

Ben Esgate – a true mountain bushman



Ben and Dot Butler

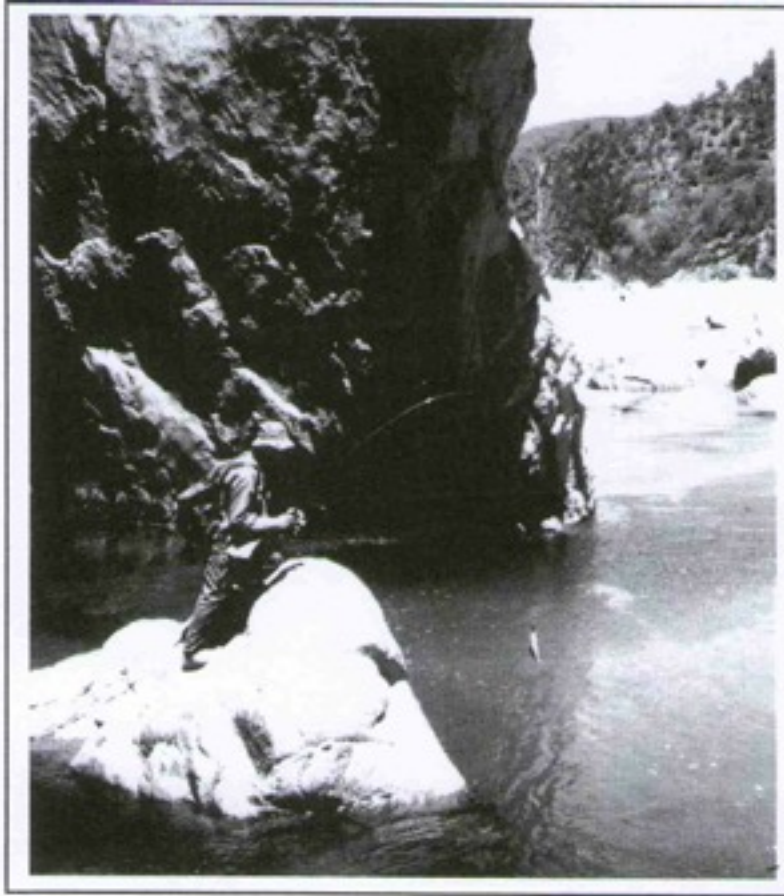
Ben Esgate was born in Katoomba in 1914. He appeared destined for the bush as his older brothers encouraged him to go bushwalking with them not long after he could walk so by the age of 5 he was a confirmed bushwalker.

Living in the Blue Mountains back in those days it seemed so natural for Ben to not just be in the bush but of the bush. Ben and his brothers went on many a sortie and developed between them a unique calling system which it was reputed could be recognised a ½ mile through thick vegetation. The sound, as distinctive in its way as the SBW “dayo” enabled the receiver to identify it as coming from one of his brothers.

Ben did a lot of walking in the Kanimbla and Megalong valleys and had an intimate knowledge of the Cox River where he camped many times as he was growing up. Ben became an expert in bushcraft through these forays. He became friends with the Carlon family and with them explored the area



**Ben with one of his “babies” at old station, Jenolan River, in March 1971.
A self portrait.**



One of Ben's favorite areas was around the junction of Megalong Creek and the Cox's River. This photo shows Ben at one of his regular fishing holes at the "Golden Gates", a dyke of pink granite crossing the Cox. Photo by Don Matthews.

later known as the Wild Dog Mountains with the first recorded decent down White Dog ridge. Ben also explored Narrow Neck and found a previously unknown pass off Narrow neck down into the valleys.

In 1927 Ben had to leave school to work and as the depression years hit families hard Ben was able to compliment the family's food with bush tucker and rabbits as well as wild honey from bee nests. Ben's interest in bees led to him starting up a bee farm. This was just one of many occupations which also included working for his keep at the Carlons and being a groundsman at the Hydro Majestic Hotel at Medlow Bath. Ben married Lillian in 1936. The honeymoon was naturally a camp in the Megalong on the Cox River.

Ben found he had a natural bent as a builder which developed into his career. Later very notable achievements were the building of the original cable car for the Katoomba Skyway (which kept operating until 2004), assistance in the scenic railway design, building the Katoomba revolving restaurant overlooking the Jamieson Valley and advising on the waterproofing of the Sydney Opera House.

In 1942 Ben joined the Volunteer Defence Corps (VDC) whose job it was to prepare the country to defend any invasion. Ben's VDC war effort was the "job from heaven", to explore the bush bounded by Mt Hay to the north, Mt Solitary to the south, Kings Tableland to the east and Jenolan to the west. The idea was to find alternative access that could be used between the coast and tablelands that avoided the obvious known routes such as the great Western Highway, and also to assist downed airmen. Such knowledge would also be invaluable in any guerilla war in case of invasion. There was no better man for this job.

After the war Ben became captain of the Katoomba Bush fire brigade in 1948 and built a reputation as an expert on bushfires and bushfire survival techniques. He also

became prominent in rescuing people that became lost in the bush. No one else could match Ben's extensive local knowledge of the mountains so he was the person most likely to find any lost souls.

Ben loved his dogs and hated foxes. Accordingly one of his dogs almost always accompanied him on his walks and almost always he had a gun for the foxes. But to be one of Ben's dogs wasn't a normal dog's life as they had to learn to go where Ben went including steep mountain passes and even negotiating some vertical cliffs. In fact, Ben built specially designed spikes so he could carry his dogs. A keen fisher, Ben introduced trout into the Cox River over many years after world war 2.

Ben's association with SBW began in the 1950s. He became very active in the club and led many epic walks in the country he knew so well. A typical walk would have been down Misery Ridge to the Kowmung and then up Landigan Ridge and with many side trips to little known spots.

Ben left his beloved mountains in 1960 to live in Berowra. He often walked with Don Matthews and other close friends. Some trips were to check on Ben's beehives and others were to discover new country.

Ben discovered the deep hole near Mt Mouen that featured in the Gundungurra aboriginal story about the hole. Jim Smith, the Blue Mountain's historian maintains that no one else held the deep understanding about what the Southern Blue Mountains meant to the aborigines and few could interpret their stories about specific physical features.

Ben walked a lot with the club in the 1980's and 90s. A typical walk (and one that Dot Butler went on) was Jenolan – Black Range – Beef Steak Creek – Little River – Table Rock – Gibraltar Peninsula – Murdering Creek – Billy Healy Spur – the Sentinal – Katoomba. Many SBW members that walked with Ben marvelled at his





Ben, Scotty and dinner. Near the junction of Kanangra Creek and the Cox. 1935

bushman's skills, especially in navigating difficult country and getting on without many of the creature comforts sought by the younger bushwalking brigade. Ben left SBW in 1992 as he thought he did not relate to the younger generation of bushwalkers. It is true that his generation, the one that survived the depression, were tough. Ben once, when constructing a house in Leura slipped off a snow ledge (it was a cold winter) on the roof and landed on a rail on his back with such force he bent it down 2 inches. In the fall he hit a concrete wall with his head. They fixed up his skull in hospital but a fractured spine went undiagnosed for 7 years.

Ben died in 2003 and his ashes were buried at Point Pilcher lookout overlooking the Grose Valley, part of the country he loved and knew better than any other white man. Ben's story is told in Jim Smith's biography, "Ben Esgate – the Last of the Cox River Men" (Den Fenella Press; 2006).



Ben in a pensive mood under the Blacks Ladder 1988. Photo courtesy of Mike Reynolds and Ainslie Morris.