



F Cornell Photographer Courtesy Slate Library of Victoria

Remembering Howitt

LARGELY FORGOTTEN BY TIME ALFRED HOWITT WAS A GREAT EARLY GIPPSLAND ANTHROPOLOGIST, BOTANIST AND GEOLOGIST. JENNY HERBERT FINDS OUT MORE ABOUT HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND A SPECIAL EXHIBITION THAT WILL BRING THE LEGEND BACK TO LIFE.

In 1863, a young Alfred Howitt arrived in Omeo to take up the role of Police Magistrate and Gold Warden. Today, his name is sprinkled across Gippsland: Mount Howitt, Howitt Trail, Howitt Park, Howitt streets and roads and halls, but the man himself is largely forgotten.

To mark the 150th anniversary of his arrival in Gippsland, the East Gippsland Historical Society is bringing the man's legend back to life. Although Howitt's lasting legacies are in the fields of anthropology, geology and botany, he was also the very capable explorer who discovered the fate of Burke and Wills.

Burke had divided his party and pushed north to cross the continent to the Gulf of Carpentaria only to meet grief when he, Wills and John King returned to the Coopers Creek depot. Howitt's Contingency party discovered Burke's and Wills' bodies, and the survivor King, with remarkable speed and efficiency.

Howitt, already an experienced explorer, was the opposite of the rash, inexperienced Burke. He travelled light; Burke took twenty-three tonnes of paraphernalia. He was level-headed; Burke was mercurial. And Howitt was an outstanding leader.

He'd learnt his skills when looking for pastureland in the outback north of Adelaide, and in the rugged country of north Gippsland, prospecting for gold for the Victorian government. The first gold rush was slowing and the government was keen for another rush to replenish its coffers. Despite the rough country without tracks or maps Howitt's party found gold at Crooked River.

After returning to Melbourne from the Burke and Wills' mission, Howitt was sent back to the desert to retrieve the explorers' bones, and to explore and map the country between Coopers Creek and Adelaide.

From these experiences he came to love the land of his adopted country (he was born into a Quaker family in Nottingham, England). He developed an interest in geology and his association with indigenous people began a lifetime's quest to research and document their customs. Like most colonists of the time, Howitt believed that the Aboriginal race was destined for extinction, however he was exceptional in his belief in the value of recording their traditions before they were lost.

While a magistrate in Omeo, Howitt married Maria Boothby. To do so, he mounted his horse in Omeo and rode, in the middle of winter, all the way to Adelaide for his wedding. Then he brought the young woman home – from all of the society and culture that 1860s Adelaide could offer, to the slab huts, mud and miners of a remote, tiny high country town.

Having proven himself as an accomplished in magistrate duties as exploration, Howitt was assigned a larger area of Gippsland and in 1866 moved to Bairnsdale. He purchased land on the Mitchell River and called the farm Eastwood. Here he added agriculture to his list of duties and capabilities and was one of the first in the region to grow hops. A hop-growing Quaker! He was rapidly shedding his old ways.

In 1879 he moved again, to live in Sale for ten years.

How did a nation, and especially Gippsland, lose sight of this man and his many outstanding achievements?

A year after arriving in Sale he and his colleague Reverend Fison published a major anthropological work: *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*. This work established him internationally as a serious ethnographer.

Throughout the Gippsland years, Howitt crossed and recrossed the countryside on horseback, reputedly covering up to 7000 miles a year. While riding from one courthouse to another he mapped the region's geology. He would be seen in the saddle, his horse finding its own way while he read such tomes as Rosenbusch's *Mikroskopische Physiographie der Mineralien und Gesteine*. In the original German!

He also collected and classified botanical samples and shared his interest with his friend Ferdinand von Mueller, Victoria's first government botanist who established the National Herbarium of Victoria.

Another friend of Howitt's was the artist Eugene von Guerard. It's tempting to imagine these three men with their shared interests in botany, geology and anthropology, composing together the story of this ancient land. All Europeans by birth, how open minded they had to be to see past the influences of their heritage, to learn to look at the landscape afresh, and come to terms with its difference and to recognise its unique, if bizarre, beauty.

Howitt's career prospered and in 1889 he left Gippsland for Melbourne to become the Acting Secretary for Mines. This appointment was followed by Secretary for Mines and Water Supply, Audit Commissioner and member of the Public Service Board.

Howitt published prolifically across the subjects of botany, geology and anthropology. Perhaps his most important and lasting contribution is *The Native Tribes of South-east Australia*, still in print today, published by the Aboriginal Studies Press and used as a resource in establishing Native Title.

Howitt was an exceptional man who lived a full and energetic life. Although he never received formal training, his work was recognised through a tellingly diverse range of awards and appointments, Fellow of the Geological Society of London, Fellow of the Linnean Society in NSW, Fellow of the Anthropological Institute of Washington, Fellow of Queen's College at the University of Melbourne, Recipient of the first Mueller medal for scientific research from Australasian Association for the Advancement



A W Howitt (standing) and Rev Fison in the garden of Howitt's home. Photo courtesy of the Centre of Gippsland Studies.

of Science, Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Recipient of honorary doctorates from Cambridge and Melbourne Universities

In 1905, three years before his death, Howitt received the Companion of St Michael and St George in King Edward VII's honours. His friend Reverend Fison wrote to congratulate him: 'The Fison family heartily congratulates St Michael and St George on their new companion.'

How did a nation, and especially Gippsland, lose sight of this man and his many outstanding achievements? In this 150th year since Howitt first came to Gippsland, the East Gippsland Historical Society is making sure that his memory is revived and celebrated.

An exhibition documenting Howitt's life will open at the Bairnsdale Museum and Resource Centre (40 Macarthur Street, Bairnsdale) on 10 March and will run until 14 July. The exhibition will be launched on Thursday 7 March from 6 pm at Howitt Hall, Lucknow Primary School, Eastwood, to which the public is warmly invited.

The following week, on Friday 15 March, 7 pm, there will be a re-enactment of a Howitt court trial, again at Howitt Hall, with local legal identities taking the leading roles and members of the jury selected from the audience. The criminal and his or her crime will be a surprise! Tickets \$15 at the door, include a glass of wine.

Other events are planned during the months of the exhibition. For more details call (03) 5152 6363 or visit www.eastgippslandhistoricalsociety.com