Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell and Australia Felix

Rod Bird
Red Gum Festival, Cavendish
14 April 2018

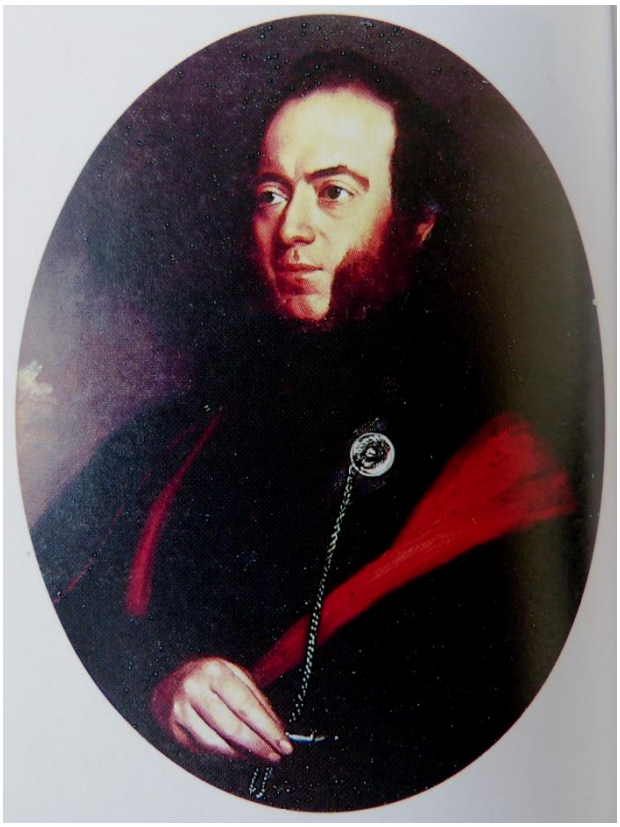
Cavendish Red Gum Festival (13-15 April 2018)

Anthony Watt, a committee member for the festival, asked me if I would provide an introduction to the forum by presenting Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell and his exploration of Australia Felix. Anthony expressed a wish for me to deal with the River Red Gum in SW Victoria and the Major's journey of exploration in 1836. He was clearly also interested in a theatrical presentation, assuring me that he would be able to borrow a suitable costume for the occasion from the Harrow Sound and Light Show!

This short discourse is not the theatrical performance at Cavendish on the 14th of April 2018, where a major part was an impression of the good Major through a variety of sources, including his second-in-command Granville Stapylton, and the presentation of images of some of our majestic River Red Gum giants. It is a rather more sober (but hardly in-depth) presentation of the man and his explorations in eastern Australia – it is simply an introduction to the man and the legend for those who know little of him and his accomplishments.

I have also presented here photographs of many of the plants that Mitchell saw and collected on his journey through south-west Victoria.

Lastly, in this article I draw attention to the nature of the 'soft' and wet landscapes through which Mitchell's bullocks toiled with their heavy drays – and how that has changed following settlement.



Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell and his exploration of Australia Felix

Rod Bird
Cavendish Red Gum Festival, April 2018

Surveyor-general Major Thomas Livingston Mitchell is credited with opening the plains of Central and Western Victoria to settlement by pastoralists and farmers. In his book of 1838 (*Three expeditions into the interior of eastern Australia*) he called this land '*Australia Felix*':

> *'The land is...open and available in its present state for all purposes of civilised man. We traversed it in two directions with heavy carts, meeting no other obstruction than the softness of the rich soil; and, in returning over flowery plains and green hills fanned by the breeze of early spring, I named this region Australia Felix, the better to distinguish it from the parched deserts of the interior country...flocks might be put out upon its hills or the plough at once set to work in the plains'.*

Mitchell had made it! After 2 expeditions that had been comparative failures, contributing little to the picture of land resources of the British colony, he had succeeded in finding great new pastures and his name would resonate in the halls of pomp and power in Britain and in the annals of exploration.

His journey of 1836 also revealed the extent of distribution of the River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), from the banks of the Darling, Macquarie, Lachlan, Murrumbidgee and other rivers of NSW to the SW plains of Victoria (Photo 1). Mitchell's party also collected a host of botanical and other specimens previously unknown to science. He was also one to note the prolific 'Oat Grass' (Kangaroo Grass – *Themeda triandra*) and other species and the harvesting of the seed by Aborigines for food. Pascoe (2014) draws attention to the many references by the early explorers to the harvesting by Aborigines of crops of Native Millet (*Panicum decompositum*), Nardoo (*Marsilea drummondii*), Yam Daisy (*Murnong – Microseris* sp.) and other species.

Thomas Mitchell was born of humble parents in 1792 in Scotland. He became a soldier, surveyor and scientist. He had botanical interests, shown by some entries in his journal. One instance was on the summit of Mt William (14th July 1836): '*I found a small heath-like, bushy Leucopogon, from six inches to a foot high. It was in flower, although covered with ice. Also a variety of Leucopogon villosus, with rather less hair than usual…near the highest parts of the plateau I found a new species of eucalyptus with rather short broad viscid leaves and rough-warted branches*' [probably *E. serraensis*]. To top it all he was a talented artist. The latter aspect is revealed in the sketches and colour plates that adorn his published works of exploration. His writings exhibit a romantic flair.

In 1808 Mitchell served under the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsula Wars of 1808-14, where he compiled topographical information and drew plans of the major battlefields. Later, he would name many places in Victoria after comrades in those wars. After Waterloo, Sir George Murray sent Mitchell back to Spain and Portugal to make a historical record of the war, measuring, mapping and sketching the major battlefields (Rolls 1984).

In 1818 Mitchell married General George Blunt's daughter Mary and in 1826 he was promoted to Major but placed on half pay; Britain had too many soldiers in times of peace. With Blunt and Murray's support he was appointed Assistant Surveyor-General of NSW in 1827. Murray commented to the Colonial Office *'You must not expect to find Captain Mitchell a great scholar, but a skilful, accurate and a practised surveyor, and a very good draftsman. His plans are indeed beautifully executed*' (Rolls 1984).

Mitchell began a proper survey of the colony and, when Surveyor-General John Oxley died in 1828, he was appointed to that position by Governor Darling. The governor kept Mitchell busy with local survey projects of roads and bridges. He did not permit exploration by his surveyor, entrusting that to Charles Sturt and botanist Allan Cunningham. Mitchell regarded them as unqualified and he was keen to grab some of the renown accorded to explorers. The irascible Mitchell wrote that "*Geographical research cannot be entrusted with advantage to amateur travellers'*. His opportunity came in 1831 when Darling returned to England and Colonel Sir Patrick Lindersay became Acting Governor.

Mitchell's first expedition in 1831 was to find the fabled 'Kindur River' that he expected to flow to the northern sea. He abandoned the search at the junction of the Gwydir and Darling Rivers. During the next 3 years Mitchell surveyed the settled areas, especially land grants.

In 1833 the Colonial Office instructed Governor Bourke to send an expedition along the Darling River from the present town of Bourke to see if it was the same as the one Sturt had seen to the north of the Murray in 1830. Mitchell was given the command of the party. Travelling SW they reached Menindee, where 7 convicts in the party sent to fetch water were reported to have been attacked by a group of Aborigines. Convict fired muskets into the group and killed at least one woman and her child. This, and a latter incident, cast a shadow over the Major's future prospects. He wrote '*I was indeed paying dearly for geographical discovery…it seemed impossible in any manner to conciliate these people*'. Mitchell turned back at that point, having considered that he had fulfilled his task which, incidentally, proved that Sturt was right and that he was wrong in thinking that the Darling must eventually flow north.

Governor Bourke thought that the matter had not been proved, since there was an unexplored gap of 150 miles of the Darling River between Menindee and the Murray River, and he wanted certainty. Mitchell was appointed again. And so began the third expedition in 1836, with 25 Europeans, 6 Aborigines (collected along the way), 11 horses, 52 bullocks, 100 sheep, 22 carts and a boat carriage with 2 boats. It must be wondered what the Aborigines thought when they saw this train extending perhaps 500 m!

Apart from Stapylton and Mitchell the white men were convicts or ex-convicts. They wore grey trousers and a red shirt crossed by white braces, having a military appearance. Each carried a firearm and ammunition. Mitchell made his daily march in military fashion, forbidding the men from leaving their position without his permission, and his camps were always established to a set defensive pattern.

The Aborigines were Piper (guide/scout), Kitty (Piper's wife), Tommy-came-first, Tommy-came-last and Turandurey and her 4-year-old daughter Ballandella. They were invaluable members of the party, scouting and communicating with Aborigines along the way, but were not recorded on the official list.

Mitchell fulfilled his major task to clear up doubts about the course of the Darling (he followed the Darling for 20 miles from the Murray and considered that to be sufficient). The party then travelled east along the Murray River where, at Mt Dispersion in May 1836, Mitchell was concerned about a group of Aborigines who were following him. He organised an ambush intended to scare off the natives but it got out of hand and at least 7 people (including the chief) were shot in crossing the river. News of that event apparently passed ahead of Mitchell on his journey and his party was largely avoided thereafter, depriving him of the opportunity to establish local names for landscape features.

This murderous encounter also found him out of sympathy with the Colonial Government and was a setback for a person with his ambitions. It seemed out of character, too, for he was mindful of the welfare of his men and they were faithful to him. Perhaps it was as he had remarked earlier '*when my honour and character were delivered over to convicts…I could not always rely on humanity*'. On the other hand Pascoe (2014) notes that '*You can imagine his regret at the murders and attacks but it did not stay his hand; he did not resile from murder if resistance were to interrupt his expeditionary force…settlers and explorers were united in their assumption of superiority and entitlement*'.

Pascoe (2014) acknowledges that Mitchell was more sensitive to Aboriginal attainment than most of his contemporaries but he devoted less space in his journal to their culture and achievement than he did to description of the land, the wealth it would bring to 'civilised man' and, unstated, fame that was his due. No words at all to suggest that he had any feelings about his role as an agent in the impending dispossession of the Aborigines and destruction of their society in his 'Australia Felix'.

Mitchell did recognise that Aborigines had a purpose in their patch-burning. '*Fire, grass, kangaroos, and human inhabitants all seem dependent on each other for existence in Australia; for any one of these being wanting the others could no longer continue…but for this simple process the Australian woods had probably contained as thick a jungle as those of New Zealand or America, instead of… open forests*'.

Gammage (2014) noted that the Aborigines managed country for plants, '*making animals not only sustainable but abundant, convenient and predictable*' for the hunters.

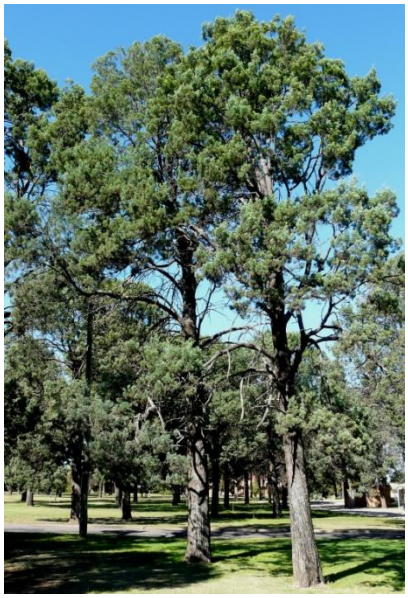
June 16th 1836. On the banks of the Murray River, among Callitris (*Callitris glaucophylla*) and Black Box (*E. largiflorens*) upstream from the junction with the Murrumbidgee River, the Aborigines captured a Pig-footed Bandicoot (*Chaeropus ecaudatus*). This species was said to have been unknown to the captors and is now extinct.

June 21st 1836. The calling of Black Swans kept the party awake at Swan Hill. During the day a Mitchell's Hopping Mouse (*Notomys mitchellii*) was captured by the Aborigines.

June 29th 1836. Mitchell rode across the plain to a granite hill, Mt Hope. There he collected 'new' plant species, including *Eriostemon pungens, Baeckea ciliata, Hibbertia stricta* and *Wurmbia dioica*.

Guinea-flower (*Hibbertia* sp.)

Early Nancy (*Wurmbia dioica*)



Murray Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla)*

In the distance were other hills, including Pyramid Hill. Having thus travelled along the Murray River to the east as far as Mt Hope, Mitchell departed further from the instructions of his superiors.

Mitchell gazed to the SW and decided '*the country that I had seen this day beyond Mount Hope was too inviting to be left unexplored; and I, therefore, determined to turn into it without further delay*'. The 'promised land' was beckoning and greatness was to be his, after all!

June 30th 1836. Mitchell climbed Pyramid Hill, which he found to be 90 m above the plain: '*Its apex consisted of a single block of granite and the view was exceedingly beautiful over the surrounding plain…verdant plains as yet untouched by flocks or herds; I felt conscious of being the harbinger of mighty changes, and that our steps would soon be followed by the men and the animals for which it seemed to have been prepared*'. Like all colonists of the time, Mitchell did not regard the land as belonging to the Aborigines – the land was there to be taken by civilised men and their animals.

July 1st 1836. Passing deep pools surrounded by Red Gums the party crossed a plain: …'*anthistiria or oatgrass* [Kangaroo Grass – *Themeda triandra*] *appeared…the best grass for cattle… one of the surest indications of good soil'.*

July 2nd 1836. Crossing the flooded Loddon River, Mitchell remarked: '*This was a busy day for the whole party…in tracing lost cattle, speaking to the wild natives, hunting, or diving, Piper was the most accomplished man in the camp. In person he was the tallest, and in authority he was allowed to consider himself almost next to me, the better to secure his exertions…The men he despised and he would only act by my orders'*.

Themeda triandra & *Eryngium ovinum* native grassland in summer

July 9th 1836. Mitchell wrote '*After travelling through a little scrub, we descended on one of the most beautiful spots I ever saw – the turf, the woods, and the banks of the little stream which murmured through the vale, had so much the appearance of a well kept park, that I felt loth to injure its surface by the passage of our cart wheels*'.

July 11th 1836. Stapylton mentions that they collected a 'rabbit-rat' (*Conilurus albipes*, now extinct).

July 13th 1836. Travelling SW Mitchell named the Loddon, Avoca and Avon Rivers. He was ecstatic: '*We had at length discovered a country ready for the immediate reception of civilised man, and destined perhaps to become eventually a portion of a great empire*'. The Wimmera River was reached and the soil was sandy and poor. Ahead was Mt William Creek and a chain of mountains.

In order to scan the landscape and take bearings of significant points Mitchell and 5 men made an arduous ascent of a peak in a range he named the Gulielmean Mountains (he changed this later to Grampians). He named the peak Mt Blue (changed later to Mt William). Mitchell resolved to stay on the summit without warm clothing, food or tents to provide shelter from the sleet, wind and sub-zero temperature. '*I was unwilling to descend without trying, whether it might not be clear of clouds at sunrise…I was willing to suffer any privations for the attainment of the object of our ascent*'.

A 'new' Eucalypt, Grampians Gum (*E. alpina/serraensis)* was collected there, among floral species such as Rosy Baeckea (*Baeckea ramosissima*), Variable Prickly Grevillea (*Grevillea aquifolium*), Cats Claws (*G. alpina*), Snow Myrtle (*Calytrix alpestris*), Notched Phebalium (*Phebalium bilobum*), Prickly Cryptandra (*Cryptandra tomentosa*), Rough Bush-pea (*Pultenea scabra*), Ruddy Beard-heath (*Leucopogon rufus*), Grampians Bossiaea (*Bossiaea rosmarinifolia*) and Grampians Common Heath (*Epacris impressa* var. *grandiflora*).

View SW from Mount William in 2015

Grampians Gum (*Eucalyptus serraensis*)

Common Heath (*Epacris impressa*), incl. var. *grandiflora*

Snow Myrtle (*Calytrix alpestris*)

Cats Claws (Grevillea alpina

Variable Prickly Grevillea (*Grevillea aquifolium*)

Some observations were possible next morning of the land beyond before bad weather intervened. Mitchell noted '*To the westward the view of the mountain ranges was truly grand*'.

Rosy Baeckea (*Baeckea ramosissima*)

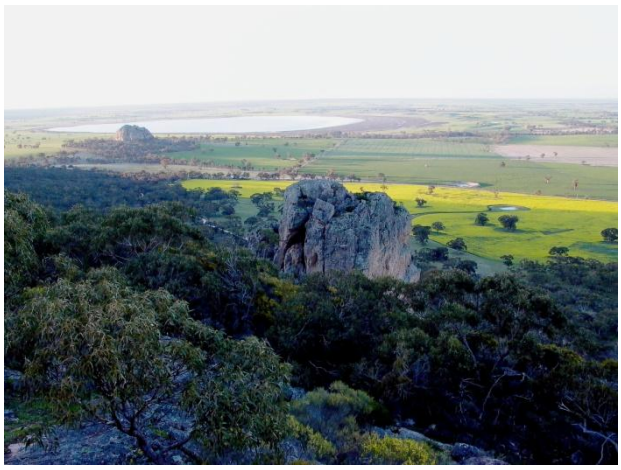
July 16th 1836. Mitchell was not affected by the hard night on the mountain but two of his best men (Muirhead and Woods) were, a fact commented on by second-in-command Granville Stapylton (Assistant Surveyor in NSW): '*The surveyor-general's constitution must be as hard as iron to stand three days of it without food, wet through the whole time and a bitter wind from the southward…he appears not at all the worst for it at present but positively in better health'* (Douglas & O'Brien 1974).

Mitchell's party then crossed the Wimmera River and travelled west across a plain where he stated that the richness of the soil '*could scarcely be surpassed in any country*'. Today, the Wimmera clay plains are one of the world's great grain-producing areas.

July 23d 1836. Mitchell climbed a sandstone peak that he first called Mt Broughton and later Mt Arapiles (after a similar landform in Spain). He surveyed the country and located Mt William and another range extending south which he named the Victoria Range.

The party rested for a few days near the mount while Stapylton rode NW to try and find the Wimmera River. Mitchell sketched the scene approaching Mt Arapiles and Mitre Rock and Mitre Lake from the summit (he painted the pictures later). Modern-day photos are shown below of similar scenes.

View of Mt Arapiles in 2004



View of Mitre Rock and Mitre Lake in 2004

July 26th 1836. Stapylton reported exceedingly heavy going through heavy country south of Mt Arapiles to near White Lake. He reported '*Guneaks*' (huts) of large size: '*one capable of containing at least 40 persons was of very superior construction and apparently the work of a white man*'. Stapylton would not credit the natives with any aptitude. He commented '*... four scoundrel natives…were on my track…I was provoked by their cunning and villainy for they had evidently tracked me for miles*'. He did not see that they lived there and had a right to see what he was doing.

July28th 1836. Stapylton did not have Mitchell's qualms when it came to ill-treatment of the Aborigines they met, although he took no part in the shooting on the Darling. He expressed more concern for Smut, a lost dog. His diary record when they were travelling south from Mt Arapiles, remarks that '*Blackfellows shot at and wounded today by one of the men in the bush. The native shipped his spear and was accordingly very properly fired at. Now for war with these gentry I suppose. They are encamped around us tonight. Tomorrow we will give them a benefit if they don't keep off. Piper carries a pair of handcuffs slung around him as one must be taken prisoner for the sake of obtaining native names for the places'*. Mitchell does not mention this tactic of capturing natives that was used later by some other explorers, such as Warburton in 1872, to aid them in locating waterholes.

July 31st 1836. The party travelled through '*noble and wide ranges, grassy and thinly covered with Swamp Oak, Banksia and lofty gums*'. The tree species referred to were probably Buloke (*Allocasuarina luehmannii*), Silver Banksia (*B. marginata*), River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) and probably some Yellow Gum (*E. leucoxylon*), Grey Box (*E. macrocarpa*) and Yellow Box (*E. melliodora*).

River Red Gum (*E. camaldulensis*)

Silver Banksia (*B. marginata*)

Yellow Box (*E. melliodora*)

They party reached the Aboukir River (later called the Glenelg River) at a spot near present-day Harrow. An attempt was made by part of the party to travel in the 2 whaleboats down the river to the sea but the overhanging vegetation and snags in the river caused problems.

While Stapylton praised 'The Major' at various times, his diary has other adverse comments when the travel got tough. To Stapylton fell the task of coping with the soft, boggy land between Mt Arapiles and Portland and the swampy country between Portland and the Grampians. He had to see to the extrication of bogged wagons and boat carriages and manage unruly convicts. He complained frequently that the Major was leaving all the heavy work to him and the men, whilst he drew sketches, took theodolyte sights of distant peaks and swanned around the countryside.

Stapylton, the son of a Major-General and grandson of Viscount Chetwynd, was a rather strange fellow, as evidenced by quotations from his diary (Aug 15th, Aug 16th, Sep 2nd & Sep 5th). He did not cope well with very stressful conditions and one has some sympathy for his commander who had to deal with him!

August 1st 1836. The boat trial on the Glenelg River was abandoned due to snags and overhanging trees. Mitchell collected Leafless Bitter-pea (*Davesia brevifolia*) and Showy Bossiaea (*Bossiaea cinerea*).

Leafless Bitter-pea (*Davesia brevifolia*)

Showy Bossiaea (*Bossiaea*

August 3d 1836. Stapylton: ' *drays bogged and with 31 bullocks in a team unable to make any way through the mud. Broke ring bolts, yokes, chains and shafts…'*. Camp was made near a place where Common Bronzewings were seen (present-day Pigeon Ponds creek).

Near Pigeon Ponds Mitchell described '*hills of the finest forms all clothed with grass to their summits, and many entirely clear of timber'*.

August 5th 1836. Mitchell sees Pink Bells (*Tetratheca ciliata*) on the banks of a stream (Chetwynd River) near the Glenelg River '*…perhaps the most beautiful plant we met with during the expedition*'.

August 8th 1836. Stapylton remarked *'Got out of a bog today by making all hands carry the loads and drawing by hand the drays to hard ground'*.

August 10th 1836. Major Creek was crossed with great difficulty, it having very steep sides.

Pink Bells (*Tetratheca ciliata*)

The party then entered open grassy country either emerald green or of a golden colour, the latter due to the abundance of flowering Australian Buttercup (*Ranunculus lappaceus*).

Australian Buttercup (*Ranunculus lappaceus*)

Mitchell was able, with the help of the woman in his party, to talk with a native woman he found digging Yam Daisy (*Microseris* sp.) and obtain the name of the place.

They descended into a beautiful grassy valley (Wando Vale) '*…enlivened by a winding stream*'.

While Mitchell claimed that he always sought 'local' names it is clear that he did not often use them, despite meeting Aborigines on several occasions.

Murnong (*Microseris lanceolata*)

Mitchell appears to have preferred to name places after comrades from his army years in Spain, or current dignitaries who could assist his career.

Mitchell described a scene near Casterton as '*A river winding among meadows which were fully a mile broad, and green as an emerald. Above them rose swelling hills of fantastic shapes, but all smooth and thickly covered with rich verdure.*

Behind these were higher hills, all having grass on their sides and trees on their summits, and extending east and west, throughout the landscape as far as I could see'.

Wando Vale from the Dundas Tableland on 2 May 2015

Stapylton noted, when camped on the Glenelg River, about 6 km north of present-day Casterton '*By Jupiter this is a paradise of a country – an Eldorado…undulating ground clear of timber except for occasional picturesque clumps of trees'.*

The Glenelg River, snags and an Aborigine scar tree north from Dergholm in April 2010

August 11th 1836. The party reached the confluence of the Wannon River and Glenelg River, having descended from a grassy ridge through large stringybarks (*E. baxteri*), other eucalypts, banksia and sheoaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*).

August 12th 1836. Mitchell recorded the capture of a White-footed Rabbit-rat (*Conilurus albipes*), now extinct, near the Wannon River. He sighted a flat-topped hill (Mt Napier) to the east.

August 15th 1836. Leaving the Stokes River, Mitchell then met the Crawford River and 'Fort O'Hare' was established at nearby present-day Dartmoor (all were named after officers in the Peninsula War). He met with White Correa (*Correa alba*) and Running Postman (*Kennedia prostrata*) along the way.

Running Postman (*Kennedia prostrata*)

Stapylton noted '*I would positively give half my year's salary to any little fairy who would at once transport me from hence to Sydney. Nothing on earth can equal the irksomeness and thraldom of my situation under such a fiend in human shape*'.

August 16th 1836. Stapylton: '*At 1 pm the Surveyor General proceeding with the light carts, gave over to me the pleasant office of seeing the bullock drivers through their difficulties. Remained with them until sunset, all bogged and bedevilled...damn the bullock drivers, bullocks, drays, wagons and all...'*

August 20th, 1836. Stapylton*: 'A more self-opinionated, absurd, stubborn, imperious brute never drew the breath of life'.*

The men in the whale boats rowed down the river through the wide and deep stretches of limestone cliff to the estuary of the Glenelg River at present-day Nelson, only to find shallow water there and a sandbar blocking access to the ocean. There was no great harbour port! A most disappointing finding.

Glenelg River cliffs upstream from Nelson, Apr. 2008

Glenelg River estuary and sand bar

August 28th 1836. Mitchell reached a volcanic hill he called Mt Eckersley and he recognised a prominent hill to the NE as the one he had seen on 12 August (later to be called Mt Napier). Eckersley and Napier were both soldiers in the Peninsular Wars.

August 29th 1836. After crossing the Surry River, Mitchell finally reached Portland Bay. He named 'Lady Julia Percy Isles' (a volcanic island about 10 km to the SE) and 'Lawrence's Island'.

Cattle tracks were seen on the beach by Tommy-came-last and soon Mitchell saw wooden houses and a vessel at anchor in the bay.

Lady Julia Percy Island

He knew that whalers visited the bay but did not know of the settlement established 2 years earlier by Edward and Francis Henty from Tasmania.

August 30th 1836. Mitchell left Portland and camped on the Surry River at present-day Narrawong. Beach. The next day he named and climbed nearby Mt Clay.

September 1st 1836. Stapylton wrote of fishing establishments and flocks of sheep and cattle found at Portland Bay. '*It is annoying that our discovery of Portland Bay as a roadstead and good anchorage for shipping should have been anticipated by the Vandemonians.*'

September 2nd, 1836. Stapylton: '*Wet weather, another infernal halt. Of all the detestable tempers I ever heard of, or could imagine, this man has the most hellish...What officer ever benefitted from accompanying*

him?...When the Devil is hard at work within him his smile is the most sinister I ever beheld. Whence arise all this animosity towards me? Good Lord deliver us. He is made up of bad passions, envy, jealousy, low pride, hatred, revenge. A boaster and a blastering coward...'

September 4th 1836. Stapylton: '*Brought up by an immense reedy morass* [Condah Swamp], *cutting off all further progress eastward, extending north and south out of sight and about 1 ½ miles wide*.

The drained Condah Swamp in Sept. 2013, from the Boundary Rd crossing of the drain

The larger boat was abandoned, being too difficult to take through the boggy land.

Mitchell rode to Mt Napier and climbed to the summit. Mitchell noted '*The surface consisted wholly of stone, without any intermediate soil to soften its asperity…yet it was covered with a wood of eucalypt* [Manna Gum – *E. viminalis*] *and mimosa*' [Blackwood – *A. melanoxylon*].

On the crater rim *'trees and bushes grew luxuriantly everywhere, except where the sharp rocks shot up perpendicularly*'. The contrast between Mitchell's description of the vegetation on the mount and the present-day scene is evident from the photographs below. The first photo was taken from the west side, from where Mitchell and his men approached.

Bare upper slopes of Mt Napier in Sept. 1975

Bald summit of Mt Napier (*Tappoc*) in Sept. 1973

September 5th 1836. Stapylton: '*Mount Napier is a commanding hill and I see a beautiful forest land bare of timber eastwards of the morass. How are we to cross it or head it?...We are cursedly hobbled with our drays...there is a spy on me in every corner of the camp...'*

September 7th 1836. Stapylton: '*Mt Napier… a hollow crater on its summit on which also high rank grass and trees totally excluding all view north, east and south…A vast plain with a great lake* [Linlithgow]*in the centre to the north east of Mt Napier.*

September 8th 1836. Stapylton: '*The path to the summit is the most rugged I ever trod…Thin rank grass and a few blue gums* [Manna Gum] *apparently about 100 years growth in the hollow... the swampy low*

ground...to the north is appalling...God knows how we will get through it with the drays...5 men employed today clearing the top of Mt Napier of timber…the Surveyor General obtained a good survey of the surrounding country, having intersected all his points on the Gulielmeans [Grampians] *and the coast'.*

The clearing of trees from the summit might be partly responsible for seeing that area treeless for the next 150 years. However, there is no doubt that the more frequent fires lit almost annually by graziers, intending to foster the growth of grass would, in combination with grazing livestock, have been the major agent.

From 1984-1994 the Hamilton Field Naturalists Club planted 2,000 Manna Gum (*E. viminalis*) and 30 Blackwood (*A. melanoxylon*) on the upper western slope and summit. There has been no fire on the summit since 1972 and many of the trees have survived on that harsh, windy summit.

Tree growth on the summit of Mt Napier in Oct. 1996

September 9th 1836. Stapylton: '*…drays reached the camp having been 4 days in advancing 11 miles. Two bullocks swamped and dead*'.

September 10th 1836. Stapylton: '*Traced today about 7 ½ miles in spite of some awful swamps… one wheel of the dray buried in the mud, the top of the tyre covered… swamps, some lakes and all level wet ground up to the base of Mt Abrupt…The country appears to be thickly inhabited, fires seen in all directions, but no natives'.*

Mitchell named Mt Rouse to the east and Mt Hotspur (now Tower Hill) to the south. On seeing the fires when he ascended Mt Napier for the third day and had clear views in all directions, he stated '*We could look now look upon such fires with indifference, so harmless were these natives, compared with those on the Darling…*'. He was wrong in that estimation because the Aborigines staged the Eumeralla War against settlers in the Mt Rouse, Mt Napier, Eumeralla and Portland area when they arrived in 1838 and that guerrilla war lasted for at least 10 years, only being arrested when a mounted contingent of native police from Geelong were brought in to shoot the local 'insurgents' who were defending their country against invaders. Their 'sanctuary fortress' was the lava flow areas of *Budj Bim* and *Tappoc* and the adjacent swamps but in the end the fire power of Dana's armed native police was too great (Bird 2011).

Mitchell saw Red Parrot-pea (*Dillwynia hispida*) at Camp Creek and several species of Caladenia on the 'flowery plains' between the Grange Burn and Mount Sturgeon.

Red parrot-pea (*Dillwynia hispida*)

Pink Fingers (*Caladenia carnea*)

September 11th 1836. Mitchell discarded many heavy items and the party reached open grassy country in a fine, clear valley '*…with a lively little stream flowing westward through it and which I named the Grange. This was indeed one of the heads of the Wannon and we had at length reached the good country*'. Mitchell had dodged west of the swamps between Mt Napier and the Grampians.

September 13th 1836. Mitchell crossed the Grange Burn a few km upstream from present-day Hamilton and named Mount Bainbrigge and Mount Pierrepoint after Peninsular War colleagues. They passed by Lake Nivelle (now Lake Dolling Dolling) and camped at the southern tip of the Grampians Range, below Mt Sturgeon (named after another war crony).

Stapylton noted*: 'Encamped under Mount Abrupt* [Sturgeon?]*... Here we are on the verge of the most magnificent undulating plains that can be conceived…'*. The undulating plain was *'covered with Xanthonia'* [*Xanthorrhoea minor*?].

Dolling Dolling Swamp and *Xerochrysum palustre* 2003

The scene on the right is a view from Mt Sturgeon (*Wurgarri*) across the basaltic plains to Mt Napier (*Tappoc*), a scoria cone formed 45,000 years ago. Note the River Red Gums on the sandy outwash slope from the Grampians and the Lakes Linlithgow and Kennedy in the mid-ground. The Great Swamp (Buckley Swamp) lies beyond and Mitchell had to negotiate a plethora of wetlands on his way from Portland north east to the Grampians.

Victoria Range to Mt Sturgeon, Nov. 1985

Mt Sturgeon to Mt Napier (*Tappoc*), June 1974

The scene above is from the Grampians (*Gariwerd*) Victoria Range across Bryans Swamp to Mt Sturgeon (*Wurgarri)* , very wet country crossed by Mitchell in 1836. Note the River Red Gums growing on the sandy outwash over the basalt plain.

September 14th 1836. Stapylton: '*The Surveyor General and five men off to the summit of Mount Abrupt, a wall-sided hill distant about 5 miles...I cannot imagine a more interesting country than this for the surveyor and geologist who has the time and the summer months for its investigation…the settler will have no timber to clear away, the soil fruitful in the extreme and the pastures for flocks and herds rich and unbounded to an immense extent. Plenty of water, in short, it has not a drawback or objection belonging to it'*. Stapylton did not allow that the Aborigine inhabitants had any objection!

One feature of the landscape often mentioned by Mitchell and Stapylton was the soft nature of the soils over which their bullocks toiled. Settlers found that the impact of grazing by sheep and cattle after as little as 2 years hard grazing changed the land from a '*bed of sponge*' in winter, over which '*horses sank to the fetlock*', was made so '*firm*' that horses could race over the ground (Lloyd 1862).

'Kenilworth' and River Red Gums, Sept. 2009

River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) woodland at 'Kenilworth' near Cavendish, on the laterised sedimentary plain of the Dundas Tableland. The Wannon River lies in the valley. Squatters appropriated this land for a pastoral run in 1839. The land in Victoria was rapidly invaded by squatters and most in SW was taken up by 1840 and all by 1850.

Mitchell named Mt Dundas to the west and Mt Cole to the NE. He later named the Mt Difficult, Mt William and Serra Ranges of the Grampians.

From Mt Abrupt, Mitchell saw '*a vast extent of open downs… quite yellow with Murnong…natives spread over the field, digging for roots'*. Squatters were soon to disrupt this vital food-gathering activity of the Aborigine women, and hunting by men on the plains, concerned that their sheep were being disturbed. *Murnong* vanished from the plains within a few years of the grazing of the native pastures by sheep (Bird 2011). The animals ate the tops and dug up the tubers using their hooves.

The loss of a staple food source, combined with their exclusion from their customary waterholes, the murderous proclivities of the settlers and their ex-convict workers, and death from the white man's small pox, influenza and other diseases, soon resulted in the extermination of the Aborigine clans (Bird 2011).

September 15th 1836. The camp site was near Lake Repose (SW from Glenthompson) and Stapylton and 6 others of the party stayed there until 2 October. Stapylton: '*I am directed to remain here one fortnight to give time for the bullocks to refresh* [they had become too weak to travel] *and then proceed on his track…This Homo is the most impenetrable I ever knew. He appears to be meditating me mischief…I was duly apprised by a friend of the atrocious tempers and disposition of the man I had to deal with and yet I had the folly to comply with his invitation to join him…*'.

September 19th 1836. Mitchell and his group of 16 left camp with the light cart and boat and made for home. He was anxious to get there to break the news of his discoveries before news reached Sydney from Portland.

Mitchell climbed Mt Stavely (named after another war crony), '*a forest hill*' now bare, near Glenthompson to find a clear way through the swamps ahead. He collected a new plant; Hedge Wattle (*Acacia paradoxa*), a plant with vicious spines on leaves and stems. He crossed the Hopkins River, named after yet another war veteran!

Hedge Wattle (*Acacia paradoxa*)

October 3d 1836. Stapylton: '*Broke up our encampment and quitted the depot. Caused also the date of our arrival and departure from hence to be cut in large letters on an adjacent gum tree…*'

That River Red Gum eventually died and part of the trunk with the carving was cut out and, after years lying in a shed in the Hamilton Botanical Gardens, was finally stored in the *Dunkeld and District Historical Museum*.

Mitchell toured past present-day Castlemaine, with the land *'resembling an English park'*. He climbed Mount Macedon, from which he saw the village of Port Phillip but saw '*no stockyards, cattle nor even smoke*'. He must have wondered why settlers at 'Port Phillip' had not ventured inland and found this part of 'his' Australia Felix. No doubt it prompted him to speed back to Sydney, to make known his finding of great new pastoral lands before others did!

Continuing, he discovered the Campaspe and Coliban rivers, crossing the Goulburn, Ovens and then Broken River at present-day Benalla and reaching the Murray River on 17 October 1836. *Mitchell wrote 'No one could have mistaken this grand feature; for the vast extent of verdant margin, with lofty trees and still lakes, could belong to no other Australian river we knew of.'*

October 24th 1836. Mitchell arrived at Guys Station on the Murrumbidgee River near present-day Wagga Wagga. He was then able to send supplies back to the party in the rear. Mitchell then hurried to Sydney on horseback, leaving the carts to follow at a slower pace.

November 11th 1836. Stapylton's party arrived at Guys Station and then went on to Sydney. Stapylton worked for a while in Melbourne then in Queensland where he was killed by natives in 1840, surveying south of Brisbane.

Back in Sydney, Mitchell found it hard to '*win the esteem of his contemporaries or quieten his detractors*' (Michael Cannon 1999). Governor Bourke was troubled over the killing of the Darling River natives in 1835 and there was also a question over the death of natives near Mt Dispersion in 1836.

Governor Gipps later reported to London that '*The long and expensive journies of Sir Thomas Mitchell in the years 1835 and 1836, though highly interesting, led to no discoveries which could be turned to profit, with the exception perhaps of the fertile land of Australia Felix, which surely would have been reached by ordinary advance of our graziers…'.*

The last part of the Governor Gipps criticism seems rather harsh and probably arose because of Mitchell's inability to get along with his contemporaries. Scores of squatters did drive their flocks into this new country, following 'The Majors Line' of deep dray wheel ruts. Others went out from Port Phillip and Portland.

May 1837. Mitchell took 18 months leave on half pay and returned to London to write his journals (*Three Expeditions into the interior of Eastern Australia*) and prepare his maps. He barely escaped the debtor's prison.

Despite being disliked and avoided by his contemporaries, Mitchell was awarded a knighthood in 1839 for his services to the colony and thus he achieved his ambition.

Mitchell returned to Australia in February 1841, resuming the duties of Surveyor General.

November 17th 1845. Mitchell returned to exploration on with the aim of finding a route to Port Essington in Arnhem Land but Ludwig Leichhardt achieved that objective before Mitchell had proceeded far. Mitchell continued with the objective of finding the great river that he was sure ran to the Gulf of Carpentaria. He ventured past present-day Blackall and Longreach, following the Barcoo River which ultimately turned SW. Mitchell arrived back in Sydney on December 29th 1846. His findings led to the expansion of pastoralism in that huge region of sweeping Mitchell Grass Plains.

March 1847-Oct 1855. Mitchell sailed again to England in and he prepared his *Journal of an Expedition into the interior of Tropical Australia*. He returned to Sydney in 1848, then returned again to England in 1852 for a time, before going back yet again to Australia.

A Royal Commission in 1855 looked for grounds in the workings of the Survey Department to dismiss Mitchell but his death in October 5th 1855 from pneumonia, contracted while surveying, pre-empted an outcome (Feeken *et al*. 1970).

Major Sir Thomas Livingstone Mitchell was an irascible egotist and he desired fame and acclaim. That he gained, although grudgingly. He was a very efficient surveyor with artistic talent and a good story-teller. He ran his expeditions along military lines and was certainly competent. However, he found difficulties in dealing with his equals, as well as quarrelling with his superior officers in Sydney and England.

Canon (1999) describes Mitchell as '*regarded by some as proud, demanding and over ambitious, but he was also considerate to his subordinates and compassionate to the convicts under his care*'. He was not loved by them but the convicts and other lesser mortals that he led appeared to be happy with his leadership and attitude towards them – some returning for 2 or 3 tough expeditions.

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