

# VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

## WILSONS PROMONTORY NATIONAL PARK

by Daniel Catrice, circa 1994.

*Wilson's Promontory is Victoria's oldest national park. Reserved in July 1898 'the Prom' has long been valued for its rugged beauty and its diverse flora and fauna. During its history, successive periods of high and low sea levels have resulted in it being either an island isolated from the mainland or part of a land bridge extending from the mainland to Tasmania. This fascinating natural landmark has an equally fascinating human history, of Aboriginal occupation and European exploration, of sealing and whaling, mining and timber-getting, and of conservation and park management.*

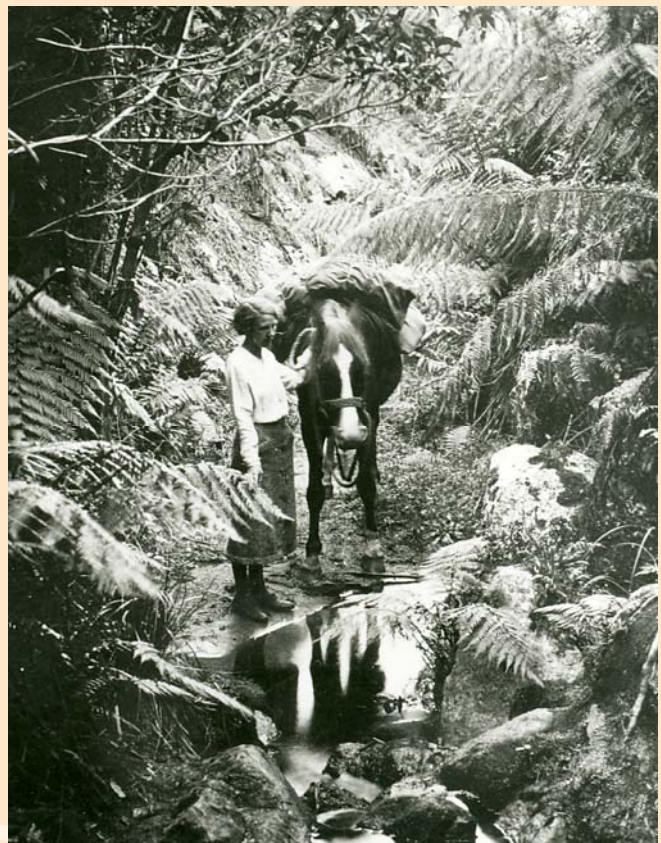
### THE FIRST INHABITANTS

The area now known as Wilsons Promontory was part of the tribal lands of the Brataualung. These people occupied the area from Cape Liptrap to the mouth of the Albert River and inland to the ridge of the western Strezelecki Ranges. The coast yielded to them a rich harvest of fish and shellfish. The forest also yielded timber and bark for shelters, weapons, tools and canoes.

The 'discovery' of the Prom by European explorers in the 1790s led to the decimation of the Brataualung. Deprived of traditional foods and decimated by European diseases, the last members of the tribe were sent to the Aboriginal mission at Lake Tyers.

### EXPLORERS

The first European explorers approached Wilsons Promontory from the sea. George Bass first sighted Wilsons Promontory in January 1798 during his whaleboat expedition from Sydney to Western Port. Bass did not realise that the 'high hummocky land' that he saw was part of the mainland Bass. He believed instead that the promontory was part of the Furneaux Islands until he returned later in the same year with Matthew Flinders. Upon completion of their coastal survey of the area,



Sealer's Cove Track. Photograph by Smith, courtesy of DSE.

Bass and Flinders charted the coast around the Promontory and recommended that it be named in honour of Thomas Wilson, a London friend of Flinders.

### SEALERS AND WHALERS

When Bass and Flinders sighted the promontory in 1798, they were accompanied by the "Nautilus" which was sent to investigate the potential of sealing. The results were promising, the "Nautilus" returned to Sydney with 9,000 seal skins and several tons of seal oil. Sealers were most active on the eastern coast of Wilsons Promontory, particularly at Sealers Cove. For the next forty years sealers exploited the seal colonies of the islands around the Prom. By the 1830s seal numbers had declined to such an extent that the industry had ceased to be viable.

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In 1842 traces of sealing activity were recorded by Captain J.L. Stokes who described dogs having been left on nearby sealers and rabbits on Rabbit Island which 'had been multiplied from a single pair turned loose by a praiseworthy sealer six years before'.

Refuge Cove was a busy whaling station for many years. In 1843, H.B. Morris reported on a trip to the Prom in which he stated that Lady's Bay (Refuge Cove) 'was a whaling station establishment, huts still stand and piles of enormous whalebones strew the shore, showing the success of former occupants'. Whale numbers declined, and by 1847 whaling activities had virtually ceased on the shores of Wilsons Promontory.

## TIMBER GETTERS

The tall forests above Sealers Cove attracted timber millers to the Prom during the late 1840s. Posts and railings for fences were the main products with a strong demand coming from pastoralists.



A Timber tramline. Photograph by P. King, courtesy of DSE.

Turnbull & Co commenced cutting timber at Sealers Cove on Wilsons Promontory around 1847, and the company was soon shipping staves and other split timber to Melbourne. A mill was set up some time around 1853,

adding sawn timber to the company's production and increasing their output substantially. By 1858 their plant included 17 miles of tramway and the company was shipping timber across to Port Albert to meet the demands of Gippsland settlers. The 1854 Census recorded a population of 61 people at Sealers Cove. By 1860 the mill at Sealers Cove had closed and part of the tramway and plant were moved by William Buchanan, (Turnbull & Co's manager) to Little (Agnes) River, presumably as part of the network for his new mill at Muddy Creek (Toora). Timber millers later returned to Sealer's Cove, and in 1903 there was a population of 40 people at the mill settlement. Ships made regular calls to the cove to deliver supplies and to take timber to markets in Melbourne. In 1906 the mill was destroyed by bushfire and the timber industry on Wilsons Promontory was abandoned. All that remains of the settlement are a few stumps of the pier which can still be seen in the sand at the southern end of the beach.

## PASTORALISTS

Because of its remoteness and difficulty of access, South Gippsland was one of the later parts of Victoria to be occupied by squatters. The Turnbull Brothers held three pastoral runs, "Sealer's Cove", "Mt Singapore" and "South Corner Inlet", amounting to 38,400 acres in 1862. Jane Lennon has suggested that their limited pastoral activities were only for the purpose of grazing enough livestock to provide a meat supply for their timber settlement. Robert Turnbull held the Wilsons Promontory run. In 1865 John Baragwanath occupied the Sealers Cove run, having his homestead on the northern bluff, but he only remained five years. He then selected at Barry's Beach on Corner Inlet. Most of the Promontory land was poor grazing, and cattle suffered from "coast disease", apparently a kind of malnutrition.

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Cattle around the mouth of the Darby River circa 1918. Photograph by N. Everett from Gunn Collection, courtesy of DSE.

The Yanakie run, established on the isthmus by Richard Bennison in 1850 was much more successful, especially for sheep. After several different holders, it was acquired in the early 1870s by William Millar. Yanakie Station remained in the hands of his family until 1907. In 1909 the leases were cancelled and 27,000 acres of the old Yanakie station was made available for winter agistment of cattle for dairy farmers of the South Gippsland hills. Before 1959 up to 3500 cattle were agisted annually in the area. The run was reduced by 12,000 acres in 1954 when the northern part was set aside for Soldier Settlement. Agistment continued in the remaining part, even after its addition to the National Park in 1969.

## MINERS

The Gippsland gold rushes of the 1860s did not bypass the Prom. In 1866 the "Chancellor Gold Mining and Quartz Crushing Company" was formed and applied for a mining lease of 25 acres (10 hectares) on Mt. Singapore. The mine was not particularly productive and by 1870 it had closed.

Tin ore was discovered near Corner Inlet in the 1870s. The ore was not mined until demand increased towards the end of the First World War. In 1919 Cabinet approved the granting of mining leases in the Wilsons Promontory National Park to the Mt Hunter Tin Mining Syndicate. The company installed a mining plant and commenced mining in 1924. However returns were not favourable, and mining ceased in 1925.

## NATURALISTS

Early interest in the Wilsons Promontory's scientific attributes was shown by Dr Ferdinand von Mueller who, as the first Government Botanist, visited Wilsons Promontory in March and April 1853. Dr. Mueller explored the east coast and north east coasts, collecting botanical specimens. After his appointment as Director of Melbourne's Botanic Gardens in 1857, he sent his foreman to collect further specimens from the Promontory. Mueller himself made another visit to the Promontory in 1874, this time collecting specimens from the Mt Oberon area.



A beautiful bank of sweet smelling fan flower, found by Dave Mathews. Photograph by Mr M. Hawkins, courtesy of DSE.

In 1884 a party of field naturalists led by John Gregory made a trip to the Wilsons Promontory lighthouse. Gregory dubbed the 'noble granite Promontory' to the Cornwall of Victoria and recommended that it be reserved as a national park:

*We may safely commend the promontory as full of interest to naturalists of all persuasions. Practically inaccessible as it is at present we believe that a future awaits it as a summer haunt of lovers of nature, lovers of scenery.*

At the same time, a counter proposal had been submitted to the Government to settle more than one thousand Skye crofters on the Promontory. A Scottish philanthropist proposed the scheme involving the formation

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of a settlement at Waterloo Bay, to be known as Port Gordon, 'from whence a road would be formed to a suitable township on the western side to be called Villierstown'.



Field Naturalist Club December 1912. Party on Bull Plain discussing route up the western slope of Vereker Range. Courtesy of DSE.

The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria (FNCV) led the campaign to protect the Prom. Support came from local steamboat companies who promoted 'people's picnic and marine excursions' to the east coast coves. The *Yarram Advertiser*, advertising the sale of land in Liverpool township, were equally enthusiastic, proclaiming the Prom 'the future People's Park'.

## THE NATIONAL PARK

Deputations by the FNCV to the Minister of Lands eventually led to the temporary reservation of 36,842 hectares as a site for a national park on 8 July 1898.

In 1904 a proposal to subdivide the land into 1,000 acre grazing blocks brought another deputation from the FNCV to the Minister, asking for the permanent reservation of the area "as a National Park for the preservation and protection of native fauna and flora". As a result the subdivision was cancelled by State Cabinet. By now the campaign was receiving wider public support, particularly from organisations like the Royal Society, the Royal Geographic Society, the Zoological and

Acclimatisation Society, and the Australian Natives Association.

Following a large deputation to the Premier, Cabinet agreed to the permanent reservation of 30,363 hectares as a site for a National Park, which was gazetted in March 1905. The park excluded half of the township of Seaforth reserve on the Singapore Peninsula, gazetted in 1889 and subdivided in 1892. Some of the blocks had been sold, and although a hotel was built, the township was never settled. The reservation also excluded a half mile coastal strip around the Promontory. Following further representations most of the coastal strip was added to the reserve in August 1908, with the exception of a ten chain (200 metre) strip at Sealers and Refuge Coves, Waterloo and Oberon Bays, which was retained for the use of fishermen.

## ADDITIONS

Over the years there have been many additions to the park. In 1928, 58 hectares of freehold land, comprising of the Seaforth township reserve was the purchase by the Crown, and in 1947 the coastal strips earlier excluded from the park were added. In 1969 park was increased by 7422 hectares with the addition of the agistment area that had been part of the old Yanakie Run. In the same year the islands of the Glennie group (excluding Citadel) were added to the park.



Darby chalet, circa 1934. Photograph by Mrs William Astbury, courtesy of DSE.

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## MANAGEMENT

A Committee of Management was appointed in 1908 to oversee the running of the park. The first ranger, Charles McLennan, commenced duty in 1909. He set up camp at Darby River. An additional ranger, Gordon Mathieson was appointed in 1910. Rangers' cottages were built at Darby River and at Vereker Landing. The Committee of Management were able to employ rangers (when few national parks had trained staff) using the agistment fees from grazing in the park. These fees were a major source of income for the park's maintenance, as well as an important factor in maintaining the viability of many local hill farms. Grazing on the Yanakie isthmus continued after its addition to the park in 1969. Up to 2000 cattle were grazed during winter, and in summer a maximum of 300 were admitted. Grazing finally ceased in 1992 following the recommendation of the Land Conservation Council.



Ranger Bob Turner with Land Rover at Land's End

were 66 visitors who camped in the park.

Access to the Promontory was difficult. Approaching from Fish Creek it could be reached by car, the drive including a ten kilometre stretch along Darby Beach from Shallow Inlet to a point near Cotters Lake. The Prom could also be approached by boat across Corner Inlet from Port Welshpool or Port Franklin. During the 1930s a duckboard track was built from Yanakie to the Darby River Chalet, although many drivers continued to come to grief. A trip to 'the Darby' in 1936 provided some anxious moments for a group of rover scouts:

## TOURISTS

In the early years of the Park camping was loosely controlled by the issue of permits, and limited statistics available for the early years show that between 1912 and 1916 there

*From [Foster] the going was not so good, an unsurfaced road with many scars causing considerable discomfort to the occupants of the car. However, worse was yet to come. The sand drift was reached, and after a few minutes, the inevitable happened - the car stuck - and all hands on deck to get it out. Eventually, without human freight, the auto proceeded to the end of the sand drift - two miles - after which followed four miles along firm sand to the turn off to the Darby*

From 1946 the Committee of Management set about improving the park's facilities, making Tidal River the main service area. Some of the army buildings (built when the Prom was taken over by the Australian Army during the Second World War) were converted for accommodation, and cottages were built from the remains of the old Darby River Chalet. Over the years the Committee provided further additions and improvements to visitor facilities, before the Park was handed over to the National Parks Service in November 1975.

## SOURCES

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