1813: THE FOUR SUMPTER HORSES OF BLAXLAND, LAWSON AND WENTWORTH

A talk to the Mt. Wilson & Mt. Irvine Historical Society, 10 November 2012 by John Low

When the expedition led by Gregory Blaxland (1778-1853) William Lawson (1774-1850) and William Charles Wentworth (1790-1872) left Blaxland's South Creek farm on 11 May 1813 in quest of a passage over the Blue Mountains, their departure was noted quietly in a paragraph on page 2 of the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* several days later. Noting their spirit and determination, the writer also made special mention of their 'prudentially taking with them four sumpter horses' (Anonymous 1813).

The *Gazette* writer's particular comment on the decision to take packhorses is interesting. As the 'grand narrative of the Blue Mountains crossing'(Lavelle 2012, p. 28) developed over the next two hundred years the four horses, along with the four 'servants' and five dogs, slipped into the background, becoming mere decorative appendages to the main story of the 'dauntless three'. Little thought and few words have been given to them.

Was the decision to take the horses in fact a prudent one, introducing, as explorer/historian Ernest Favenc argued in 1888, a new era of exploration in which horses would play a significant part or is bushwalker/historian Ross Brownscombe (2004, p. 223), writing over a century later, correct in concluding that the decision to take them was a bad, even stupid, one with the horses proving more of a hindrance than a help? The four sumpter horses deserve reflection and offer an interesting angle from which to approach the 1813 expedition.

### The horse in earlier Blue Mountains exploration: George Caley

While Francis Barrallier (1773-1853) was toying briefly with the idea of using horses as part of a supply chain to provision his November 1802 expedition (Macqueen 1993, pp. 69-70), the botanist George Caley (1770-1829), son of a Yorkshire horse dealer, was also giving thought to the role horses could play in exploration. His correspondence with his employer Sir Joseph Banks gives some insight into his thinking. Writing to Banks on 1 November 1802, a month or so after Barrallier had made a reconnaissance journey using two horses, Caley made the following remarks:

[Barrallier] is upon the eve of setting off again with a larger party, and instead of horses he takes out two bullocks. ... I am so vain as to think that with another man besides myself, and a horse, that I can go further than what this party will, provided the weather is favourable. I have often lamented that being bred a horseman had been all lost labour in forwarding a pursuit in natural history, but at length I am undeceived, for as a traveller in this country it has given me an advantage over all others. When Mr. Barrelier [sic] returned I perceived his loss for the want of the like. (Macqueen 1993, pp. 70-71; Andrews 1984, p. 15)

Again, on 8 November 1802, he continued:

Mr.Barrelier [sic] set off on his journey on Thursday last. They were 10 or 11 in number, and all had guns [and] a cart with two bullocks. This party, I understand, are likely to go a great way if we credit the report; but in my opinion it will fail, for they cannot go above 2 days' journey before they must part with the bullocks, and then every man must carry his own provisions, and he must be a very strong man that can carry 20lb extra of his gun, ammunition, etc. They talk of making stations in order to have supplies forwarded. Upon a horse I can take 100lb of food extra of all other articles for my pursuit. I am not afraid to travel by having only another person besides myself. By this I have not the encumbrance that will always be found in a large party. (Macqueen 1993, p. 71)

Caley's observations proved accurate for, having established his first depot at Nattai, Barrallier's planned supply line of depots failed to materialise and he and his men returned 'footsore and short of provisions'(Richards 1979, p.20) on 2 December.
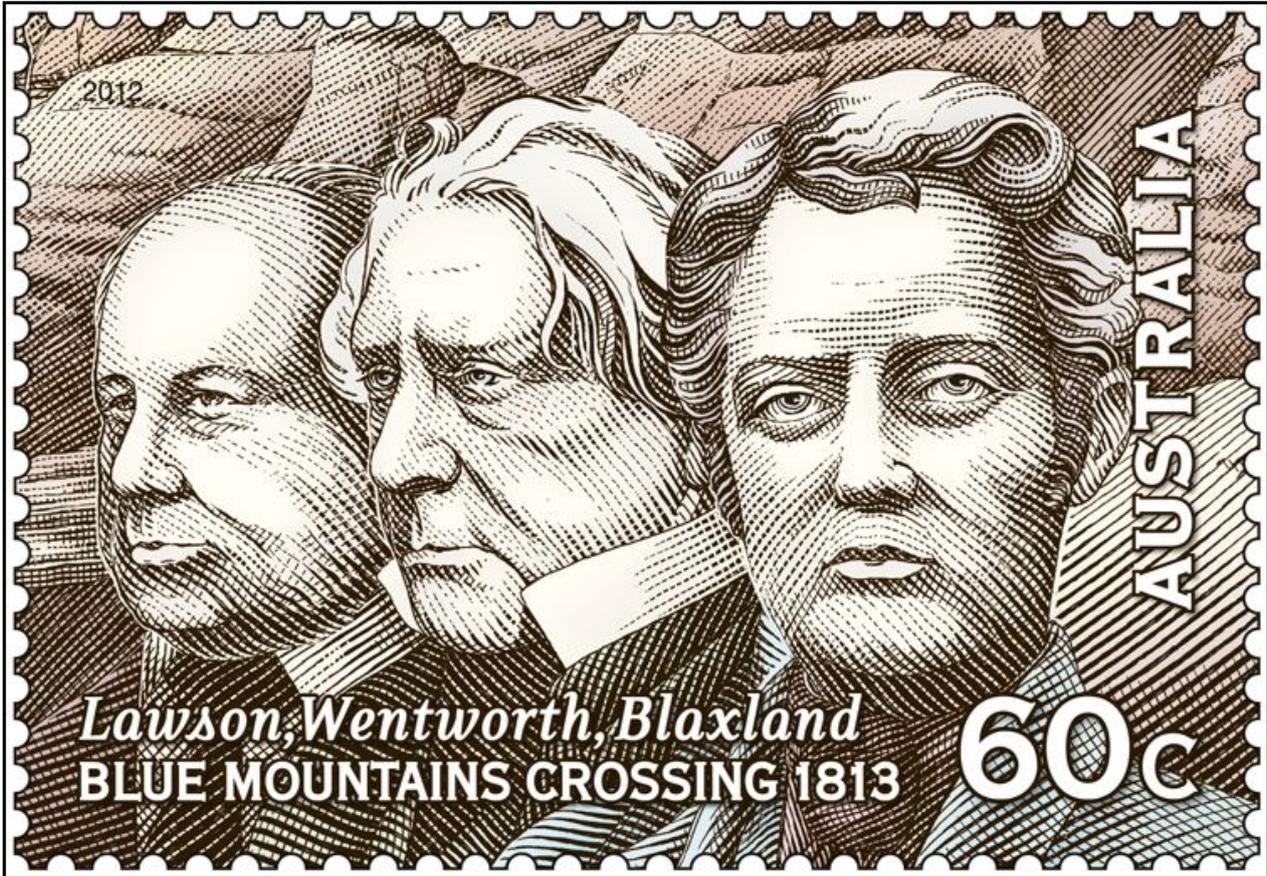
A stamp released by Australia Post on 3 July 2012 as part of the Inland Explorers release

Subsequent letters to Banks suggest Caley may have made a number of Blue Mountains excursions using a horse, though only one appears to have been documented. Lasting nine days, it occurred in February 1804 when he crossed the upper Nepean River and journeyed some distance into the mountains with one companion and a mare laden with provisions (Andrews 1984, p. 15). This was not, however, 'the grand mountain journey' (Andrews 1984, p. 15) he was dreaming of and about which he had written to Banks almost a year earlier, on 13 May 1803, telling him that 'next spring I mean to visit the ruggedest part of the Blue Mountains' and adding that 'this will be a tract impassable for to take a horse'.

His opinion on the horse's place in his own plans had clearly changed and the February 1804 expedition (and any others he may have made) did not persuade him otherwise for on 18 August 1804 he informed Banks: 'In the course of a month I think of going on a journey into the mountains for about a fortnight ... I have already travelled the ground that can be done with a horse.'(Andrews 1984, p. 16) And again on 1 November 1804: 'Upon the eve of going a journey ... Having tried every part to the westward for to penetrate into the interior with a horse but always having been prevented by very barren rocky ground I have now fitted myself out as well as the colony will afford for such a journey'. (Andrews 1984, p. 17)

A day or two later Caley set out with three companions and a dog, equipped for about 20 days. In his journal he listed in some detail his provisions: biscuits, flour, rice, portable soup, pork, sugar, tea, 'two fusees (small muskets] and a brace of large pistols',20lb of ammunition, cooking utensils, compass, brush clearing implements etc. The total weight to be divided between Caley and his companions must have been at least 250lband this was unlikely to have lightened as the expedition progressed because 'as the food diminished the natural history collections took its place'. (Andrews 1984, pp. 101-102)

When he returned, his comments to Banks (16 December 1804) on the conditions he encountered were blunt:

My journey to the Carmarthen Mountains was a very rough one. I was out three weeks which was as long as I was able to abide for the want of provisions. The roughness of the country I found beyond description. I cannot give you a more expressive idea than travelling over the tops of the houses in a town. (Andrews 1984, p. 24)

Such conditions certainly seemed to confirm the unpracticality of a horse.
But could Caley have later changed his mind again? Though his expedition got bogged down in the Devil's Wilderness and failed to re-find the ridge that would have seen them into the Hartley Valley, Caley did report from the top of Mount Banks that 'to the eastward very high land is seen' (Andrews 1984, p. 79) and found cause to reflect upon the possibilities such high land might offer for easier travelling (Andrews 1984, p. 81; Cunningham 1996, p. 118). Could he have thought more on this and not only seen the potential of the ridges but also renewed his faith in the value of the horse?

Though there is no evidence to substantiate it, is it possible that Caley met with Gregory Blaxland and discussed Blue Mountains exploration prior to his departure for England in May 1810?(Richards 1979, pp. 38-39) Sir Joseph Banks, after all, was a mutual friend(Blaxland, in fact, sent Banks a copy of his Blue Mountains journal in 1816). Blaxland also mentioned Caley by name in correspondence with Commissioner J. T. Bigge in 1819, though including him with others who had believed that a Blue Mountains crossing was impossible (Richards 1979, p. 175). While this might suggest that if indeed he had met with Caley their discussion was unfruitful, it should be remembered that by 1819 Blaxland was nursing a grudge against Macquarie. He was feeling badly treated and ignored and was playing up his achievements to Bigge, a ready listener to complaints against the Governor.

It has also been suggested that Caley met with William Lawson while the latter was in London between 1810 and 1812ostensibly to act as a witness at the court martial of his superior officer, Lt. Col. George Johnston. The anonymous writer 'X.Y.Z', probably the tobacco merchant Thomas Horton James (Havard 1953), believed this and wrote in March 1827, in an article for Wentworth's *The Australian*, that: 'no sooner [had Lawson] arrived from London where he had met Mr. Caley, and frequently discussed the practicability of a mountain pass, than he determined to set out on the expedition to find a passage over the Blue Mountains'. (Jervis 1954, pp. 74-75)While there is no record of Lawson ever confirming James' statement, nor did he deny it.

Despite the lack of direct evidence, it is still interesting to speculate that, if such meetings did take place, issues such as ridges and packhorses may well have been discussed. For Caley's part, it is clear that he never lost his interest in the Blue Mountains, as can be seen from a letter he wrote to his friend George Suttor on 10 August 1812: 'Oh! Botany Bay! I wish I could forget you! But this will never be the case as long as your mountains haunt me.' (Webb 2009, p. 80)

The decision to take horses in 1813
By 1813 Gregory Blaxland, his pastoral concerns under pressure from the deteriorating conditions on the coastal plain, had clearly been thinking for some time on the possibilities of expansion and had made several earlier trips into the Mountains. The first began as a picnic excursion by boat up the Nepean River with Governor and Mrs. Macquarie in November 1810, during which they ventured into the gorge of the Warragamba and would almost certainly have discussed the possibilities of a crossing. Blaxland was clearly enthused and made a quick return journey a few days later and soon followed this up with a further more rigorous exploration that strengthened his conviction 'that it was practicable to find a passage over the mountains ... by the ridge which appeared to run westward, between the Warragomby and the River Grose' (Blaxland 1823, p. 65). This latter expedition was undertaken in the company of 'three European servants and two natives, with a horse to carry provisions and other necessaries' (Blaxland 1823, p. 65).

Blaxland was clearly aware that the length of time an expedition could stay out depended on the provisions it was able to take and that, if on foot, a leader had to balance what each man could carry against his ability to still manage the hard graft of walking and clearing a path. This was certainly a problem that had

plagued earlier expeditions and his use of a horse in his 1810 excursion shows that he was giving practical thought to the matter. Though discouraging him, mistakenly perhaps, from the use of Aboriginal guides (he felt their geographical knowledge was too limited; Blaxland 1823, p. 65), he seems to have been satisfied with the role of the horse and when the main expedition left his farm at South Creek on 11 May 1813 it was equipped with 'four horses laden with provisions, ammunition, and other necessaries' (Blaxland 1823, p. 67).

It has been suggested by Ross Brownscombe (one of the few historians to give the subject more than a passing thought) that the decision to employ horses in 1813 was a bad one, made simply on the basis of class, that this was 'a *gentleman's excursion* and unlike their predecessors, the *dauntless three* had no intention of carrying their own provisions.' (Brownscombe 2004, p. 223) This seems to me, however, too cynical and shallow a judgement, down-playing the seriousness of their intent and ignoring their obvious willingness to embrace hard physical labour. Colonial gentry and driven by economic self-interest, certainly, they were nevertheless, as Lawson's journal in particular makes clear (Lawson 1813), prepared to share the heavy work of exploring and cutting a path with their 'servants'. The horses seem to have been a deliberate strategy to save all five members of the expedition from the extra burden of carrying their arms and supplies.

Brownscombe states further that the decision to take horses was 'not very smart because most of the difficulties the party encountered, particularly the hand cutting of the track ... , were the result of the horses' inability to make their way unaided through the thick bush' (Brownscombe 2004, p. 223). While the explorers, as we shall see, did encounter difficulties with the horses this judgement again seems too hasty and misses what I think was another important reason for taking the horses, other than as beasts of burden. The explorers' journals make it clear that, unlike Caley, they were not primarily interested in 'going farther than any person has yet been' (Andrews 1984, pp. 17-18)but, rather, in finding a practical route across the Mountains along which both men and livestock could travel. By taking the horses they were proving that it was possible to get animals over the mountains and, to this end, the labour invested in cutting a path was a necessary imposition. Towards the end of his account, while admitting that they had not completely crossed the Mountains, this was clearly what Wentworth was saying when he wrote (using 'cattle' in its older and broader sense): 'we have at all events proved that they are traversable and that too, by cattle – a circumstance which ... has been hitherto deemed impossible'. (Wentworth 1813, p. 114)

The horse in Australia 1788-1813

When the First Fleet arrived in early 1788 nine horses, purchased from the Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope and primarily of Spanish origin, were landed: one stallion, three mares and three 'colts' (1 male, 2 female) plus a further stallion and mare bought privately by two of the marine officers (Binney 2005, p. xvi).Though a government stud was soon established, the authorities showed little interest in horse breeding in the early years and the better quality Arab, Thoroughbred and Jennet horses that followed were imported largely through the commercial enterprise of the officers of the NSW Corps and various wealthy free settlers ('exclusives').

Image source: wikimedia.org

The importation of large numbers of Spanish Jennet mares during the 1790s and the fact that Arab stallions dominated breeding up to the 1820smeant that the colony's horse population by 1813 was primarily composed of Arab and Arab-cross horses. Such strong Arab bloodlines, combined with the freedom of open pasture lands, began to produce a local horse of hardy character, strong and with good wind and increasingly well suited to the local environment (Kennedy 1992, pp. 12, 80, 84). Even Commissioner J. T. Bigge, loaned a saddle horse by John Macarthur during his time in NSW 1819-1821, was impressed with the quality, endurance and speed of the colonial bred horses (Kennedy 1992, p. 85). The success of early horse breeders such as John Macarthur, D'Arcy Wentworth and Samuel Marsden was founded on Jennet mares and Arab stallions (Kennedy 1992, p. 83).

Because the business practices of these 'privateers' were not always strictly legal and they sometimes operated without official approval it is difficult to track exact numbers of horses in the colony. Illegal imports did not always appear in official census figures (Binney 2005, pp. xvii-xviii).By the early years of the 19th century, however, there were probably something like 300 horses in the colony, most owned by officers and wealthy free settlers. Horses were expensive and the preserve of 'gentlemen'. Their number had increased to almost 1000 by 1808 and by 1815 numbered close to 2,500. (Kennedy1992, pp. 13-14). The first officially sanctioned race meeting was held at Hyde Park in October 1810 (at which Wentworth Jnr. rode one of his father's horses to victory) and by the time Blaxland's party set out for the mountains horse breeding was a minor (compared to cattle and sheep) but established part of pastoral activity on the Cumberland Plain.

All three of the explorers owned horses and large pastoral properties. Blaxland had Brush Farm and Lee Home at Eastwood and South Creek respectively, Lawson Veteran Hall at Prospect, and Wentworth Vermont on the Nepean River. On his first small property acquired at Concord in 1807, Lawson had kept six horses and his interest continued when he established Veteran Hall. Following his retirement from the military in 1824 he became a significant player on the Australian equine scene, importing a number of stallions and breeding and racing numerous horses. (Binney 2005, pp. 35-38) His horses were also prized by the emerging coaching services. In an 1826 memorial written to Earl Bathurst of the Colonial Department he claimed to own 70 horses (along with 9,000 sheep and 1500 head of cattle) (Magannnd., p. 68)

The four sumpter horses chosen in 1813 were most probably locally bred, selected with an eye for fitness and stamina and, in light of the above, primarily of Arab descent. They were the precursors of a great equine heritage, for the pasture lands to which they helped open a passage would become, with increased thoroughbred imports, a nursery for that hardy Australian stock horse, the Waler, a horse that later found its place in both the 'bush' ('Man from Snowy River') and 'Anzac' (Australian Light Horse) legends. (Yarwood 1989, p. 17)

The performance of the horses during the expedition
Though a detailed list of the expedition's provisions is not available, a list of sorts can be made by using the journals themselves and the list of Caley's provisions mentioned earlier. In this way some idea can be formed of what the horses were required to carry.
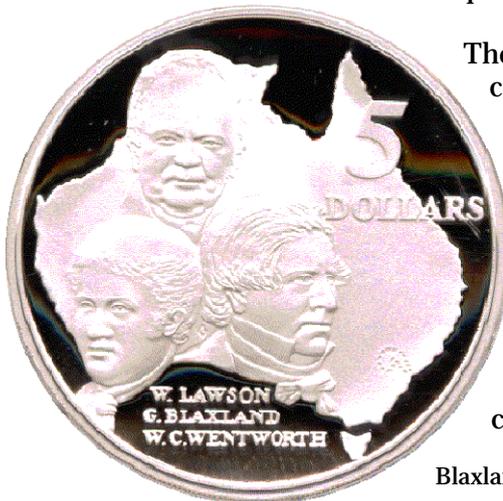
The expedition took seven muskets plus ammunition, tents, brush clearing implements (hooks, hoes etc.), compasses and cooking utensils. Their food included salt meat and flour and probably, like Caley, also a supply of biscuit, rice, sugar and tea and perhaps even the portable soup which Caley valued greatly. With seven men, the weight of these provisions would have been considerably greater than Caley's. Five dogs and four horses, of course, also had to be fed and while the odd bird or wallaby might have helped feed the dogs, as we shall see the natural fodder available for the horses proved inadequate and had to be cut where available and added to their load. The horses were not burdened, though, with a growing collection of natural history specimens!

Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth depicted on a $5 coin released in 1993

There is no doubt that the loaded horses experienced problems with the mountain terrain and sometimes stumbled and fell. (May 13, 19, June 4) They 'travelled very awkwardly', wrote Blaxland, 'being much incommoded by the small trees and brush at places and the ridge they followed being very crooked and intricate between the gullies' (Blaxland 1813, p. 3). The ground too, often with sharp, jutting rocks and loose stones that made ascents and descents especially difficult, severely tested the horses.

The general method of proceeding was to cut a path through the bush and then bring the loaded horses forward. A camp would be established and a couple of men left to look after the horses and provisions

while the others cut and cleared a path forward through the often thick brush, returning to camp at the end of the day. The daily distances achieved often varied considerably and sometimes, when the going was especially difficult, they camped in the one spot for a couple of days and were forced to re-walk the same section of cleared track several times. It was tedious and exhausting work.

Several times they were forced to redistribute the horses' loads. Descending Mount York (May 29) they used a hoe to cut a small trench to prevent the horses from slipping, but even so 'the descent was so steep, that the horses could but just keep their footing without a load, so that, for some way, the party were obliged to carry the packages themselves.' (Blaxland 1823, p. 74) On the return ascent of Mount York (June 2) they again had to carry the horses' loads for part of the way and later, towards the end of the return journey (June 4), 'one of them fell this day with its load quite exhausted and was with difficulty got on after putting its load on the other horses' (Blaxland 1813, p. 11).On only one occasion did they actually lose a horse. It got away in the night (May 16) and fortunately they found it again the next morning 'about a mile and a half back' (Blaxland 1813, p. 4).

The most serious and regular problem was lack of feed and water. Good grass was generally difficult to procure on the mountains, reported Blaxland, the horses surviving on 'coarse swamp grass or rush [as] nothing else could be got for them' (Blaxland 1813, p. 5). 'It was', confirmed Wentworth, 'the scanty fare which these swamps afford that enabled our horses to exist.' (Wentworth 1813, p. 112)Where grass and rush was available it had to be cut and loaded on the horses for later use. Occasionally only enough water could be found for the men and the horses went without. Perhaps the decision, unlike the majority of earlier expeditions, to go out in the cooler months was made not only with the men in mind, for there is little doubt that the horses would have fared very badly in the hot, dry months (Brownscombe 2004, p. 223).By the time they got the horses down Mount York 'they were getting into miserable condition' (Blaxland 1813, p. 9). Soon, however, they passed into 'open meadow land clear of trees, covered with grass two and three feet high[and] encamped on the bank of fine stream of water to rest themselves and to refresh their horses' (Blaxland 1813, p. 10).

Feed for horses continued to be a problem even after the road was built and had to be carried until inns offering baiting facilities began to appear in the 1820s and 1830s. It is interesting that many of the feed and water locations identified in 1813 eventually became regular stopping places for stock, then locations for inns and eventually towns. Springwood, Lawson ('Christmas Swamp') and Wentworth Falls, for example, can trace their stories in this way.

So, back to the question posed at the beginning – a wise innovation or a silly mistake? It seems to me that the inclusion of sumpter horses to carry the provisions and equipment was a carefully planned one made in conjunction with the strategy of tracking along the ridge and that their presence was also important in demonstrating the practicality of moving livestock along the route the expedition travelled. The horses certainly experienced difficulties but they did cope and, despite all the problems, all four returned safely, proving the quality of locally bred horses and their ability to survive in inhospitable terrain.

As suggested by Favenc, this *was* the horse's first real test in inland exploration and did in a sense begin what he termed 'a new phase of exploration' (Favenc 1888, Ch. 2). George Evans, sent out by Governor Macquarie to confirm and survey the newly discovered route later that year, saw no reason not to follow Blaxland's example and also included horses in his party. After the road was built, Bathurst established and exploration extended further inland, horses became a common component of exploratory expeditions. John Oxley in his exploration of the Lachlan River in 1817 took 13 horses, while explorers like Parr, Howe and Gregory Blaxland's nephew John who later (1817-1824) explored the northern Blue Mountains also made use of horses. (Macqueen 2004) When Melbourne folk were confronted with the extraordinary sight of Burke and Wills leaving that city in 1860 with 28 horses and 24 camels, horses (and other baggage animals) were well and truly taking 'their share of sacrificing their lives in the cause' (Favenc 1888, Ch. 2).

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