The Significance of the Route across the Blue Mountains in New South Wales

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The Great Dividing Range is a very European construct. For Aboriginal people for millennia before 1789 the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, though a self-evident demarcator, were not so much a divider as a meeting-place on the periphery of several language groups. For the Wiradjuri, the Gundungurra, the Darug people, the Mountains were a natural point of contact. One result was that there was widespread knowledge of how to attain the table-top from the plains and valleys and how to cross the climactic landscape of the table-top without abruptly terminating one's journey.

Aboriginal people knew that the single track from the Sydney basin to the Bathurst plains, and vice versa, held to one narrow ridge on top. They knew also that there were only a few viable options for attaining that ridge from the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley at the east and from the Hartley Valley at the west. This knowledge was passed to Europeans whether directly in the form of Aboriginal guides or indirectly through discussions with Aboriginal people. This was the source of the basic information which enabled Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth, those three self-seeking pastoralists, to cross the Mountains in 1813 to find green grass on the other side.[1]

This route, on the approximate line of today's Great Western Highway, was surveyed in 1813 and a rough roadway was cleared in the following year by convict labour.[2] Water supplies, of course, played a part: Glenbrook Lagoon and the spring which gave Springwood its name were important staging posts. But the Bathurst road is quite unlike the road following the mound-springs in Central Australia which Colin Harris has discussed at this Alice Springs conference. The road over the Blue Mountains was not so much following things as avoiding things, usually precipices.

The cultural purposes of the Europeans' western road were also very different from the immemorial purposes of the Aborigines' trackway. For Europeans, the Blue Mountains had basically constituted one wall of the big detention centre on the Cumberland Plain. The building of the road by Cox's convicts and the unlocking of transmontane Australia which was its corollary had symbolism as well as practicality. The western road was a necessary transition step from a penal settlement to a free colony.

The opening of the west to herds, flocks and crops led to the discovery of dangerously desirable things like gold, coal, iron and copper. But half a century elapsed before a rail route complementary to the road could cross the Mountains and make the economic, social and cultural effects of the Victorian industrial world more universally felt. The aesthetically spectacular Zig Zag at Lithgow exemplified these high Victorian values. From 1870 onwards the western rail route, going farther and farther west in spasms, brought enormous changes. The western coalfield and its contingent secondary industry, as well as the wheat harvest of the black soil plains, could at last have access to coastal

and international markets. Farther west again, the pastoral world of the Darling, which had depended on the river-boats, paddle-wheeling down to Victoria and South Australia, began at the end of the nineteenth century to look instead to the steam-trains bound for Sydney. Bourke at last became more than a notional part of New South Wales.[3]

All this stemmed directly from the engineering skills which took the railway across the Blue Mountains in the 1860s. More parochially, the railway through the Mountains also changed the leisure patterns of Sydney. To escape the heat and humidity of summertime in Sydney, the coastal elite built hill-station retreats along the railway line from Springwood to Blackheath and they were soon followed by the hoi polloi, who could suddenly afford cheap day-trips to the Mountains or economical family holidays in the guesthouses of the new townships like Katoomba: to meet the demand Katoomba developed 156 accommodation houses within walking distance of the railway station.[4] The late Victorian cult of the sublime chasm, the development of the walking tracks, discussed authoritatively by Jim Smith, and public relations events like the transmutation of the prosaic Tria Saxa ('three rocks') into the Three Sisters, complete with a pseudo-indigenous legend, all helped to change cultural horizons.[5]

The rail-line and the western road intertwined intimately right across the Mountains. At Katoomba, where the highway has been moved slightly north in recent years, the relationship was once closer, with the posh Carrington Hotel at the top of the private tourist town to the south while the family pub, Gearin's, and the government town were immediately to the north. The railway was single-track until 1902 and there were numerous level-crossings, with twelve identikit gatekeepers' cottages built in stone in the late 1860s. The duplication of the line in 1902 brought over-bridges, so the gatekeepers and their cottages became redundant: five cottages were recycled for their fine stone blocks, one was resited in Lawson and six remain in their original relationship with the railway, significant evidence of the original intertwining of road and rail.[6]

The road itself has not been entirely static. Cox's road of 1814 was realigned in many places in the 1820s, while the Surveyor-General, Thomas Mitchell, in 1832 opened a new pass up to Blaxland from Emu Plains near Penrith. A handsome and unusual mile-marker survives halfway up the pass near Lennox Bridge, the oldest surviving road bridge on the Australian mainland. The difficult descent beyond Mount Victoria, which later defeated the railway engineers, who had to go north along the Darling Causeway to find a place to build the Zig Zag, had involved four separate routes by 1830s and a fifth pass was built by John Berghofer for the early motor-car.[7]

On the table-top, however, the symbiosis of railway and highway from Blaxland to Mount Victoria is quite exceptional. A view of Blackheath, for example, taken around 1905 emphasises how intimate the connection was between rail and road in most of the townships.[8] The exception was Leura, where an unblinking eye of crown land ripe for development separated road from station.[9]

The highway, already upgraded in the 1980s, is now changing again, to accommodate a political decision to have a four-lane highway all the way from Sydney to Bathurst. The

financial and cultural costs of this road-widening are immense. The work already done near Woodford, for example, has left the original single rail-track curiously suspended on a ledge high above the new highway. The rich multiplicity of old road alignments at Soldiers Pinch between Mount Victoria and Blackheath have been essentially eliminated in an engineers' orgy. The straightening of the Linden bends has not been without archaeological cost. The shopping centre of Lawson is under threat of demolition, since the rail-track is so close that four road-lanes cannot be otherwise accommodated and total rerouting would have dire consequences for the built and natural environment elsewhere in Lawson. Faulconbridge has suffered great changes, with a church shifted backwards, trees removed and gardens curtailed.

The current roadworks, despite anticipatory consultancies and archaeological monitoring, have produced many surprises. A lot of valuable information about the various earlier roads, with some fine stone walling, culverts and the like, has been obtained, but most of the unexpected discoveries have then been destroyed. And there remain terrible problems, most terrible of all Victoria Pass, where Mitchell's 200-metre-long two-lane causeway halfway down, buttressed on both sides still by convict work of the 1830s, cannot be widened or duplicated without disastrous heritage consequences.

One last, less familiar element of the significance of the Blue Mountains transport corridor, which runs basically east-west, is its linkage system to north and south. Both the Aboriginal people from the beginning of time into the twentieth century and the European settlers who from the nineteenth century occupied the valleys to the south, Megalong, Kanimbla, Burragorang, needed tracks to access the table-land route. These feeder tracks ran basically from south to north and they too are part of the cultural route network of the Mountains.[10]

I have enjoyed the recent experience of documenting and exploring one of these valley properties, dependent on a track up the escarpment. This is the Maxwell family farm in Kedumba Valley, the remotest part of Burragorang, where the cattle could go to market only by a 60-kilometre walk to Camden, fording Coxs River and the Wollondilly River several times, but the Maxwells themselves needed access to the much closer township of Wentworth Falls, using the Goat Track.[11] Jim Smith has plausibly argued that this track up the Kedumba Walls was dented into the precipice during a chasing episode between two Dreamtime figures.[12] Until 1928 and even the 1950s the Goat Track remained a perilous descent of about 600 metres of awe-inspiring cliffs and foothills, where it was difficult to use even a pack-horse.

Bushrangers had used Kedumba Valley and the Goat Track. The evidence is convincing, for there is first-hand testimony from William John Maxwell who in the 1890s met one of the former bushrangers, recently released from jail, and William's father, who was born in 1832, had told his son about much earlier desperadoes.[13] Kedumba is a prototype for Captain Starlight's secret valley in Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery under Arms,* first published in 1881, and after the Aboriginal people and the bushrangers it was occupied by three generations of Maxwells for a hundred years.

The second generation of Maxwells, man and wife, took it in turns to climb the Goat Track every week to walk into Wentworth Falls where they collected the correspondence school material for their two sons and bought basic supplies which they brought home on their shoulders.[14] The Goat Track was a lifeline. In 1926 a rich young man, son of the flour-milling Crago family, was accidentally shot on a hunting trip in the valley and a field hospital, with doctors and nurses, had to be brought in to operate on his damaged kidney. The Goat Track was the only viable way to reach him in time. As a result we have a remarkable set of photographs of the hut complex built in the 1890s by the first William Maxwell and the slab houses built in 1893 and 1925 by his son, William John. They are among the best documented slab buildings in New South Wales.[15]

As a direct result of the publicity generated by the Crago incident, the Goat Track was upgraded to a bridle track in 1928-9, and ultimately a vehicle track of sorts was blasted out close to the alignment of the Goat Track in 1953. In 1960 Warragamba dam flooded the access route from Camden and this road to Wentworth Falls, now the only way out except by air, was further improved.[16]

Today it is singularly evocative to reach the surviving slab cottage of 1925, with its back-drop of Kedumba Walls, eternally reminding the Maxwells of their profound remoteness only eight kilometres as the crow flew from the Great Western Highway.

The Blue Mountains transport corridor has many faces. It is salutary to remember the minority interests of the fringe-dwellers in the valleys, like the Maxwells, who had to maintain perilous routes up the escarpments, as well as the mass culture of the holiday-makers on the table-top, and the economic imperatives of the farmers, miners and industrialists from Lithgow and Bathurst out to Bourke and Cobar. The way over the Mountains has meant many cultural things to many people, Aboriginal and European, and the challenges of accommodating transport imperatives to human and environmental needs have changed but in no way abated.

Endnotes

[1] G. Blaxland, 'A Journal of a Tour of Discovery across the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, in the year 1813', in G. Mackaness, ed., *Fourteen Journeys over the Blue Mountains of New South Wales*, 1813-1841, Sydney 1950, reprinted Dubbo 1978, 19-25.

[2] G. Karskens, Cox's Way: Historical-Archaeological Study of Cox's Road and Early Crossings of the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, Sydney 1988

[3] J. Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines: a History of the Railways of New South Wales, 1850-1986*, Carlton Melbourne University Press, 1989.

[4] G. Silvey, *Happy Days: Blue Mountains Guesthouses Remembered*, Kingsclear Books, Crows Nest 1996; P. Stanbury, ed., *The Blue Mountains: Grand Adventure for All*, Sydney and Leura: Macleay Museum and Second Back Row Press, 2nd ed. 1988.

[5] J. Smith, 'Blue Mountains National Park: Walking-Track Heritage Study', report to National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1998.
[6] B. Slade, 'Railway Gatehouses of the Blue Mountains', *This Australia*, autumn 1988.
[7] A. Wilson, 'The Great Western Highway',*Main Roads* XV i, September 1949, 6-15.
[8] R. Bissett, photographer, *Picturesque Blackheath*, Sydney [c.1905], [12].
[9] State Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library, sub-division plans, ZTP: L4/4.
[10] Cf. E. Stockton, *Blue Mountains Dreaming: The Aboriginal Heritage*, Winmalee: Three Sisters Productions, 1993.
[11] . State Records New South Wales, Conditional Purchase files, 10/19478, 04/7347 and 7350.
[12] J. Smith, *Aboriginal Legends of Burragorang*, Wentworth Falls: Den Fenella 1992, 55; Stockton, *Blue Mountains Dreaming*, 111-3
[13] *Daily Guardian*, 10 January 1927, 7.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Blue Mountains Historical Society, Wentworth Falls, Crago file F 201; *Daily Guardian*, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11 January 1927.
[16] Musecape, 'Blue Mountains Walking Tracks: a Heritage Assessment', report to National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1998, Appendix 7.1, 18-19.