

GOVETT, William Romaine. *Sketches of New South Wales, written and illustrated for 'The Saturday Magazine' in 1836 – 37. Together with an essay on 'The Saturday Magazine' by Gaston Renard and an account of his life by Annette Potts.* Melbourne, Gaston Renard, 1977. pp. xxxii + 96. \$85. ISBN 0 959 98991 9.

How interesting life must have been as a surveyor-explorer in Govett's time, with great tracts of unknown land to be localised, named and measured, new roads to be laid out, hard living conditions and tough physical challenges to be overcome. Loneliness, lack of communication, the surprise of beauty seen in miniscule or in the grand expanse of mountains and valleys, mists, waterfalls, and sunlight on escarpments; dark night skies, camp-fires, pork and damper, rain, the slur of rivers, bird-calls, the roll of the surf, deserted beaches, the wind, isolation, the infrequent company of small farms, confrontation with goannas, possums, emus, kangaroos, snakes and aborigines were part of the environment of his duties. Freedom, with the responsibility of exact notation, and the unexpected, the frightening, the fascinating, were shared with a few companions, some of them convicts.

Govett's articles in the *Saturday Magazine* were written for an English public. The fact that twenty were published between May 1836 and September 1837 must establish their contemporary popularity. Interest in the still relatively newly-settled colony would have been natural to many readers with family or friends living in New South Wales, and general interest in the excitement of new discoveries, and the possibilities for new trade, profit or adventure was constant.

The articles tell of the aborigines and their way of life, native animals, Sydney and its environs, the Blue Mountains and the Stockade, distant settlements and the various geographical areas surveyed by Govett and his men. They differ slightly in style from the published journals of Oxley and Mitchell, which were day-to-day records. Govett is recollecting his experiences in England with the aid of his notes made in New South Wales. He writes in a more relaxed and narrative style, and is untied to precise chronology. His illustrations add a lively and direct visual imagery.

Sydney, to Govett, was a town of cottages with gardens, and of two or three storied houses made of brick or stone, and wide verandas to catch the harbour breezes. The Rocks, the area of the first settlement, was busy with shipping, wharves, warehouses, a dockyard, government stores and all the vitality of a port. Dawes Battery and the Signal Staff dominated this hub of mixed housing, hotels and mercantile activity. On the other side of Sydney Cove a popular walk led from Government House via Fort Macquarie, The Domain and Woolloomooloo Bay to Mrs Macquarie's Chair, with the accompaniment of a "remarkable noise of insects, which keep up an incessant loud and shrill buzzing". Swimming was so popular "that it was impossible to walk out any time of the day... without being annoyed by bathers in all directions." George Street, with its market, barracks, hotels, theatre and police station was the main thoroughfare, and Macquarie Street, with its government buildings, led to Hyde Park, the social meeting place of the town, where cricket and all kinds of sports, promenading and riding were enjoyed. St James's Church, the Supreme Court and the Catholic Chapel stood at the edge of the park. At South Head, Macquarie Lighthouse

and the signal-staff relayed their messages to ships and to the city. Botany Bay, linked to Sydney by a new road, was gradually being settled.

Govett's Leap, or waterfall, was so named by Thomas Mitchell after its discovery by Govett during his survey of the Blue Mountains Road. It lies at Blackheath above the Grose Valley, and falls about one thousand feet, eventually joining the Grose River. The road survey was essential, as the way to the western plains was all but impassable over the continuous barricade of endless ridges and valleys, and further settlement was being held back. The road was built by convict labour and these men were housed in a Stockade. Govett describes the one erected beyond Mt Victoria. Surprisingly, this temporary settlement housed between seven and eight hundred men. Built in the form of a square, there were huts for the prisoners, barracks for the soldiers, officers' quarters, a hospital, storehouse, tents for the commissary, a cooking shed, butchers' and bakers' houses, constables' huts etc. Rations were contracted at so much per annum. Laziness and refusal to work by the prisoners incurred a flogging. "This Stockade, altogether, formed a peculiar scene of animation amid the solitude of the mountain."

Govett's attitude towards the aborigines was friendly and interested. Most of their troubles he blamed on white brutality, contempt, and the ready access to drink. His descriptions of their natural way of life are detailed and sharp. He tells how they made their opossum-skin cloaks, canoes, gunyas and weapons, how they fished and climbed trees, how a corroboree was held, how they spent their evenings by the fire, chatting, smoking and playing with their children, how a coveted bride from a different tribe was followed, stunned by a waddie, and dragged away insensible by the prospective groom, and how he then had to endure a trial of courage and strength at the hands of the bride's tribesmen. On another occasion we accompany Govett on a two-hour walk with a few aborigines, travelling only a couple of miles. We observe their ways of finding grubs, opossums, an ants' nest, a bee-hive, a kangaroo-rat, a bandicoot. They carefully examine everything, lifting bark and stones, and follow tracks of different animals. Yet "their eyes give the strongest marks of expression to their physiognomy, — large, full, and penetrating, and shaded by overhanging brows and long lashes; the very working of the soul is discoverable in the vivacity of their eyes, and all the softer as well as the more tumultuous passions are expressed by them. Their colour, which is of a deep hazel, contributes much to enforce the expression."

Geographical descriptions of salient features of the landscape by Govett are still easily recognisable to-day where settlement has not intervened. Predictions by Govett about various areas have proved correct. To him, Pitt Water "appears a beautiful and romantic lake, and the scenery around is very picturesque. . . . The shabby hut will here, probably in a few years, give way to the ornamental villas of the rich. . . ."

Without doubt *Sketches of New South Wales* are worth re-publishing for their intrinsic historical value and for the immediacy of their perception. Accompanying them in this new edition are two new and interesting articles, one by Gaston Renard on the *Saturday Magazine*, and one, a biography of Govett, by Annette Potts, together with a portrait by G. Day, an index, and a chronological publication list of the original articles. The cover, in blue cloth, printed with white kangaroos, from a sketch by Govett, and end-papers of the same design, are attractive, but a dust-jacket would have helped to prevent easy soiling. The printing is clear and the paper good, but the binding of the review copy is very bad, with unevenly guttered folds along the sewn seams throughout the book. The re-produced wood-engravings, as might be expected, have

lost some of their crisp linear quality. The general design is spacious and adequate, but a rather high-shouldered Contents page, and two pages each with only three lines of text above a naked expanse of white, could easily have been avoided. At a price of \$85, one imagines that only compulsive buyers of limited editions would purchase this pleasant but unremarkable publication.

Paulette Jones,
Mitchell Library,
State Library of New South Wales,
Sydney.

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