Crossing the Blue Mountains

Due to the rough terrain and lack of resources, the Blue Mountains were seen as an impassible barrier for future exploration from the time of Captain Cook’s landing in 1770 through to 1813.

In 1813, Gregory Blaxland, William Charles Wentworth, and Lieutenant Lawson, along with four servants, four pack horses and five dogs, set off on an exploration which was to create history. On the 11th May 1813 the explorers departed from Emu Plains reaching the foothills of the Blue Mountains, or Glenbrook as it is known today.

For Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson, the trip across the Blue Mountains was a tremendous struggle. Having insufficient food for their journey, they recorded the trek required constant hacking through thick scrub and treading through “damp dew-laden undergrowth”. They were also in fear of attack by Aboriginals. These factors, in combination with sickness, nearly saw the men defeated by the rugged terrain.

Eighteen days later, on the 29th May 1813, the Blue Mountains was no longer considered an impassible barrier following the discovery of the gently sloping mountains to the west.

Today, just west of Katoomba you can see the remains of a Eucalyptus tree marked by the famous explorers Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson. The Marked Tree, along with Caley’s Repulse at Lawson, are the only remaining marks of the early explorers. A cairn of stones was also placed at Linden, however, we cannot be certain if the existing cairn at Linden is the original.
In 1813 Gregory Blaxland, William Charles Wentworth and William Lawson became the first European settlers to successfully navigate a path across the Blue Mountains. Their feat opened the inland to pastoralism, and set in motion a pattern of land disputes that would result in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples across the continent. At first, the colonists were too busy surviving to consider trying to cross the mountains. However, by the time Governor Macquarie arrived in 1810, a combination of drought, insect plagues and exhaustion of the soil around Sydney made finding fresh lands imperative.

**Blue Mountains**

As Sydney established itself, the Blue Mountains formed a barrier to the westward expansion of the new colony. Local Gundungurra, Dharawal, Wiradjuri, Wanaruah, Darug and Darkinjung peoples used two main routes to cross the Blue Mountains, but most Europeans saw the range as a forbidding maze of sandstone bluffs, deep gorges and dense bush. At first, the colonists were too busy surviving to consider trying to cross. However, by the time Governor Macquarie arrived in 1810, a combination of drought, insect plagues and exhaustion of the soil around Sydney made finding fresh lands imperative.

**Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson**

Blaxland, inspired by the need for more grazing land for his flocks and frustrated by the Governor’s refusal to grant him more coastal land, decided to attempt to cross the Blue Mountains. Macquarie granted permission for the venture, and Blaxland invited Wentworth and Lawson, a trained surveyor, to join him.

On 18 May 1813 they departed from Emu Plains with James Burns, a local guide familiar with the bush and its Aboriginal pathways, as well as four convict servants. The expedition crossed the mountains in three weeks, adopting the novel method of traversing the ridges instead of looking for a route through the valleys as previous explorers had done.

**Consequences**

Macquarie rewarded the three men with grants of land, and then sent the surveyor William Evans to explore beyond the point that Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson had reached and report on the extent and fertility of the land. Evans did this, and so became the first European to completely cross the Great Dividing Range.

Macquarie then set William Cox, a former army officer turned builder, the mammoth task of constructing a road suitable for carriages and stock to traverse. Macquarie made the first official visit to the Bathurst Plains in April/May 1815, lavishly praising the achievement of Cox and his convict labourers.
On 4 May 1815 three days before he would hoist the British flag and commence laying out the town of Bathurst, Macquarie first met some of the Indigenous people of the area, the Wiradjuri:

We found here also three adult Male Natives and four Native Boys of this new discovered Tract of Country, who shewed great surprise, mixed with no small degree of fear at seeing so many strangers, Horses and Carriages — but to which they soon appeared to be reconciled on being kindly spoken to.

Macquarie’s journal, 4 May 1815

Initial relations were cordial, because the new settlement remained a small government outstation. It was not until grants were made to settlers that hostilities broke out. In 1820, there were 114 Europeans. In only four years, this grew to more than 1200. Another drought, the arrival of flocks and the fencing of land disrupted their food supplies to such a degree that the tribes around Bathurst realised that their way of life was fundamentally threatened.

By 1824, William Lawson’s son wrote:
We have now commenced hostilities against them in consequence of their killing a great number of shepherds and stockmen, but afraid we shall never exterminate them, they have such an extensive mountainous country for them to flee from their pursuers.

Responding to urging from settlers, Governor Darling declared martial law on 14 August 1824. Over the next four months, a vigorous military campaign was launched against the local Indigenous population resulting in the deaths of at least 100 Aborigines.

With resistance destroyed, the pass through the Blue Mountains allowed settlers to pour into the interior, and ultimately turned the Blue Mountains into a popular tourist destination.