge. Smith's disappointment at this third best was then compounded by a peculiarly intractable thicket which cheated us of the summit.

It was now getting late so to avoid the fearful prospect of a bush walk after dark we initiated our retreat with a rappel which used two ropes of unequal thickness. This experiment nearly proved a fatal point in favour of the sheet-bend save for a quarter of an inch of rope which at the end of two abseils, had still to slip through the knot. The approach of evening spurred us on through thicket, thorn, root and snare: sometimes headlong and sometimes horizontal. Traditionally, we made our road-head well after dark. Clothing, hands and shins were lacerated and tongues rasping. And in the manner of most climbing adventures good or bad we blunted the memory of the venture with Swan lager.



8 *Redemption Groove on Isongerup, Stirling Range* Photo: J. G. R. Harding

Barely 25 miles S of the Stirlings lies a range wholly different in climate, vegetation and character. This is the Porongorups, barely ten miles long and 2000 ft high. Here, granite plugs and karri forest replace the sandstone bluffs and thorn bush of the Stirlings to give the range a Yosemite flavour. The karri is one of the great trees of Australia and indeed the world. It grows to over 250 ft with barely a branch for the first 150. In spring, when the old bark peels from a tawny underskin, the boles rise from an undergrowth of Tyrian hued hovea straight and serene as the Pillars of Jupiter.

The range is another National Park particularly rich in wild flowers but, so far as I could discover, had no climbing history. The routes are much shorter but harder than those in the Stirlings because so much of the rock on the basalt domes is smooth as eggshell and almost devoid of cracks and holds. The day after 'Redemption Groove' on Isongurup, Riddey and I approached the Porongorups' main spectacular, the 'Devils Slide', by way of the boles of fallen karri driving a causeway though dense thickets of sapling. After much tramping around what seemed disconcertingly like a gigantic rock garden, we chose our line. This began hopefully but petered out 30 ft up with no discernible belay fore or aft. Thereafter we settled for the more obvious chinks in the Devil's armour. There are few of these but domes apart, the Porongorups have great scope for short, gymnastic climbs up cracks and chimneys on perfect granite in a relaxed atmosphere. The juxtaposition of shaded karri groves, miniature El Capitans, colossal granite megaliths and the sight of the sea away to the S provide the perfect antidote to the heat and uncompromising prickliness of the Stirlings.

As you look S to the sea from the top of this range all that is left of Australia's three million square miles is a narrow littoral of bush and farm land, green and cool when so much to the N is saline, dun and torrid. Beyond this are cliffs and headlands which fall swiftly to beaches of white sand washed by great, rolling waves from the Southern Ocean. On a morning in the New Year of 1970 at the threshold of this last of lands, my wife and I walked four miles of deserted beach E of Albany to the foot of Mount Many Peaks whose bald, granite dome overlooks the sea by 549 m. We forced our way through prodigious bush different in character to that of the Stirlings but almost as difficult to penetrate. On that brilliant day we saw no one but the red kangaroo. And at the top of that strange peak with its unexpected Alpine flowers, the swelling sea at our feet and the fringes of habitation far away, we both sensed that feeling of intrusion on a preserve still unblemished. This perhaps is the reality of the Australian dream.