

# **GLIMPSES INTO THE PAST**

## **Flood and Fire**

**By H.A. Nichols**

“I was somewhat flattered to learn that the State Meteorologist had read my remarks in regard to a record rain for this State having fallen in September, 1822, and asking for fuller information. Much of one’s writing depends in part on remembered conversations with one’s parents or others 50 or more years ago aided by documents, public and private, available to anyone who has patience enough to read and record.

The record rain of 1822 was often referred to by the early settlers, whose memories treasured notable events much more clearly than do people in these later years. In those days letters were rarities, newspapers barely seen, and books comparatively scarce. To-day we get the world events served up at our breakfast table (per medium “The Advocate”) and great happenings follow so quickly on each other that none remain much more than a “nine days wonder.”

Now, all through the 30 years following 1822 the great floods of that year were frequently spoken of among the settlers until in 1851 “Black Thursday” provided everyone with a topic of conversation that was an evergreen for at least another 30 years.

In regard to that 1822 flood I have through the kindness of the Warden of Table Cape, Mr. D.T. Jones, received a confirmation of how this rain was regarded during the after years. Mr. Jones loaned me “Woods’ Royal Southern Kalendar” of 1850. This is quite a large volume, dealing with the Southern Hemisphere for the first 50 years of last century, including India, Ceylon, South Africa, and all the islands south of the Equator, and for the month of September for the years 1800 to 1850 the only reference to any event in Tasmania is that of this particular rainfall. It reads as follows “September 24: Great fall of rain in V.D. Land lasted three weeks, 1822.” This is, indeed; a strong confirmation of my previous remarks on that event.

While dealing with floods it may be added that on Feb. 26, 1854, great floods occurred in Hobart Town, and the poor residents of Wapping and the neighbourhood were washed out of their homes by the overflowing of the Hobart Rivulet. This rivulet is carried along a covered way now, out of its original course, and knowing of certain serious floods of last century I will be interested in watching the result if ever another extraordinary rainfall occurs during my day.

## **BLACK THURSDAY**

What boy or girl of 60 years ago has not recollections of the wonderful, awesome Black Thursday stories told to him or her by their parents.

Over in the then young colony of Victoria at the end of 1850 the weather was hot and dry. The previous winter had been mild and the spring showery and prolific of growth. On the vast plains grass was abundant: in the forests there was plenty of fuel. During January, 1851 the abundant herbage became dry until early in February fires broke out in various directions, and on the 5<sup>th</sup> spread with amazing rapidity, and on Thursday, 6<sup>th</sup>, culminated in a catastrophe of such magnitude that the tales of deaths of men, women and stock that shortly reached Tasmania shocked everyone. Victoria

was largely settled from Tasmania, and but few of the Tasmanian pastoralists of that day but found some relative had been either lost or more or less ruined. On vessels over 200 miles out at sea darkness settled early on Thursday afternoon, and ashes fell thickly on the decks. The crews believed the world was burning up, though some were of opinion that some new and gigantic eruption had broke out, and for a time few indeed believed it could only be a bush fire.

In Tasmania darkness settled over the land, burned fragments fell thickly, and fowls went to roost. People had to light candles even in Oatlands and places further south.

Hundreds of people left all work and prayed for hours, believing the world was coming to an end, and the relief at daylight the next day when the sun rose was to them all a sensation of and cause for untold thankfulness. In Fenton's History there is a very vivid description of the way this fire overshadowed Hamilton-on -Forth.

Some of the experiences of Victorian settlers during that week were more sensational than any fiction ever penned. How men, women, children, cattle, horses, kangaroo and snakes crowded into the same waterholes and the dogs forgot to kill, and the kangaroos forgot their fear of men and dogs; how men rode madly for life until both horse and rider fell to be destroyed by the pursuing flames. Eye-witnesses who survived tell how on the timber country the fires leaped across mile-wide gullies and rose above the tallest trees. Some settlers saved their lives and most of their stock on the open country by the old-time Indian method of lighting fires that quickly spread with the wind and then following on to the hot ashes.

It was just a few weeks after this catastrophe that the news filtered through of the discovery of gold at Bathurst and not a very long time before the gold rush to Ballarat, etc., startled the world. Quite half of the free male population of Tasmania rushed across Bass Strait, and Melbourne grey like a big mushroom. How many settlers in Victoria found themselves without any help, and some of them sold their stations at any price to get to the diggings themselves, has formed the ground work for any number of novels. One man in Victoria (an ex-Tasmanian) sold his horses, sheep and cattle at 2/6 per head and gave his station in, probably regretting his action once only, and that was ever after. To the settlers along the north of Tasmania the gold miles in Victoria gave a great impetus. The Tamar had for years been a very active port for shipment of stock to Victoria right along from 1835, when on August 23 J.P. Fawkner and party from Launceston sailed up the Yarra and encamped where Melbourne now stands. Who can say Australia has not progressed when in a little over 80 years marvellous Melbourne, first founded by Tasmanian settlers, has become one of the foremost cities of the world! How soon, indeed, did the paling structure, built from N.W. Coast palings, give rise to the stately edifices now adorning Flinders street. The old splitters who sent earthwards the beautiful timber trees around Don and Leven in those days never dreamed of the early changes to take place across the water.

Some time I will give an estimate of the quantities of palings and posts and rails shipped in those days when the song of the axe was almost the only song in the N.W. forests save the birds and where now are to be found our richest farms."

*Advocate* 17 October 1923.