

The Strzeleckis

A New Future for the Heartbreak Hills

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INTRODUCTION

Rising out of the undulating country of South Gippsland a broken tangle of hills and razor-backed spurs runs for many kilometres roughly from west to east and gains altitude as it goes.

These are the Strzelecki Ranges which, for a century, have been the site of some of the grimmest struggles Australian pioneers ever faced in their attempts to settle the country; and they have been the scene also of some of the most tragic stories of failure, as men and women broke themselves in their battle with a hostile environment.

Forty years ago it looked as if this was doomed to become a derelict region - a sort of "heartbreak range", where every square kilometre had its story of ruined hopes and shattered dreams. It was a place where for years men and women had been abandoning their homes and farms, leaving behind them almost everything they had worked for.

Today the Strzeleckis are the scene of one of the most exciting reclamation schemes of its kind in the world. Across the hills, once covered with bracken and noxious weeds, new forests are growing. Some of them are already at a stage where they are producing revenue.

In the years to come they will lend a new beauty to this part of Gippsland and provide large quantities of timber for a country that needs it so badly. This is the story of the combined efforts of the Forests Commission, Victoria, and APM Forests Pty Ltd to retrieve the disaster that had fallen on the Strzeleckis and turn their desolated hills into a national asset.

Not all the Strzeleckis fall within this category. At the western end of the ranges the land is less broken, perhaps more fertile and certainly better suited for farming. Here agriculture is successful and many farms and townships thrive. The section of the ranges with which this book deals extends from Mirboo North eastwards to where the hills fall away and merge into the lower lands of central and eastern Gippsland.

These eastern ranges are entirely different in character. Seen from a distance they are dark, almost forbidding. The ridges seem to follow no pattern as they twist and turn, falling away in slopes up to 40 degrees. They have a certain wild beauty, but it is not the beauty of a settled landscape; instead there is about them a feeling of the stark and primitive.

THE EXPLORERS

For thousands of years the ranges had remained a densely forested primeval wilderness. Periodically fires swept through them, destroying the great trees and their understorey. Then the seeds of mountain ash, released by the heat from their hard seed capsules, showered down on the forest floor and with the coming of rain germinated. The young trees forced their way up through the mass of wattles and other quick growing trees and shrubs and re-established the eucalyptus forest in a cycle that went on for countless centuries.

The Aborigines came, and there is the evidence of numerous stone tools and artefacts to show that they hunted and journeyed through the hills. But "the Aborigines never permanently occupied the forested mountain country because of the uncertain food supplies and harsh climate. During spring and summer, however, short trips into the mountains were common." (Land Conservation Council, Report of 1971.) It is probable that this applied to the Strzeleckis as well as to the higher mountains of the Dividing Range.

There are reports of battles between Aborigines of the low country and those who came down from the Strzeleckis. One story was told of how after such a fight the victors ate the flesh of their dead enemies - a report which in view of Aboriginal customs seems highly unlikely to have been true.

Then the white men came. First were the explorers, who found here country different from almost anything else they had seen - tangled mountain forests that seemed to have no way through them, many rivers. It

was a violent contrast to the open plains of western Victoria and the dry land of the northern and western States. In particular they found themselves confronted by the dark ranges that lay between them and their goal on the south coast.

The Strzeleckis took their name from a strange, adventurous man, who came to Australia when past the age of 40, and spent four years exploring, travelling and examining the natural resources of the country. He was Paul Edmund de Strzelecki, who called himself "Count Strzelecki", although he was not of aristocratic descent, his father having been a small landholder in the Prussian-annexed part of Poland. There he was born in 1797. Of his use of the title the Australian Encyclopaedia comments that "his parents, although of good descent, were not titled and his claim seems to have been baseless."

Strzelecki did a short term of military service, which he abandoned early, apparently because of dislike of the strict discipline. As a young man he attempted an elopement with a 15 year-old girl, who was overtaken on the way to their meeting place. Strzelecki left the district, and eventually, after managing an estate for a wealthy aristocrat, left Poland about 1830 for England. In the years that followed he travelled about Britain, North and South America, the South Sea Islands and New Zealand before arriving in Australia in 1839.

In his travels in New South Wales, Strzelecki, who had considerable scientific knowledge, found gold near Hartley and Wellington, but at the request of Governor Gipps, who feared the repercussions on the life of the colony that a rush for gold would bring, he kept his discovery secret. In January 1840, with James MacArthur, he started south from Sydney, intending to reach Port Phillip and go on to Tasmania.

By February 15 he had reached and climbed Mount Kosciusko, which he named after the Polish patriot. From there he pushed south. Crossing the Latrobe River, he entered the dense forests that lay to the south and west. For 22 days he and his party struggled through the bush, at times unable to cover more than three kilometres in a day along the main ridge of the range.

This is basically the route now followed by the Grand Ridge Road. Anyone travelling in comfort along this road today might spare a thought for that little group of hardy men battling their way through the undergrowth - and try to visualise something of the ordeal they suffered.

It was an almost impossible journey. The scrub that linked the great trees towering 90 metres and more above him was so thick that at times the men threw themselves at it in an attempt to break through. The horses had to be left behind, together with the scientific specimens Strzelecki, always a great collector, had gathered.

The party was on the verge of starvation and was saved only by the hunting skill of an Aborigine who was travelling with Strzelecki and who caught koalas, which the group cooked and ate. They reached Westernport on May 12, practically exhausted, their clothes torn to shreds in the terrible scrub.

From there Strzelecki went on to Melbourne and Tasmania and eventually left Australia in 1843 - four years after he arrived. He still had many years of achievement and reward ahead of him. He was given the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographic Society, was made a Companion of the Bath for his relief work in the great Irish Famine, became a Fellow of the Royal Society and was awarded a KCMG.

Through the years Strzelecki remembered Adyna Turno, the girl with whom he had tried to elope. He kept up a correspondence with her in affectionate terms, and 20 years after they were parted they still considered themselves engaged. It is believed they did not meet again until about six years before Strzelecki's death in 1873, when both were ageing and romance was perhaps but a memory.

Strzelecki was not the first discoverer of Gippsland and the immense forests that covered its central and southern areas. That honour belongs to Angus McMillan, who came into Victoria in search of fresh pastures for the growing herds of the developing stations in southern New South Wales. A native of the Isle of Skye, where he was born in 1810, he came to Australia in 1838 with letters of introduction to Captain Lachlan Macalister, who gave him a job on his station in the Goulburn district.

During the drought of the next few months feed on the pastoral stations became short, and McMillan was commissioned to find fresh grazing in the land to the south. Taking with him a chief of the Monaro tribe, Jimmi Gibber, he started south on May 28 1839. In five days he had crossed the Snowy River and was in eastern Victoria.

From a high point in the Buchan district he saw the sea away to the south and the promising country that lay to the south-west. But the fear of his companion that they would be attacked by the blacks in the country that lay ahead forced McMillan to return by way of Omeo to his home station.

A few months later McMillan was back at his task of exploration and trail blazing. He founded a cattle station on the Tambo near Ensay and, in January 1840, from this base he set out down the Tambo with a party of five that included two natives. He broke through to the lowlands near the coast, but was blocked by the Macalister River and returned to Ensay.

By now McMillan had an instruction from his employer to establish no more stations until a way had been found to Corner Inlet. And so he resumed his attempts to find a way to the coast. A series of disappointments followed, created by flooded rivers and the almost impenetrable forests.

But McMillan was no man to give in, and on February 14 1841, he reached the coast of Port Albert, a little to the east of Corner Inlet. In the following May, James Lawrence arrived at Port Albert with a bullock dray he had driven all the way from Sydney.

McMillan was to carry on his pioneering work. He founded a station at Bushy Park, near Stratford, became the first representative for South Gippsland in the Victorian Legislative Assembly and finally accepted a commission to open up tracks from the Crooked River near Dargo to Omeo and Harrietville. He had completed a good deal of the work when he met his death as the result of an accident. McMillan named many of the natural features of Gippsland, including the Nicholson, Mitchell, Avon and Macalister rivers.

THE FIRST SETTLERS

After McMillan and Strzelecki had opened the way, it did not take long for settlement to develop along the river flats and in the more favourable grazing lands of Gippsland. Two separate means of access into the region were opened up. One was the land track from New South Wales to Port Albert along the route McMillan had discovered. The other was by sea from Melbourne to Port Albert.

By 1856 mail was being carried by packhorse from Melbourne to Port Albert by way of Sale. Later a relay of couriers, it is believed, carried mails into the region, each man running about 16 kilometres. An express line of coaches between Sale and Port Albert was opened in 1860. Cobb and Co. came in during the 1860s, and until the building of the railways coaches formed the principal means of transport. The railway was pushed through in the 1870s and 1880s.

But for many years the forbidding terrain and dense forests of the Strzelecki Ranges discouraged attempts to open up the hill country. The early settlers entered the western hills along the two main river valleys, working their way northward up the Tarwin and south along the Morwell River. The first settlement was at Mirboo-on-Tarwin in 1876, and from that stage the land was quickly taken up. By 1887 the Minister for Lands (Mr. Dow) was expressing regret that "the magnificent blue gum ridges throughout south Gippsland have been alienated from the Crown every acre of this land has passed into the hands of private selectors."

The prospect that faced the settlers was an almost terrifying one. Huge trees, 90 metres and more high and with a diameter of two to three metres, covered the hills. Beneath them grew a dense jungle of smaller species - hazel, musk, waffle and others - combined with swordgrass and wiregrass, while in the mountain gullies tree ferns reached a height of 12 metres. Supplejacks twined themselves around the trees, especially on the ridges and among the hazels, sometimes binding areas the size of a house block.

The swordgrass grew up to three metres high, with leaves 25 millimetres wide. As its name implied, its sharp edges could inflict a bad cut, though the pioneers soon learned that a brown, sticky substance which could be found adhering to the bottom when a young blade was pulled up helped to heal the wound quickly.

The growth was so dense that people feared to wander far from their camp sites because of the danger of becoming lost. Some used a compass to keep direction in the scrub. The early settlers, particularly those new to the Australian bush, spoke of the loneliness of the nights in the "great scrub".

The silence would be broken by the howls of dingoes, the growls and grunts of koalas in the trees, the sound of possums fighting, the sneeze of a bandicoot in the undergrowth. And through the dense blackness of the bush floated the lonely calls of mopokes and owls. Neighbours might sometimes not be far away, but their lights could not be seen through the dense forest.

Leeches abounded in the scrub, and in some localities there were scorpions, not to mention snakes. In the wet climate leather turned mouldy, and matches had to be kept in a dry place or they became useless.

Clearing of this vast growth was a formidable task which cost the settlers years of back-breaking work. The original selections were limited to 130 hectares but some held less. Even to clear 40 hectares with axe and saw and shovel - and fire - was an herculean undertaking.

The method they followed as they gained experience was to partly cut through the trees as they worked their way uphill and then at the top of the slope fell one large tree, which by its weight brought down the trees below in a giant, accelerating collapse. This left a tangled, compacted mass of scrub, undergrowth and fallen timber, which was left to dry, until on a suitably hot day in January or February it was set alight. The success of the whole operation depended on getting a clean fall and a good burn. In the months that followed the settler tackled the back-breaking and dirty job of gathering together the charred branches and trunks that remained, and burning them in heaps that stayed alight for days.

Contemporary accounts describe how some of the great eucalypts had girths of 18 metres and more, with huge buttresses running six metres up before merging into the trunk. There were even bigger trees than these. At Bulga a tree was measured at 29.5 metres circumference two metres from the ground. Near Boolarra a tree was burnt in the 1898 fires which had an inside diameter of eight metres. It was used for a time as a church and hall, with space for 50 people, and later became a stable for five horses.

The mere problem of access to selected blocks involved tremendous difficulties. There were no roads. Stories have been told of people moving into the remote districts, bringing their children in sacks slung on either side of a packhorse.

A selector of the 1880s related how he and his father took their supplies, tools and equipment by bullock wagon 24 kilometres from Morwell, then for the remaining two kilometres carried everything along a narrow track and up steep slopes on their backs. For the first year or two everything had to be brought in on their backs from Morwell, until they got their first growth of grass on cleared land and could keep a horse. From that stage they could ride to Morwell and lead the horse back loaded with supplies.

MUD AND FIRE

As roads were opened up they improved access and communication between selectors. But without metal the roads degenerated in winter into "mud canals" over which nothing could travel but a horse or sledge. One who remembered those pioneering days described how a sledge passing along a winter road pushed a wave of mud in front of it, like the bow-wave of a ship. Horses became bogged in the clinging, seemingly almost bottomless mud.

Corduroy tracks were built of logs, 15 cm to 20 cm in diameter and two to three metres long, laid crosswise along the worst stretches of country. Often settlers were cut off from the main roads by gullies or ridges and had to make their own rough tracks and build their own primitive bridges.

Yet the people came with high hopes of making a good life in this grim environment. They were of all types. There were young Australians, looking for a chance to own their own land. There were men who had been sailors or soldiers, some from the Indian services and some from the old British universities. Many stayed on and hacked farms out of the forests. Some gave up, beaten by the toughness of the task - and a simple notice would appear that the land was again available for selection.

It took two generations of back-breaking toil, self-denial and often real privation to break-in the Strzeleckis. Those who did it were not to know that eventually the country would win, and that what they had achieved would in the long run largely be lost.

In the meantime the settlers faced other trials and real dangers as fires swept across the country. The worst occurred in 1898. Hundreds of settlers were burnt out, and the loss of stock and property was described as "enormous". An early count showed 50 homesteads destroyed.

What it was like to be caught in that fire was described by one who went through it: "The sky began to take on an effect so dreadful and threatening that it made one almost afraid. Its colour was a strange shade of purple, tinged with blood ..."

"The air was full of dense smoke, and the sparks were as thick as the flakes of a heavy snowstorm. Flames burned blue instead of red, and the great tongues of flame had no illuminating power.

"Next morning what a change met our eyes! Instead of the forest of dry trees, there were great, clear spaces. The forest had largely disappeared, and through the murky atmosphere one could see the homesteads of neighbours half a mile away that we had never been able to see before, and then the smoking ruins of what one had been pleased to call a farm, now swept of grass and fencing."

"It took no prophet to discover the beginnings of a more prosperous future, as much of the timber which had before seemed to be the work of generations to clear had vanished in the night."

Describing the scene after the fires, one reporter said: "South Gippsland is red-eyed and heart broken. There is not a man, woman or child in the whole forest country who is not more or less blinded by the smoke, and there are hundreds who are homeless."

"As the day wears on they are coming from the back country into the town, and more pitiable spectacles could hardly be imagined."

"With eyes bandaged, hands burned, clothes torn and dirt-grimed they struggle in, and though there are kindly welcomes from the townsfolk there is that in their faces which tells of Tuesday's tragic experience."

Other great fires followed - 15 between 1899 and 1944. During the 1944 outbreak the fire travelled 16 kilometres through the Strzeleckis; eight houses were burned at Morwell and 40 at Traralgon. It was in this last fire that one death occurred. But the ranges escaped some of the other big fires in the 1920s and 1930s.

The early life that developed in the hills was an essentially simple, almost primitive one. The nature of the country, the poor roads and the dense forests meant that families were isolated and opportunities for social gatherings were strictly limited. On top of all this was the fact that scarcely anyone had surplus money for entertainment.

Occasionally picnics or sports meetings would be organized, and people rode or drove for kilometres through mud or dust to attend. One woman who went into the Strzeleckis as a child remembered these picnics as gala days. Amusements were simple. She recalled how the young men put up swings on which to swing their girlfriends on giddy flights.

Hemlines were down to the ground in those days, and some of the girls protected their modesty by tying their skirts firmly around their ankles before venturing on the swing. One, more daring than the rest, kicked up her heels as she swung high, and there were shocked gasps and shaking of older heads when a fair length of underwear was exposed. But, like all innovators of fashion, she was reported to have had several imitators next year, and skirts and heels went higher.

There were concerts, where the program was supplied by local performers, although occasionally more sophisticated entertainers were persuaded to come from places as far away as Traralgon and Yarram. And among the widely assorted groups who made up the early settlers there were a few people of real musical talent. One Swiss bachelor was a classical pianist who also played several stringed instruments. Incidentally, he was the local strongman, who was reputed to have carried a sack of flour on his back from Calignee to Blackwarry - a distance of 19 kilometres.

In the same Blackwarry district one girl with a naturally beautiful voice went on to sing with the Melbourne Philharmonic Society. Perhaps no applause she gained in later years was ever so sweet as that she met with as a girl in a bush hall.

Dances were popular, too, after life became well enough established to permit the building of halls. One woman who enjoyed those evenings of 40 and 50 years ago recalls that the dancing went on until daylight. It was not because they liked dancing so much, she said, but because the narrow roads through the forest were so dark and rough that people did their best to avoid driving home in the dark.

Many years after the first settlements the lack of reasonable roads was still irritating the landowners and their families. Often settlers, after failing to stimulate the local shire council into action, combined to build their own access roads. Surfacing material was obtained by piling stacks of wood on sedimentary rock and burning it for several days. This produced a serviceable substitute for blue metal.

Even as late as the outbreak of the First World War the state of the roads was a fighting issue among the Strzelecki people. A meeting in the middle of the winter of 1914 of members of the Gunyah Progress Association gave vent to their feelings in this resolution.

"Seeing that the Federal Government has done nothing useful for the past two years, this meeting of the Gunyah Progress Association respectfully asks the members of Parliament to cease sitting for two days and to vote the money so saved to constructing a good road from Boolarra to Gunyah, as such a road would result in thousands of acres, now closed to access in the winter, being made productive and would open up for the Commonwealth a permanent source of agricultural and pastoral wealth."

The resolution seems to at least have reached the Senate, since "The Age", Melbourne, a few days after its passing reported Senator Blakely as asking whether it would be prepared to "suspend its useless verbosity in the interests of the Citizens of the remote locality of Gunyah."

It is indicative of what was to come that not many years later the Gunyah Progress Association was no more. Where the homes of its members once stood tall eucalypts now grow. About the only physical remains of this early settlement are a few bricks marking the site of the local hotel.

THE LOSING BATTLE

The hopes that once filled the Strzelecki settlers were beginning to die. The realisation came to them at different stages that the land was basically not suited to farming. An attempt by the State Government to help with finance and better roads, on which it is estimated \$4 million was spent, failed to arrest the trend for abandonment of the hills.

As the understanding grew among the people that the clearing of the Strzeleckis for farm land had been a tragic mistake, a slow blight settled over the ranges. Farmers sold their land and moved away. Others

walked off, leaving behind vacant properties and abandoned homes. The bracken and scrub grew thicker. Blackberries, introduced, it is claimed, so that farm women could make the fruit into jam, ran out of control.

The rabbits became more numerous, and soon reduced the productive capacity of the pastures. In this dairying country ragwort spread until it became a major problem. Then the First World War broke out, and the young men left the farms to serve in the fighting forces. The older people found themselves confronted with increasing difficulties from pests, falling production and a reduced supply of labour. The move away from the farms accelerated.

Gradually as a farming region the Strzeleckis deteriorated. With the mechanisation of work on farms elsewhere, it became clear that many of the farms on the steeper ridges would never be worked satisfactorily with tractors. And the younger men were increasingly unwilling to resign themselves to a life based on the older horse-power. The wet, cold climate, the steep roads and the isolation of farm families all had a part in the de-population of the range.

What it meant in human terms for a family to have to abandon the home and farm on which they had grown up and spent so much backbreaking labour was described recently by one woman who came as a child to the hills. For 19 years her parents struggled with the steep land, the weeds, the rabbits and the isolation. Then the day came when they took their two horses, packed what they could on them and closed the door of their home behind them. Even the furniture and her mother's sheet music (she had been a South Street competitor) were left behind.

Another man remembers how their 145 hectare farm had once carried 130 head of cattle. After the rabbits came and the weeds spread over the land the carrying capacity when they left it was two ponies.

THE DERELICT RANGES

Today it is possible to drive long distances through the hills without seeing a single occupied homestead. Halls where the people once gathered for the little entertainment they knew now stand deserted among the bush or have been dismantled and carted away. High on one hill stands a small, comparatively modern school building. Its pupils are all gone. Unless it is dismantled, the scrub will soon move in and there will be nothing left to show where children once played and gained their rudimentary education.

Today there are place names on the map which are names, all the homes are gone, the dreams and hopes of their owners shattered. Further back towards Melbourne on the Princes Highway the road passes over the Haunted Hills; it is a name that might well have been used for the Strzeleckis.

A State Development Committee report many years ago said: "This area, which once carried some of the finest white mountain ash forests of the State presents a challenge to man to restore its former beauty and productivity, which he so eagerly destroyed. It is a tragedy that so much effort was put into the destruction of these forests, only to find that the majority of it was unsuitable for the purpose for which it was cleared.

"The job of restoration of the forest will be long and expensive, but it is vital that this wide area of the State should not remain unproductive but should once again become the source of high quality forest produce and that further deterioration of the soil be prevented."

REFORESTATION BEGINS

Before this report was written the first steps were already being taken to rehabilitate the Strzeleckis. The Forests Commission saw the need for reforestation and began to draw up plans. It had already started planting trees at Childers-Allambee and had built a camp on the Morwell River, from which its men began planting the surrounding area. APM Forests Pty Ltd entered into Strzeleckis planting in 1960, but had begun buying land in the 1950s. In the years since then these organisations have established a scheme of

planting and timber production that in nature and size, and as a co-ordinated effort of State and private enterprise, has no counterpart in Australia.

It was a task of forbidding size and difficulty. The derelict land stretched across vast distances of rugged hills, broken by gullies so steep that it was hard to maintain a foothold, let alone carry on the work involved in clearing and planting. Land slips had made scars on many of the more precipitous slopes.

The very conditions that made it impossible for the settlers to carry on also made it more difficult to reforest the land. The scrub, the bracken and blackberries, the rabbits that attacked anything edible, created problems that had to be overcome before plantations could be successfully established.

Only organisations with capital, extensive physical resources and experience could have hoped to make any real impact on a task of the size now presented. It was the small individual settler who had cleared the Strzeleckis to their ultimate desolation. It needed combinations of men and money and expertise to restore them. In this region the day of the "battler" was over.

For one thing there could be no quick returns from the capital invested in the project. The first farmers had cleared a few hectares, established some sort of pasture among the burnt logs and fallen trees and earned a subsistence income within a year or two. The returns from reforestation are slow in coming, and in a scheme so vast as that in the Strzeleckis must be preceded by the injection of large amounts of capital. The reclamation of a whole range is a project that has been going on now for years and will take many more years to complete.

Nor could it be left to nature to restore the violated lands to their original forest cover. Over wide areas the seeds of the great mountain ash trees which once covered the hills have long since been destroyed. There was, therefore, no possibility that those magnificent forests which the first settlers knew could regenerate by natural process. Only a deliberate program of planting and careful silviculture can restore them.

Failing that, thousands of hectares of hill country would remain covered by wattle and scrub and other useless growth - a haven for vermin and an area for the dissemination of noxious weeds.

The first purchases of land by the Forests Commission began in the early 1930s. They increased in number to reach a peak in the years between 1944 and 1951. The purchase rate fell off during the years of high prices for primary produce, but it has risen again in recent years. In all cases sales of land have been the result of offers by the owners to dispose of their land; there have been no forced acquisitions.

Over 300 individual purchases, totalling 22,300 hectares, have been made by the Forests Commission. Prices have varied over the years. It is on record that one whole farm was bought for £5 from an absentee owner who offered to transfer his freehold rights without payment, just to be rid of the responsibilities of ownership. Some recent prices have been around \$250 per hectare.

In addition to land which was bought for reforestation, nearly 9,000 hectares of Crown lands have been dedicated as Reserved Forest. The bulk of this was once farm land which had been abandoned by the owners and had reverted to the Crown.

There is still a considerable area of privately-owned land in the Strzeleckis which is believed to be potentially available for purchase. Estimates of this range from 5,000 hectares to 12,000 hectares. Negotiations to buy additional areas are proceeding, subject to available finance.

It is worth noting that both the Land Conservation Council and the House of Representatives Inquiry into Conservation and the Environment have recently, in their policies on forestry, come out strongly in favour of the purchase of private property for plantations. In effect they have endorsed a policy which has been followed by the Forests Commission in the Strzeleckis for more than 40 years.

Experiments to discover the most suitable trees to plant began in 1944, when sample plots were established. The softwoods tried out included hoop pine, sitka spruce and Douglas fir, as well as *Pinus*

radiata. Among the eucalypts included in the test plantings were mountain ash, blue gum, silvertop, alpine ash, manna gum and yellow stringy bark. It became clear that *Pinus radiata* was the most suitable softwood for the area and mountain ash was the best of the eucalypts.

PLANTATIONS EXPAND

The first large-scale plantings began in 1946 in two abandoned closer-settlement areas at Childers and Allambee. Eventually 342 hectares of pines and 41 hectares of eucalypts were planted at Childers. At Allambee the figures were 225 hectares for pine and 21 for eucalypts.

The next step was to set up a reforestation camp at Morwell River in 1949 to accommodate workers engaged on the replanting of that area. From there re-planting spread out over the hills until today in the West Morwell block there are 502 hectares of softwoods and 2,316 hectares of eucalypts.

Another move took reforestation to the country around Blackwarry in about 1960, with labour coming from Yarram. Later the Won Wron prison establishment provided a source of labour.

Of the two State Forest districts which cover the Strzelecki Ranges - Mirboo and Yarram - Mirboo has a permanent staff of 18, plus about eight to 10 who are engaged during the planting season. An additional work force is supplied by prisoners from the Morwell River prison farm, who are engaged in both forest work and the running of the nursery for eucalypts.

In the Yarram forest district a permanent labour force of about 18 is supplemented by up to 30 for the planting season. Here men from the Won Wron prison farm add to the labour strength of the district.

The two prison nurseries raise eucalypts for planting in the Strzeleckis and in various other parts of the State, such as Orbost, Cann River, Noojee and Erica. The continuing prison labour was an important factor in the establishment of the eucalypt nurseries to meet the Commission's needs. The long-term target for Won Wron is a production rate of three million seedling trees a year, and for Morwell River one million a year.

The young pines for planting in the Strzeleckis come from one of four regional nurseries - at Benalla, Myrtleford, Trentham and Rennick. Each of these is capable of raising about three million trees a year. Together, they are designed to meet the total needs of the Commission for softwood seedlings.

One interesting development is the production of seedlings from what are known as "plus trees". These are trees specially selected for vigour, form and branching habit, from which seed is collected and sown in the nurseries to provide forest trees of superior production capacity. This practice is already well-established for pine trees but not so well advanced for the raising of young eucalypts. Incidentally, the obtaining of desirable branch tips from tall eucalypts, perhaps 25 metres or more above the ground, calls for a special technique. Crack shots, using rifles with telescopic sights, cut the relatively thin branches with a few well-aimed shots, to bring the desired tips to the ground.

Replanting of large areas of scrub-covered land in steep country and with a climb of perhaps 180 metres from the bottom of the valley to the top of the ridge is obviously a demanding job. Bulldozers are used where possible to clear strips the width of their blades and so give the young pines a start before the weeds and scrub can overwhelm them. Eucalypts withstand competition better and are able within a relatively short time to push above the weeds and undergrowth.

The result of these operations over the years is that today in the Mirboo forest district there are 3,562 hectares of eucalypts and 3,213 hectares of softwoods - a total of 6,775 hectares. The Yarram district has 433 hectares of eucalypts and 2,904 hectares of softwoods - a total of 3,337 hectares.

Planting will go on. The eventual target is around 30,000 hectares. This will probably take from 10 to 15 years under conditions prevailing today. Obviously, the costs of establishing these plantations vary with the

price of labour. Depending on the terrain and other factors, one man can plant from 600 to 1,000 pines a day. The cost of preparing the land for planting by clearing and burning the rubbish is about \$200 per hectare, the planting itself costs about \$75 per hectare. But the actual cost to the Forests Commission is lowered by the contribution made by prison labour.

Because of their slower rate of growth, the mountain ash plantations have not yet produced saleable quantities of timber. But in the pine plantations thinning for sale as pulp wood began in the early 1960s and has been going on ever since. The Commission let its first logging contract (technically called a licence to procure) in the late 1960s, with a rate of output of 5,000 cubic metres a year.

Production has increased until this year a licence to procure has been issued to APM Wood Products for 30,000 cubic metres of softwood logs a year, equivalent to 12 million super feet of timber. The royalty paid to the Commission on this timber works out at \$11 per cubic metre, its total value to the industry and the community is vastly greater. In addition a firm contract has been entered into with APM Forests for the supply of pulpwood. The softwood plantations, therefore, are already providing substantial revenue.

APM Forests have a similar pattern of land acquisition and planting, but without the help of prison labour. The company's first plantings of pine and ash took place in 1960. The first purchases of land were made in the 1950s, and they have built up over the years until today they total about 24,000 hectares of freehold and 8,617 hectares of leasehold. This leasehold land is held from the State under certain conditions regulating the way it is put to use for plantations. The total area of freehold and leasehold now in plantations, or tree farms, is 5,030 hectares of pines and 4,502 of eucalypts.

The conditions governing the lease of land by APM Forests provide that planting of the area must be completed within 15 years of the issue of the lease, which runs for 60 years. During that time the company may use any timber it grows, but must re-establish the plantation within three years of harvesting. The company pays an annual rent calculated at five per cent of the unimproved valuation, and is required to hand back in a reforested condition the area at the completion of the lease.

For both Commission and Company a major cost of development is the building of access roads and tracks through the tangle of hills, with their fearsome gradients. The Commission estimates that for every 250 hectares of plantation four kilometres of secondary roads have to be built at a cost of \$3,000 per kilometre, plus 1 1/2 kilometres of access tracks at a cost of \$500 per kilometre. On that basis the Commission has about half-a-million dollars invested in roads in the Strzelecki hills, and this expenditure will continue for years to come. The final figure for APM Forests is estimated to be over a million dollars.

FOREST LAND IN THE STRZELECKIS

		APM Forests P/L	
		State Owned (owned and leased)	(ha)
		(ha)	(ha)
Plantations	Conifer	6,117	5,030
	Hardwood	3,995	4,502
Other forest land		38,588	24,085
TOTAL		48,700	33,617

FORESTS FILL MANY NEEDS

The basic concept of management of the Strzelecki State Forests is that the Forests Commission must be concerned not with trees alone but with the soil, water, air, plants, animals and space - all in the service of the community. This is the policy, known as "multiple-use forestry", under which the Commission manages all the 2.3 million hectares of land in Victoria permanently reserved for forests, plus the 4.5 million hectares of uncommitted Crown land which, while it remains uncommitted, is used for forestry purposes.

The underlying premise of this policy is that all the products and services available from forests should be considered when decisions are made about how these forests can best serve the people of the nation. At times there must be some conflict of interest between various uses. For example the demand for timber cannot be met without impinging on the need to preserve natural features in a primeval condition.

" Multiple-use practice, therefore, involves setting priorities for use. These priorities are determined by equating the social and economic needs of the community with the ability of the forest to maintain the supply. This process of setting priorities does not remove all the conflicts between competing uses, but it does rationalise competition and ensure that, when a decision is made to use a particular product or service, consideration is given to the effect such use will have on other values." (Hodgson, in "Victoria's Resources", March, 1975.)

In the control of the Strzelecki forests the Commission, therefore, is concerned not only with the timber they will yield under progressive harvesting, but with needs of people who will want to use the forests for recreation, for enjoyment of nature and of the bird and animal life of the area and as an escape from some of the restricting pressures of urban life.

The production of wood is being carefully planned, for example, to ensure there is as little damage as possible to the catchment areas of the streams which run north and south from the ranges. Thus native vegetation is left as far as possible along water courses to provide corridors for wildlife, and to avoid disturbance of both soil and vegetation that would be associated with clearing of strips for planting. In some other areas no work is allowed where the destruction of the natural cover would, under heavy rainfall, lead to the topsoil being washed down into streams.

To enable those who drive through the ranges to get a better view of the country, some roads have been widened at strategic points that offer a sweeping panorama of hills and forests. The recreation needs of these people were also in mind when the Commission had a small clearing made at the summit of Mt. Fatigue from which people can look out over many kilometres of forest and open country, with a background of the sea and the rugged hills of Wilson's Promontory.

There are walking tracks for those who want to see the ranges on foot. These include a "Lyre Bird Walk" of 5.5 kilometres in the Mirboo North area, which runs along a creek system where lyre birds are common. In the same general area a pony trail has been constructed to give an attractive ride of about 20 kilometres through the forest. On both tracks facilities have been provided for picnic parties.

Slowly, as the growing forests cover formerly bare hills, birds and native animals and flora are returning. Already there is a wide variety of native life. Echidnas may often be seen along the roadsides, crimson rosellas swoop through the trees, and lyre birds are more plentiful than in almost any other area of Victoria. Eventually, it is hoped, native life in the ranges will return to something resembling the conditions before white men devastated the great forests with axe and fire.

Those who travel through the Strzelecki plantations will probably wonder why the pattern changes, so that at one time the hills are covered with *Pinus radiata* and a kilometre or two further on it is the reddish tips of mountain ash that dominate the scene. The explanation lies in the different requirements of the planted areas.

The Commission's policy has been that the original vegetation on a particular site as a general rule governs the choice of species to be planted. Where mountain ash occurred naturally, the area should be replanted with these trees. *Pinus radiata*, on the other hand, is regarded as more suitable in those parts where mixed eucalypt species originally grew.

Open areas that originally carried mountain ash stands, but which have since become badly overgrown with blackberries, are being planted with *Pinus radiata* because of its capacity to smother blackberries growing beneath. Another factor influencing selection of trees to be planted is the susceptibility of mountain

ash to severe damage from winds. On very exposed sites, therefore, *Pinus radiata* is given preference over mountain ash.

The policy normally provides also that existing stands of mountain ash or mixed species that are making reasonably good growth should be retained, managed and harvested. The result is that in the years to come the ranges will present a highly interesting and varied landscape, instead of the monotony which characterises some big plantations of a single tree species.

PRISONERS HELP REFORESTATION

In the reforestation of the Strzeleckis an important role has been played by prisoners working from two prison camps, one on the Morwell River and the other at Won Wron, north of Yarram. As explained earlier, Morwell River was formerly a Forests Commission camp, established to accommodate workers engaged in the reforestation of adjacent areas. It was taken over as a camp for selected prisoners in May 1961. Construction of the Won Wron camp began in 1962, but no labour was available for forest work until 1968.

The number of men in the camps has fluctuated. In the first few years a considerable force of workers was available but with the greater reliance of the courts on the parole system, the number available for field work has tended to fall. The prisoners have been responsible, under supervision, for the raising of seedling eucalypts, and these nurseries have grown well over seven million young trees, mostly mountain ash.

They have also carried out a substantial part of the planting in the ranges at both the eastern and western ends. In addition they have been used to clear difficult pockets of country, to ring-bark trees during clearing of land for subsequent planting and for general maintenance and production work. They are allowed a considerable amount of freedom and encouraged to take an interest in the work. This will continue, so that reforestation of the Strzeleckis is helping to rehabilitate men as well as the land.

A NEW FUTURE

And so, today, the tragic story of the Strzeleckis is being turned into one of hope. The bare hills, with their stark, dead trunks of trees destroyed over many decades, with deserted farms and vanished people, are being clothed with young forests of eucalypts and pines. The plantations are not continuous; stands of regenerated native timber intervene, together with open lands where a few farmers are still managing to make a living.

As a result the colour patterns vary as one drives through the hills. For aesthetic purposes care has been taken to leave strips of native growth along edges of the roads. The streams are clear and uncontaminated as the roots of the forest trees bind the soil together in a region where extensive slips on the steep hillsides were once too common.

Deep in the heart of the ranges lie the two well-known National Parks - Tarra Valley and Bulga. It will be a long time before the new eucalypt stands can approach that sort of forest. But at least the process of restoration is under way.

The whole reclamation project will cost millions of dollars over many years. But this will not be unproductive expenditure. A government report in 1959 commented that the first settlement of the Strzeleckis had, over a wide area of the eastern ranges, destroyed stands of mountain ash which at the time of reporting were estimated to have been worth \$2,500 per hectare. In their place had been left a mass of worthless scrub and weeds that made the area a "liability to the State".

This time the Strzeleckis will be producing revenue that will build up as the forests develop. It is calculated that the pine plantations will reach their peak of production in about 25 years from now. The eucalypts will

be slower in attaining their full potential. But the ultimate returns from the Strzelecki forests will repay over and over again the cost of rescuing the ranges.

And, above financial considerations, the value to the nation of having these naturally, if wildy, beautiful hills available for the enjoyment and recreation of the people will have justified all the effort that has gone into saving the Strzeleckis for Australians of the future.