

The John Wilson Mystery

P.D. Gardner*

In May 1954 one of Stratford's (and Gippsland's) most extraordinary characters packed a few clothes and his typewriter, climbed on his bike, rode out of Stratford and disappeared. John Wilson in his thirty years residence in the Stratford, Maffra and the mountain regions of Gippsland achieved far more than most residents could ever hope to achieve in a lifetime. His knowledge of the local history and the environment was deep.

John Wilson came to Gippsland in the late 1920s and, like the mystery that surrounds his disappearance, little is known of his early years beyond the obvious fact that he was well educated. According to Mr. K. Davidson of Stratford Wilson was a soldier during World War One and possibly went with the British Army to India after the war. About 1925 he was in the Northern Territory searching for gold. Almost certainly it was gold prospecting that initially attracted John Wilson to Gippsland. For a number of years in the early 1930s he held an alluvial claim at Upper Maffra West from which he is thought to have extracted a small amount of gold.

The lure of gold also attracted Wilson to the mountains. However this initial impetus soon gave way to the urge for exploration and a profound love of this beautiful rugged country. He immediately felt the need of communicating his feelings, experiences and observations of his journeys in the Gippsland bush. He began writing a series of articles entitled "Among the Mountains of Gippsland" which were published regularly in the Gippsland Times. Nearly 90 articles were published in this series over a period of twenty years.

Articles about Gippsland and the mountains were also published in other journals including the Leader, the Maffra Spectator and the Melbourne Herald. Wilson was an energetic writer and besides his mountain commentary wrote both poetry and history. Some of his poetry was published but it was his historical work that was of most interest then and now. It is this work which continues to influence Gippsland historians.

At the time he began writing his historical articles there was little published material on Gippsland available. This combined with the fact that he had no preconceived notions of local history made his writing both original and exciting. It therefore must have come as a shock for many Gippslanders to read in 1947 that what they had learned in school about local history was not true and that Angus McMillan was not the discoverer of Gippsland. To help alleviate this shock Wilson wrote:

"In several of these historical articles the traditional history of Gippsland has been attacked, and there is no doubt that the bogie of the cairns will appear before the eyes of many readers, but the ghost can be laid and need not haunt the imagination or shock the intelligence into stark inactivity."

By the 'bogie of the cairns' Wilson was referring to the stone cairns scattered throughout Gippsland commemorating Angus McMillan as the discoverer of Gippsland. Many of these were incorrect and factual errors can be found on the cairns at Omeo, Swifts Creek, Ensay and Bruthen amongst others. These cairns incorrectly attribute European priority to McMillan without acknowledging that a nephew of Macfarlane, Walter Mitchell had preceded him. The 'ghost' that 'can be laid' was the myth of Angus McMillan as the discoverer of Gippsland.

In his articles and in his *Official History of the Avon Shire 1840-1900* (Shire Hall, Stratford, 1951) Wilson championed the cause of the little known bushman and explorer Mitchell:

“Mr. Mitchell was one of the most competent explorers to enter Gippsland. Without any of the fumbling of Mr. McMillan who failed to get anywhere on his first attempt, and on the second attempt failed to find the Tongio Gap, even with Mr Mitchell's instructions in his pocket. Mr Mitchell took the best route through the rugged ranges into the plains and returned to his base without any fuss or bother at all.”

Aside from his writing in which he excelled John Wilson was a competent artist and musician. But like many of the old bushman and prospectors who led isolated lives Wilson appeared to many as an eccentric. Few could understand the whimsical manner in which the pipe smoking former prospector changed his church allegiances as others would change their socks. Few could understand why the man in the cottage on Blackall Creek would compose and sing his own hymns. And almost everyone was curious as to how the man with no obvious income had managed to live all these years.

The early fifties were busy years for the ageing John Wilson. His history of the Avon Shire was completed and published in 1951 and about this time he married a woman from the Maffra district. The marriage was short lived. In March 1954 the Queen visited Gippsland with her plane landing in the Avon shire – two months later John Wilson was gone.

The disappearance of John Wilson may eventually be solved. If he is still alive today (ie c.1978) then he must be approaching 80 years of age. It is possible that he felt a yearning for his birthplace and returned to England but the manner of his disappearance was certainly strange. He had presented a copy of his manuscript “Among the mountains...” series to Mr E. Bock, then Avon Shire secretary and a competent local historian. He had also presented a beautifully neat scrapbook to Mr Keith Davidson, then President of the Avon Shire. But when he left he did so without the slightest indication of his intentions, the food scraps and half used pickle jars remained on the kitchen table in his Blackall Creek cottage.

Passing time has added to the mystery of Wilson's disappearance. The local history society wishes to publish in book form the 'Among the Mountains of Gippsland' series, but is unable to do so until the author is located or his fate is established. Also whilst his scrapbook and manuscript are preserved and in good keeping his notes and diaries from his bush trips, his article drafts and historical notes, his correspondence and his poetry are missing.

The legacies of the eccentric prospector bushman of Blackall Creek to Gippsland are considerable. *The Official History of the Avon Shire* is in the process of being republished but

the plans of the local history society remain unfulfilled pending a solution to the author's disappearance. And the 'ghost' of McMillan and the 'bogie of the cairns' has yet to 'be laid'. Without the missing historical notes of John Wilson the 'laying' of this 'ghost' may take a great deal longer than he originally expected. And in attempting to lay one ghost John Wilson has unwittingly created a few of his own.

* This unpublished article was written about 1978 and recently rediscovered by the author whilst going through old boxes of notes and is published here with minor changes. It may now have been published in the Stratford Town Crier in 2014 but if so remains unsighted.