

The Bogong High Plain

By Arnold Moulden.

Last year, before going to Kosciusko, I was fortunate enough, through the kindness of Mr. Stuart McKay, a keen Victorian skier, to be able to join him in a tour of this area—the biggest, and, I believe, the best, skiing area in Victoria. I have been asked to write something about it for the *Year Book*.

At the outset I would like to say that my remarks are meant for those who have never been on the Plain, and to give them only some general idea of the nature of the country, and what to expect in the way of accommodation and conditions generally. I do not profess to have seen the Plain thoroughly, because, although we spent twelve days there, the weather was so atrocious—snow or fog with high winds for ten out of the twelve days—that I was not able to see half as much as I had hoped.

I propose to give a brief outline of our trip, but before doing so, just a little general information about the Plain itself. This is an area about twelve miles long and five miles wide, roughly elliptical in shape, situated about 30 miles south-west of Mount Buffalo and 60 miles south-west of Kosciusko. It lies immediately east of the well known Razorback, connecting Mount Hotham to Mount Feather-top, and is separated therefrom by the deep valley of the Kiewa River. Its general height is from 5,300 to 5,800 feet, with four outstanding peaks—Mount Fainter, Mount Cope, Mount Nelson, and Mount McKay, all of which are between 6,000 and 6,200 feet. Immediately north of the Plain, and separated from it only by the deep gorge of the Big or Mitta River, is Mount Bogong (6,506 feet), the highest mountain in Victoria.

Along the entire length of the southern edge of the Plain runs a well constructed snow-pole line, the poles being 60 yards apart—roughly 27 to the mile, and numbered consecutively. Most of the huts on the Plain are on or near this line, which therefore serves as a sort of jumping-off mark for tours and an excellent safeguard in bad weather. If you were to get really bushed, no matter where you were, you would only have to strike south-west and you must hit this line, and from the number of the pole you can tell exactly where you are and how far from the nearest hut.

Now as to our tour. There were only three of us in the party—Gordon Ross, of Melbourne, being the third member. Mr. McKay made all the previous arrangements for the trip (which were considerable) with a thorough-



Map showing the Country in the Bogong High Plains described in Mr. Arnold Moulden's article.

ness and efficiency born of previous experience of trips of a similar nature. He had sent most of the food packed in kerosene cases up to the Plain in the previous autumn by pack-horse. We therefore only had to carry such perishables as meat, bread, eggs, and fruit. He had made a real study of the food problem for such a trip—in addition to which he proved to be a first-class cook, and the result was that we fed like fighting cocks.

There are two ways of approach to the Plain—one from the east and the other from the west. We went by the one route and left by the other. The method of approach from the eastern end is to take the train from Melbourne to Bairnsdale—a seven hours' journey—leaving at 8 a.m. and arriving at 3 p.m. From there a hired car took us due north to Omeo, a delightfully situated little place, where we arrived at 8 p.m. and stayed the night. We continued our journey by car next morning for about 30 miles to Big River Bridge, where a grizzled old veteran named Fitzgerald met us with horses. The next part of the trip is the 3,000 ft. climb out of the Big River Valley on to the Plain—a distance of some eight or nine miles. The track is steep and narrow, and we were carrying packs, blankets,

skis, and stocks. However, the horses, much to my relief, proved comparatively docile, and we were fortunate in that, owing to lack of snow (which came the next day) they were able to take us right on to the Plain, to Kelly's Hut, our first camp. Under ordinary snow conditions one has to ski the last two or three miles.

Kelly's Hut is a picturesque little slab hut, well sheltered, but otherwise uninviting. It is small and does



Top.—Timms' Look-out and Mount Bogong.
Bottom.—Cope Hut, erected by the Ski Club of Victoria in 1929.

not boast a window, and is therefore dark. However, it is surprisingly snow-proof and warm, and far more comfortable than it looks, and will, no doubt, during the course of the next year or two be much sought after by fugitive taxpayers fleeing from their Governments. We spent four days there, but we had so much fog that we couldn't go far and saw very little.

From Kelly's we moved on to Cope Hut—the "Menzies" of the Plain. It is centrally situated, and, although built

in a somewhat exposed position, is excellently constructed and very comfortable. It is about half the size of Betts Camp and has wooden bunks for eight (four at each end), curtained off from a central portion, which serves as the kitchen and dining-room. There is running water laid on from a spring nearby, and the equipment in the way of cooking utensils and general hut stores is very complete. This hut served as our base for the rest of our stay on the Plain. However, the weather was still unkind, and spoilt many attractively planned days. In fact, it was not until our tenth day that we were able to do a really full day's trip. In the meantime we had to content ourselves with short half-day trips and practise slopes. This, however, did not prevent me from seeing the central portion of the Plain, which for the most part consists of irregular undulating country, fairly heavily timbered on the ridges and hilltops, but clear in the valleys. It is not steep by any means, but to my mind is good langlauf country. One very enjoyable trip we had was up a very pretty snow-filled valley called Rocky Valley, with Mount McKay at its head. Fog stopped us from reaching the top of this peak, but it was nevertheless an excellent day and in better weather the run-off should be good. There is a 500 foot drop, with a slope of anything between 15 deg. and 30 deg., according to the direction in which you take it.

Our tenth day broke fine and clear, and we set off on our only all-day trip. We chose the north-eastern corner of the Plain. This comprises a high, fairly broad, undulating spur, running from Mount Nelson (6,170 feet high and 6 miles from Cope Hut) to Timms' Look-Out (5,960 feet and a further 5 miles), and then dropping very steeply into the gorge of the Big or Mitta River. This spur and its subsidiary off-shoots are a good deal higher than the general level of the Plain, and form an excellent skiing area, being practically free of timber and comprising slopes of all grades. From Timms' Look-Out, which is at the extreme end of the spur, one looks straight across the darkly wooded gorge of the Big River to Mount Bogong—a magnificent mass of a mountain, and, like Mount Kosciusko, more or less flat topped. It only looks a few hours' trek away, but the intervening gorge is 3,000 feet deep, very steep and heavily timbered. The only party that has ever done the trip in winter took three days to do it—a camp on the banks of the Big River being their half-way house. Westward, one looks along the northern edge of the Plain to Mount McKay, Mount Fainter, and Mount Feathertop, in that order. In the north-west and thirty miles distant, the Mount Buffalo plateau rises prominently out of the densely wooded hills

surrounding it. Looking north-east one can plainly see the Kosciusko plateau away on the horizon, but at such a distance, and from this unfamiliar aspect, I could not distinguish any particular peaks. We spent some time enjoying this extensive view of the country, and then retraced our steps. On the way home there is a very fine run, about three-quarters of a mile long off Mount Nelson, although it was too hard and wind-blown to be pleasant when we tried it.

Our departure from the Plain was made off the western end, our objective being Hotham Heights. We left Cope Hut and skied five miles to Mount Jim, which is practically on the western edge of the Plain. There one encounters a nasty gash in the country—1,200 feet deep, with thickly timbered precipitous sides, at the bottom of which is the Cobungra River and a hut known as Dibbins' Hut. We had to carry our skis down into this over hard slippery snow. After about my twenty-fifth fall, I found that the process of getting up, with a heavy pack and blankets on my back and carrying skis and stocks, became a little irksome. The climb out on the other side under similar conditions called for no little effort, but once on the top the rest of the journey to Hotham Heights was good going. From there (where we stayed the night) the route is the well known Alpine Road to the St. Bernard Hospice, where we were met by a car and taken via Harrierville to the train.

There are many whole day trips on the Plain which I was unable to do—such, for instance, as the trip along a ridge known as The Niggerheads and ending up with Mount Fainter—a very beautiful trip, I believe, commanding wonderful views of the Razorback and Mount Feather-top. However, despite our foul luck with the weather, I saw enough to satisfy myself that the Plain is a skiing ground upon which one can spend a most delightful holiday. The area is somewhat limited, compared with the Kosciusko plateau—nor is the country steep enough to satisfy the speed artist. It is more particularly suited for the skier such as myself, who is content with a pleasant cross-country run, devoid of undue thrills, but through picturesque surroundings and with a good downhill run now and again to relieve the monotony.

One big advantage it certainly has over Kosciusko is the comparative inexpensiveness of the trip—at any rate, so far as Victorians and South Australians are concerned. It cost me considerably less than half of any trip I have ever made to Kosciusko, but the degree of comfort is, of course, also different. However, I thoroughly enjoyed my visit, and economy will not be my only motive in repeating it.