

Historical Roads of New South Wales

MONARO
HIGHWAY



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THE MONARO HIGHWAY

THE name "Monaro" is used to describe the plateau country of south-eastern New South Wales, extending from south of Canberra to the Victorian border, and bounded on the east by the coastal ranges, and on the west by the Snowy Mountains.

The name "Monaro" is recorded first in the "Journal of An Excursion to The Southward of Lake George in New South Wales" by Captain Mark John Currie, R.N. The journal entry for 4th June, 1823, reads, ". . . From these Natives we learned that the clear country before us was called 'Maneroo', which they described as very extensive; this country we called Brisbane Downs after (and subsequently by permission of) His Excellency the Governor". Captain Currie wrote these words from the most southerly point of land exploration reached on land from Sydney to that

date; the party had penetrated to within about 14 miles of the site of the present town of Cooma.

Over the years the boundaries of the area known as Monaro have been subject to fluctuations. Following settlement in the area, Monaro was understood to include the whole of the southern tableland from Michelago to Gippsland and across to Kiandra.

As described by the Rev. Backhouse in 1836, the Monaro Plains from beyond Mount Limestone, (near Canberra), "succeed each other for upwards of 200 miles".

Judge A. McFarland of the Southern District Courts described the district of Monaro in 1872 as being bounded on the east by the coastal range, on the south by the New South Wales-Victorian border, on the west by the Snowy Mountains and on the north by a line extending from the vicinity of Kiandra to the coastal range.

The Monaro plateau is drained in the south by tributaries of the Snowy River, and in the north by the Upper Murrumbidgee. Short coastal streams drain it to the east.

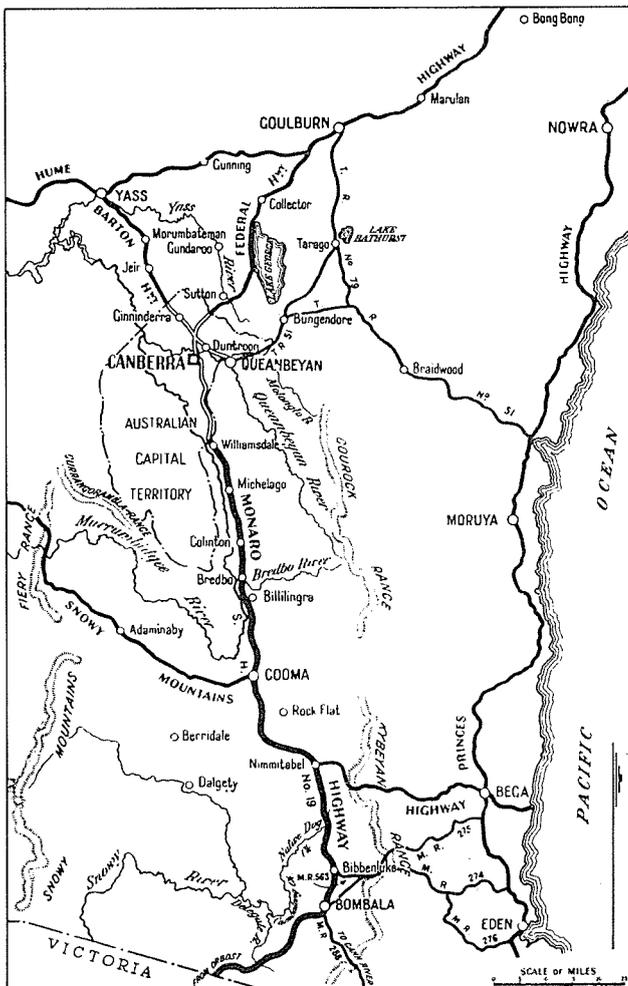
The larger part of the Monaro plateau is undulating to hilly, with a complex system of ridges standing out from the plateau surface between the rivers. Grazing, both of sheep and cattle, is the predominant industry, but in the early days of settlement, mining activity was fairly widespread. The production of silica and limestone is still carried on in parts of the area.

The Monaro Highway commences at Canberra and extends to the Victorian border, serving as the north-south backbone to the road system of the region. After passing through the Australian Capital Territory south from Canberra, the Monaro Highway continues through Michelago, Bredbo, Cooma, Nimmitabel, Bombala and Delegate. Including the length of the Highway which lies within the Australian Capital Territory (22 miles), the total length of the Monaro Highway, from its commencement at Canberra to the Victorian border, is 156 miles.

Exploration and Discovery

One of the earliest explorers of the southern districts of New South Wales was Hamilton Hume who, in 1841, discovered a tract of country situated a little north of the site of Goulburn, which he named Argyle.

With the object of extending Hume's explorations, an expedition led by the Deputy Surveyor-General, James Meehan, and Dr. Charles Throsby, and including Hume, set out from Liverpool in March, 1818, in



Route of the Monaro Highway.

an attempt to find an overland route to Jervis Bay. When near Marulan the expedition divided, one party led by Throsby attempting to effect a passage by a pre-determined route and the other under Meehan, accompanied by Hume, endeavouring to head the Shoalhaven River and to reach the coast from the south-west. Throsby succeeded in reaching Jervis Bay but Meehan failed in his objective owing to the impenetrable character of the gorges of the Shoalhaven. In the course of his journey, however, he discovered Lake Bathurst and the Goulburn Plains a little to the south-west.

To encourage settlement in the lands opened up by these discoveries, Throsby in 1820 was commissioned by Governor Macquarie to construct a road to the settlement about to be established at the Goulburn Plains. The road commenced at about where Mittagong now is, passed through Bong Bong and crossed the Wollondilly River which it again reached near the present site of Marulan, from whence it continued in a southerly direction.

While engaged in this work Throsby was told by some aborigines of the existence of a large lake near Lake Bathurst which they called Weereewaa. They also told him of a large river called Murrumbidgee which they said connected with the sea.

To investigate the story, Throsby despatched Joseph Wild, a constable attached to the road-making party, with two men and on 19th August, 1820, Wild found the lake of which the natives had spoken. In October of that year the Governor, Lachlan Macquarie, visited the lake which he named Lake George.

So impressed was the Governor by the lake, which in his journal he described as "this grand and magnificent sheet of water", and by the surrounding country, that he ordered Wild to endeavour to locate the river of which the natives had spoken. Starting from Lake George, Wild, with a constable named James Vaughan and Throsby's nephew, Charles T. Smith, passed through Geary's Gap on the western side of

the lake and on 5th December, 1820, reached a river called by the natives "Boongaroon" but which is now known as the Yass River. A day or so later they crossed the watersheds of the Yass and Molonglo Rivers and "came to a very extensive plain, fine rich soil and plenty of grass". This area later became known as the "Limestone Plains". Pressing on, Wild and his companions came to a "beautiful river that was running through the plains in a south-westerly direction" and by the side of which they made camp. The river was that now named the Queanbeyan and the site of the camp was near to Mount Pleasant near Canberra.

Wild did not succeed in finding the Murrumbidgee, but in March, 1821, Throsby with two companions journeyed south from Lake George to the Molonglo watershed and after passing the sites on which Queanbeyan and Canberra were later established, discovered the Murrumbidgee near to its junction with the Molonglo River.

Throsby's explorations were carried a stage further when on 22nd May, 1823, Captain M. J. Currie, R.N., and Brigade Major John Ovens, set out from Throsby's farm at Bong Bong near Bowral for the purpose of exploring the unknown country to the south of Lake George. They were accompanied by Joseph Wild and by the 26th May, the party had passed the limit of southerly settlement. On the 3rd June, they came to an extensive plain which proved to be the commencement of a long chain of downs. This they crossed and encamped on the bank of a gully near what is now Michelago.

On 6th June, 1823, the party crossed a river which they thought was the Murrumbidgee, but which was probably that now known as the Bredbo, and reached the neighbourhood of Billilingra Hill. Owing to a shortage of supplies they were obliged to halt and to return over practically the same route they had followed on their outward travels.



"Throsby Park" (near Bong Bong) named by Governor Macquarie in 1820. The house was built by Charles Throsby, nephew of Dr. Charles Throsby.



Lake Bathurst.

The journey undertaken by Currie and Ovens was the last expedition of a solely exploratory character to penetrate the Monaro region. Their report attracted the attention of the sheep-men and by 1827 the area of occupied country had extended to Berridale. The further exploration of the Monaro resulted chiefly from the penetration of the unoccupied lands by the pastoralists of the period.

Early Settlement

Settlement along what was to be the route of the Monaro Highway followed closely in the steps of the explorers. One of the first to occupy land in the area was Lieut. J. J. Moore who, after service in the Napoleonic wars and at the battle of Waterloo, arrived in Sydney in 1816. In 1823, he acquired a block of land in the Queanbeyan district to use as "a sort of cattle station" and he obtained permission to purchase from the Crown an area of 1,000 acres "anywhere in New South Wales". In 1826, Moore submitted a formal application for 1,000 acres in which he said "the land which I wish to purchase is situate at Canberry on the east bank of the river which waters Limestone Plains above its junction with the 'Murrumbidgee' adjoining the grant of Mr. Robert Campbell". Moore called his estate "Canberry" a name destined to be used to designate the Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia. When, at a later date, the name was changed to Canberra, the estate became known as "Acton", now a part of the capital city area. Lieut. Moore's application for land is preserved in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

The Robert Campbell to whom Moore referred in his application was a merchant who arrived in Sydney in 1798. In 1806 his ship "Sydney" was chartered by the Government to bring grain from India, in order



**Grave of Joseph Wild at Bong Bong. The tablet reads—
In memory of Joseph Wild, Accredited Explorer, Discoverer
of Lake George and First Finder of Wildes Meadow, who
died 25/5/1847, aged 88 years. This tablet, confirming
and supplementing inscription on tombstone, was erected
by friends 25/5/1949.**



Lake George and Federal Highway.

to relieve a state of near starvation of the Colony, following a devastating flood in the Hawkesbury River. Whilst engaged in this service the ship was lost and in 1825 Campbell was granted £2,000 in cash, and land and sheep, each to the value of £1,000, as compensation for the loss of the vessel. Campbell sent one of his employees, James Ainslie, to obtain sheep from the Government flock at Bathurst and to select land. Ainslie purchased 700 sheep, overlanded them via the Yass Plains, and selected 1,000 acres about Mount Pleasant on which to pasture them. This selection formed the nucleus of the Duntroon estate on which the Royal Australian Military College was later established.

By 1833 considerable settlement had taken place in the country surrounding Canberra. On a map published in that year, thirty-six holdings are shown to have been taken up within an area extending from Lake George to the Molonglo River and there were, in addition, several located on the Murrumbidgee.

According to a "Statistical Return" published by John Lhotsky in his "Journey from Sydney to the Australian Alps" there were, at the beginning of the year 1834, eighteen stations having between them 18,000 cattle and 38,000 sheep, established "in Monaro".

The earliest survey of the Monaro region was undertaken in 1839 by Stewart Ryrie, a resident of the area who previously was Commissary General of the Colony. At the request of the Surveyor-General, Ryrie carried out a general survey of the country between Miche-

lago and the eastern coast and of the area now known as Gippsland. He had no official status and carried out the work in a private capacity and at his own cost. From his notes and sketches the first map of the region was prepared and published in 1841.

Settlement progressed more rapidly than did survey of the areas opened up and by the end of 1843 the pastoral industry had become fairly well established as seems evident from an advertisement which appeared in the "Sydney Morning Herald" of 22nd December, 1843. In this the Boyd Town Store informed "The Settlers of Monaro" that they could "be supplied with stores of every description at Sydney prices; wool, sheepskins and hides taken in exchange".

The discovery of gold at the Snowy River in 1859 and the resultant rush to the Kiandra gold field, assisted in the establishment of the towns and villages now scattered throughout the Monaro but the actual development of the region came about through a process of expansion prompted by the need for pastures for the ever-increasing flocks and herds of the Colony.

Road Communications

In 1834 a map of the nineteen counties within which legal settlement was permitted was published by the Surveyor-General Major T. L. (later Sir Thomas) Mitchell. On this map a road was shown to leave the main southern route near Mittagong, pass through Bong Bong and then rejoin the main road at the "Village of Marulan". (This was probably the road under

construction by Throsby when he was told by natives of the existence of Lake George and the Murrumbidgee River). At this point a road turned south to Inverary and the southernmost point of Lake Bathurst from where a track passed through "Bungandow" (Bungendore) and Queanbeyan and terminated at the "Micaligo Plains", the then limit of southerly settlement. At this point the map was marked "from Monaro" which seems to indicate that the track continued to some point further south.

A post office was established at Queanbeyan in 1836 and arrangements were made for the distribution of mail over a wide area. All sorts of conveyances were used for the purpose but the mail carriers were limited to the one principal track shown on Mitchell's map except for those they themselves made to the outlying stations.

In that year, James Backhouse, who travelled extensively through the area, wrote in his "Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Alps" that "in the Colony generally, most of the acknowledged roads were merely cart tracks with the bad places cut through or filled up". Later, in 1839, the Rev. Edward Smith in a letter describing conditions in the Queanbeyan-Canberra district said—"the roads on which I travel in the performance of my duties, being for the most part over plains, are generally good. Some of those, however, which lead through the bush are rather rough".

On a "Map showing each Post Town, Village and Station in the Colony of New South Wales" published in 1844, a "post road" is shown extending from Sydney via Camden, Marulan, Bungonia, Bungendore, Queanbeyan, "Micaligo" and Cooma, to the coast of Victoria near Wilson's Promontory. The road followed the route of the track shown on Mitchell's map as far as "Micaligo" and went on to Cooma by almost the same route as that now taken by the Monaro Highway. On a later map "Prepared for the use of the Post Office Department" in 1852, this road is shown to have terminated at Bungonia but another road, running south from Goulburn, and passing to the west of Lake Bat-

hurst, is shown to have reached a point, unnamed on the map but which can now be identified as Tarago, where it branched, one branch leading through Braidwood to the coast at Broulee and the other running in a south-westerly direction to Bungendore and Queanbeyan, where it joined the road running south to Cooma and Bombala. On this map also, a road is shown to leave the main southern road a few miles south of Goulburn, pass through Collector and Gunderoo to Bungendore where it also joined the road to Queanbeyan, Cooma and beyond. Thus, by 1852, can be traced the emergence of the road system which now serves the Monaro region.

Further information regarding road communications in the more southerly portion of the area was given in a report on the Monaro district by Judge A. McFarland of the Southern District Courts, in 1872. He wrote—"There is one road in general use from Michelago to Cooma—that is by Colinton, Billilingeria and Cullen's Flat and that is for the most part a good bush road except in places where it is 'rather rutty'. Another, but less used road is by Colinton, Bredbo, and Brook and Rose Valley Stations. But from Cooma to Bombala there are two roads in general use—a direct one by the Rock Flat and Nimitabel, the 'Native Dog' (Native Dog Creek) and Bibbenluke, and an indirect one by Bobundra or Woolway, Duke's Springs and Bibbenluke or Gunningdrah. 'Tracks' can be made on each for many a mile and with a light buggy and a pair of good horses, nine or ten miles an hour can be readily accomplished in parts of either. The former is the shorter by about ten miles but is the rougher and could spare many of the loose stones that now lie upon it and might be deposited, with great advantage, in the beds of the boggy creeks which it passes . . ."

Although on the maps of the period "roads" are shown as such, it is probable that they were merely routes which had been defined but not formed. In the report above quoted, Judge McFarland says "There has been very little public money expended upon the roads of Monaro . . . and a few bridges . . . are greatly needed".



The Monaro Highway and countryside near Billilingeria Creek.



The town of Nimmitabel.

The road communications of the area had changed considerably by 1882. In that year a map "Prepared for the use of the Post Office Department" was published which showed a net-work of mail lines serving the Monaro region. On this map the original route to Monaro via Bungonia was superseded by a line from Goulburn via Tarago, Bungendore and Queanbeyan. The route through Collector terminated at that point but another route starting from the main southern road at Gunning and passing through Gundaroo and Sutton, joined the original route at Queanbeyan. A net-work of mail lines radiating from Yass included a route through Murrumbateman, Jeir, Ginninderra and Canberra to Queanbeyan where it also joined the original route. On this map, the line extended from Cooma through "Nimitybelle" (Nimmitabel) and Bombala to the Victorian border which it crossed at a point near Delegate. By 1882, therefore, the route of the future Monaro Highway had been established.

In 1928 a re-classification of the Main Roads system was undertaken and the sections of road between Queanbeyan and Cooma and from Nimmitabel to the Victorian border were classified as Trunk Roads, Nos. 52 and 53. Trunk roads were defined as "The secondary avenues of road communication, forming with the State Highways, the framework of a general system of inter-communication through the State, especially where no railways exist".

Over the next few years it was found necessary to expand and intensify the main roads network and a general review of the main roads system was made. Arising out of this review it was decided to re-classify the road from the Australian Capital Territory border at Royalla as a State Highway and by proclamation in the Government Gazette of the 25th March, 1938, the road from Canberra to the Victorian border, excluding the portion within the Australian Capital Terri-

tory and excluding the length between Cooma and Nimmitabel, then a part of State Highway No. 4, was designated State Highway, No. 19.

The name "Monaro Highway" was originally applied to the road from the coast at Tathra to the Hume Highway at Tarcutta but in 1955 it was decided to re-name this highway from Tathra to Nimmitabel and from Cooma to Tarcutta the "Snowy Mountains Highway" and to apply the name "Monaro Highway" to the highway south from Canberra to the Victorian border near Delegate.

This action was considered appropriate since the Canberra-Delegate road passes through the Monaro District for its full length and forms the backbone of the district's road system.

The Commonwealth Authorities also agreed to apply the name "Monaro" to the portion of the road (22 miles) which is within the Australian Capital Territory and as a result the name "Monaro Highway" now applies over the full length of 156 miles of the road from Canberra to the Victorian border.

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The Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society;

B.A.A.S. Handbook for New South Wales;

Study of the Ecosystem of the Monaro Region of New South Wales—A. B. Costin.

—S.G.P.