

The ‘tin man’: George Renison Bell, Tasmanian mineral prospector

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‘God has been good to me, and I thank Him for it.’¹

Casual observers of George Renison Bell’s struggle to make a living might be sceptical of these final words in his diary. He was born poor and he died poor. He discovered the lode of what is presently Australia’s richest tin mine, the Renison mine on the west coast of Tasmania, but derived no benefit from it. Nor did he reap any profits from making the first discoveries of payable tin in Tasmania’s rich north-east. What did he have to be grateful for?

Bell was a devout Quaker, modest, generous, public-spirited and of impossibly high moral principles that seem to have kept his conscience in perpetual torment. He had little formal education, but his wide reading, political awareness, regular newspaper correspondence and geological expertise mark him as a determined ‘self-improver’. His career was a mix of great achievement, bad luck and bad management. He showed nous in selling his tin claims, raising prospecting syndicates to back him, and tramping the nation for work, but he limited his opportunities by not taking formal qualification in his chosen field and by his failure to keep up with technology. At times he seems to have entertained an almost karmic acceptance of suffering, proclaiming that his principal mission in life was to bring men and women to Christ. For decades his family scraped by on his almost itinerant livelihood from prospecting, mining, farming and labouring, supplemented by the wages of his elder children. Youngest of the eight, Alec Bell, blamed his father for squandering opportunities. ‘That’s one thing I don’t understand about my old Dad,’ he wrote. ‘He was always moaning about lack of money, and when he had the greatest chance in the world, he failed to cash in on it. Call it unselfishness, if you like. I have another name for it’.² One of Bell’s unmarried daughters is believed to have expressed her opinion of her father’s lifestyle by burning the complete set of his diaries after his death.³

Whether he was ambivalent about financial success, or simply self-defeating, the true enigma of George Renison Bell’s life is that for decades he campaigned for a government reward for his prospecting work, which he received only in his declining years. Bell’s mentor, fellow prospector James ‘Philosopher’ Smith, advised Bell to shore up his prospecting career with property, which had been Smith’s own system.⁴ Bell fared so badly as a breadwinner, however, that he was forced to sell his own home to pay his debts, eventually dying in a rented house. Nevertheless, his achievements were remarkable and worthy of examination.

Formative years

George Renison Bell was born at Bothwell, a small highland grazing settlement about 80 km north of Hobart Town, on 21 November 1840, the fourth (third surviving) child of Sarah Bell, née Danby, and George Bell, free-born Scottish Quakers who had arrived in New South Wales in the early 1830s, and in Van Diemen's Land in 1839. George Bell was then postmaster at Bothwell and, with the post office and schoolhouse being one and the same, George and Sarah also acted as master and mistress of the Bothwell School.⁵

Sarah Bell prayed that in his health her son would not follow after his epileptic father, but the infant's health was not robust and he soon developed a stutter which remained throughout his childhood. In September 1841 the Bells moved to Hobart Town in hope of finding work. Bell senior's religious beliefs sometimes impacted upon his ability to make a living: Bothwell locals were not impressed by his refusal to receive and deliver mail on 'First Day' (Sunday), and the Quaker refusal to doff their caps cost him a job as superintendent of a convict probation party as it was thought it would threaten discipline.⁶ At times his son's beliefs and moral code would have similar practical consequences.

Personal intervention by Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Franklin finally established George Bell as a clerk in the office of the superintendent of convicts in February 1842, and there he remained until his death ten years later.⁷ Sarah Bell's diaries from this period concern themselves almost entirely with the religious devotion and the home education of her children, the essential thirteen rules of which she recorded in her diary.⁸ George Renison and his older siblings had a strict, austere upbringing, with attendance at monthly meetings of the Society of Friends. Much later in life he would look back fondly on his childhood, as 'one who owes what little good there is in him to the early training of a painstaking conscientious mother'.⁹

George Bell's death caused his family not only grief but financial chaos. The Society of Friends allowed Sarah Bell to establish a school for Quaker children in the flea-infested Friends' Meeting House, but when that closed eldest child Walter, fifteen years old, effectively became the breadwinner.¹⁰ Youngest child George Renison's school days ended when, at thirteen, he went to work for a woollen draper.¹¹ Sarah lamented having no present to give her younger son on his fourteenth birthday.¹² However, Walter gave him a gift that has survived more than 160 years, a small, leather-bound diary.¹³ This would be Bell's confessor for the rest of his life, in which can be traced the tug-of-war between his conscience and actions. Already he was hungry for knowledge. In August 1855 his mother judged him to be

in a low nervous state; it appears that hard work &, a town life does not [sic] him, he ... has exhibited mental symptoms that required prompt attention ... Our medical adviser strongly recommends me to try & place him with a farmer, in order to develop his physical strength, his mental powers being too forward & his inclination to enter upon scientific questions & pursue if possible such researches too strong for his brain at his present early age to bear.

Clearly, his insatiable curiosity was already evident—too evident for his mother's liking. She removed him from his job and sent him to work on the farm of the family's old friends the Sherwins near Bothwell, fulfilling his mother's and doctor's wishes that he undertake physical labour.¹⁴ He soon became inured to the bush life.

The trans-Tasman decade

Bell's life changed dramatically when, in March 1858, he quit the Sherwin farm in order to follow his mother and sister to Dunedin, New Zealand.¹⁵ Determined to help his mother financially, he went to work for the widow Elizabeth Fulton on her farm at West Taieri, about 25 km from Dunedin, remaining there for three-and-a-half years.¹⁶ His duties included stock riding, driving bullocks, sowing grass, hauling freight and attending bee hives, suggesting that, before the age of 20 years, he was gaining a wide range of practical and organisational skills and was already acting as a breadwinner.¹⁷

Figure 1: *George Renison Bell as a young Stockrider in New Zealand in the 1860s.*



Source: Courtesy Scott Bell, Launceston.

In April 1860 Sarah Bell sailed for Launceston, leaving only her youngest son in New Zealand. As if steeling himself for this separation, on 31 March 1860 the nineteen-year-old set himself a code 'by which ... with the Blessing of God' he determined to regulate his conduct. The eleven rules in this code included (1) 'To do for others as I would have them do for me', (3) 'Whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well', (5) 'Never lose one moment of time but always improve it in the most profitable way I can' and (8) 'Always endeavour to cultivate an enlightened conscience'.¹⁸

There appears to have been no inkling of an interest in minerals or the prospecting lifestyle before he joined the Otago gold rushes in 1861.¹⁹ Bell's time there had ended by July 1862, by which time he had resumed stock riding, but he seems to have criss-crossed the Tasman Sea during the 1860s.²⁰ In his

intermittent diary he stated that in 1864 he 'took a trip all round Tasmania', a claim about which he seems never to have elaborated. However, such an adventure is plausible for Bell, who perhaps only the legendary bushman T.B. Moore exceeded as the most widely travelled nineteenth-century prospector within Tasmania.

In 1867, at 27 years of age, he was sufficiently worldly to append his original eleven rules of conduct with four more, including the unwittingly ironic 'Don't be in haste to get rich but be content to do as well as others.'²¹ Bringing men and women to Christ committed him to what he saw as his moral duty to serve God.²² Yet, clearly, he also answered another calling, the search for gold. A surviving diary fragment reveals a final trip to New Zealand in 1867-68. In it he records how playing his flute, cribbage, reading and puzzles filled in his time during an eight-day voyage from Launceston to Hokitika, the little west coast mining port, on the schooner *Storm Bird*.

Tin man in Tasmania

Having resettled in Tasmania, Bell 'went up to Blessington [under Ben Lomond] and took to a bush life and prospecting for gold, and was at Black Boy [later known as Mathinna] for 3 years'²³ Near Blessington he experienced the finest panorama of his life while surveying the north-east from Ben Nevis.²⁴

Bell probably already worked for a prospecting syndicate, which led him to make the acquaintance of an early mentor, Launceston solicitor William Ritchie. By this time, in 1873, the prospector had a comfortable life, but his spirit was troubled: 'Well this is a state of things that will not do,' the ardent self-educator confessed.

What am I living for? I must try and mend my way of living and strive to learn or do something worth recording should I be spared another year. What shall I be then. Well in order to improve in money matters steadfastly set my face against getting into debt and as regards mental improvement. Stay more at home and read and write more and with a view to improve myself.²⁵

Within a few months the pursuit of a living had set him on the road to that 'something worth recording' by visiting the new hub of Tasmanian mining: 'I have sent Mr Geo Bell a very decent fellow to Mount Bischoff to prospect for a little company,' Ritchie told James 'Philosopher' Smith, but Bell saw his mission differently.²⁶ He was there to learn how tin was found, so that he could seek it in the country he had surveyed from Ben Nevis. Smith supported Bell's belief that tin would be discovered in the granite country in eastern Tasmania. He showed his protégé the similar Hampshire Hills granite from which he (Smith) had already won tin and, after a week's work there, Bell returned to civilisation ready, with Smith's backing, to test the north-east.²⁷

By this time Bell would have had bush expeditions down to a fine art. His youngest son Alec recalled his father setting off alone on horseback on prospecting expeditions, armed with a swag containing a six-foot by four-foot tent.²⁸ Bell's own description of pitching a camp suggests that this was hardly a spartan existence, and that the bush was a home to those who knew how to find its comforts. His tent was mounted on forked poles, with bedding made of treefern (*Dicksonia antarctica*) fronds placed upon a stick framework. A felled leatherwood sapling and 'bull's wool', the bark of a stringy-bark would help start a campfire, even in wet conditions.²⁹ He carried a possum-skin rug for a blanket, as well as a panning dish and provisions, consisting of flour, bacon, tea and sugar. Two essentials, a billy and a compass, completed his retinue. Deafness and tinnitus (ringing) in one ear hampered him slightly in the bush.³⁰ As James Smith hoped to catch fish or an echidna when his rations ran out, grilled snake was Bell's preferred supplement:

Snakes were very good eating, he said, and tasted something like eel. [his] method of catching snakes was to grab one by the tail, whirl it round and bash its head against a tree if there was one. Otherwise, he would crack it like a whip and break its back.³¹

Bell's tin prospecting in the north-east in 1874 consisted of three journeys. The first, in January, spent the last funds of the prospecting company Bell had formed at Mount Bischoff with James Smith and probably John Chaffey and George Gilham. He prospected the Ben Nevis area and at Mathinna before finding what he considered unpayable tin between Scamander and Georges

Bay on the north-eastern coast.³² Then, in February, 'Little' Bell, as some would know him, rode up to only house in the Ringarooma district, that of Donald Campbell, who found him 'rather comical, as his implements were of a very diminutive order.'³³ Here he learned from a local boy, Archibald Martin, that 'some nice wash country' existed up the Little Boobyalla River' (now Bell Creek).³⁴ Sure enough, Bell panned alluvial tin about 11 kilometres up in a tributary of that stream. Nearby, on what became known as Bells Hill, the prospector found

white rocks like what I had seen on the top of Bischoff. I looked for tin in them, and found it by pulling the moss off. There was one place in the rock—a crack—where I could pull loose lumps of tin out—enough to fill a billy.³⁵

In Launceston he secured backing from investors, which enabled him to take up eight leases in their names at the Little Boobyalla. The final 1874 trip was to the Ringarooma River near present-day Derby and Weldborough, during which he discovered more alluvial tin at the Cascade River and on Bells Hill. Before Christmas 1874, he showed samples from this area to the same investors, who declined his offer of a half share for £100. Backing by James Smith, however, allowed Bell to secure two leases at the Cascade River and one at Bells Hill.³⁶ He sold three-quarters of his 80 acres at Bells Hill to the Atlas Company and the Belmont Company, with only the former company making any return.³⁷

During the winter of 1874 Bell and William Orr worked some of the claims at the Little Boobyalla; and later Bell found a mate, Henry Gill, to help him develop one of the Cascade River sections, subsequently known as the Star mine.³⁸ In 1875 Bell also found good tin ground on the Frome River, which was later worked by the Frome River Tin Mining Company.³⁹

Bell the breadwinner and family man

In the winter of 1876 Bell followed James Smith from 'tin man' to 'husband-man' by becoming engaged to be married.⁴⁰ Watching him ride along Elphin Road, Launceston, is reputed to have stolen the heart of his life partner, Phoebe Cox, ten years his junior.⁴¹ The 35-year-old determined to better prepare himself for the role of provider by spending the second half of the year studying mineralogy and assaying at the Ballarat School of Mines.⁴² Unfortunately, he discovered that mineralogy was not offered as a subject either in Ballarat or Melbourne. He studied metallurgy instead, a subject which included assaying. This experience probably served him well, but he returned to Launceston a few months before his wedding *without a certificate* to find that another assayer had set up in his absence and that he was a bystander to proceedings—which had originally included his own name—in favour of rewarding James Smith for his mineral discoveries.⁴³ Nevertheless, the marriage took place at the Friends' Meeting House in Murray Street, Hobart, in June 1877, with Bell describing himself as an assayer.⁴⁴

Not even their honeymoon was safe from 'Pick and Shovel' Bell. With most of their five-and-a-half weeks' tour spent at the north-eastern mining fields, Phoebe might have suspected that her husband had begun as he would continue: about one-fifth of Bell's remaining 38 years as provider would be spent away from wife and family in the pursuit of mineral earnings.⁴⁵

Petitioning for a government reward

Smith's cause was championed by his friends and admirers; Bell had to champion his own. Self-promotion would not have been easy for a man of his humble temperament. His pamphlet 'The Pioneer of Tin Discovery on the North-East Coast of Tasmania: a Brief Statement of Facts' sought recognition that he was Smith's junior partner in tin discovery: just as Smith was the pioneer in the north-west, so Bell was the pioneer in the north-east.⁴⁶

Figure 2: *George Renison Bell and his family c.1904*, with George and Phoebe seated at front. With them are their children (left to right) Alice (born 1879), Roy (born 1886), Henry (born 1883), Ruth (born 1892), Alec (seated at front, born 1899), Charlie (born 1881) and John Renison (born 1889).



Source: Photo courtesy of Scott Bell, Launceston.

In February 1878 James Smith was publicly presented with 250 sovereigns piled on a silver salver and an address inscribed on vellum. The second part of his reward for enriching the colony by discovering the tin deposits at Mount Bischoff was a £200 annual pension.⁴⁷ Bell, meanwhile, tried his hand at business as a partner in Cox Brothers & Bell, wool, grain and general merchants, Launceston. The result was liquidation, with Bell having to sell his house to pay off his debts.⁴⁸

Bell would remain Smith's 'poor relation' as a prospector, humiliated by debt even through the favourable economic times of the 1880s.⁴⁹ 'As to where we are to live? And on what? he cajoled Phoebe in 1880, 'that's as mere nothing don't [sic] you fret my darling I'll find you a crust, and a bit of stuff to cover you from the rain.'⁵⁰ Mining was 'very dull'. The publication of James Fenton's *History of Tasmania* in 1884, which, on the advice of Smith

credited Bell as 'the discoverer of stanniferous deposits in north-eastern district', added impetus to Bell's cause.⁵¹

Struggle on the north-eastern tin fields through the 1880s

The shuffling of 21,000 bags of tin off the Boobyalla wharf in 1882 was the sound of Tasmania's mining boom.⁵² Tin now represented one-quarter of Tasmania's export earnings, and 47 per cent of the colony's tin export was produced by the north-eastern field which Bell pioneered.⁵³ Yet the small alluvial mines represented in those statistics struggled for sustenance. The flat lowlands surrounding Mount Cameron were covered with tin-bearing quartz and slate wash, varying from one to 60 feet deep, which remained undisturbed so long as the hydraulic hose and the sluice-box were dry. Near Gladstone, Bell settled on 50 acres of such country containing 'tons' of tin, but for want of water he was forced to work against nature, planting exotic grasses to create dairy pasture on top of the bounty he could not harvest.⁵⁴

Several companies had harnessed the Great Musselroe River with their own water races, but a reliable system which would supply all mines in every season was needed to fully develop the field and keep the district in work. The largest private race, owned by the Mount Cameron Hydraulic Tin Mining Company, hugged the contours for 20 kilometres from its outlet on Musselroe Creek before the money ran out. This became the focus of agitation for a colonial water scheme in 1884. In the following year, a select committee recommended the government buy and extend the unfinished race, an action finally authorised, after much parliamentary acrimony, by the passing of the *Mount Cameron Water Race Act* (1887).⁵⁵ The Mount Cameron Water Race Board extended the main race 33 kilometres in time for its official opening in 1890. For about a century it was the lifeline of the Mount Cameron mines, and today the 128-kilometre-long conduit still feeds Rushy Lagoon, the largest property in north-eastern Tasmania.⁵⁶

Bell was one of the chief petitioners for Mount Cameron water scheme. By managing tin claims, agisting sheep on his green oasis and supplying wood to the nearby Scotia mine he placed his wife and four children in a rare position of relative comfort.⁵⁷ Ironically, while living on the unworkably waterless tin ground Bell dreamt of finding lumps of gold on a tin claim, which caused him to ponder the ethics of 'finders keepers'.⁵⁸ Then disaster struck - a flood in the Ringarooma River carried away Bell's bridge and with it much of his livelihood, since only by crossing the river could he deliver his timber. 'I am living from hand to mouth', he wrote in January 1885:

and my prospects are not very encouraging. I am trying to sell this place and get a house in Town [Gladstone] and this place does not agree with my dear Phoebe and perhaps a change for a year or so would do us all good ...⁵⁹

It was left to others to use 'government' water to plunder his tin.

Relief was promised when at Ringarooma in September 1886 a public meeting was called to consider public recognition of Bell's services to the colony. Those assembled resolved to petition the governor-in-council for the same annuity granted James Smith (£200), but even as the petition circulated around the colony S.H. Wintle reiterated his muddled claim that he had advised Bell where to find tin on the north-eastern coast when he allegedly met him at Mount

Bischoff in 1875 or 1876.⁶⁰ Then, in 1887, Benjamin Brooks and John Smith joined the contest for a government reward.⁶¹

Bell drove cattle, but prospecting proved futile and his financial position worsened. He returned to rented housing: never again would he own a home. Being forced to sell his dray at Gladstone left his family without even the means of an outing. His faith flagged as prayer failed to deliver him from debts.⁶²

Four years living at Ringarooma were brought to an end when the Bells' rented house was put up for sale by his landlord, the prospector Chris Krushka.⁶³ This latest uprooting, which landed his family in Scottsdale, precipitated Bell's darkest days. By 1889 the north-eastern tin fields had produced about £2 million-worth of ore. Their 49-year-old founder had destitution to show for more than two decades of prospecting, as he told James Smith:

Circumstances for past years have pressed me closer and though I have striven hard to get above them I have always been worsted, till now I find myself as badly off as I suppose it is well possible to be, without employment, without property, without prospects, and saddled with a load of debt. I write this to you because as a bushman and prospector I think you would be likely to sympathy [sic] with another less celebrated one, in distress ...⁶⁴

Bell believed he had already somehow incurred Smith's 'displeasure', which may explain why the latter appears not to have replied. They were never reconciled. In the late 1880s Bell considered prospecting in Victoria, the Australian Alps and even trying the Transvaal goldfields.⁶⁵ The prospect of his departure anguished Legislative Council president William Moore.⁶⁶ The colony, it seemed, was glad of Bell's services and wanted to keep him, but would do nothing to make his retention viable.

Discovery of the Renison lode in 1890

From March until August 1890 Bell prospected between Strahan and the Pieman River on the west coast for the Renison Bell Prospecting Association.⁶⁷ The Broken Hill boom had brought silver-lead to prominence on the Zeehan-Dundas field, and Bell's discovery of manganese iron gossan outcrops containing galena prompted the flotation of the Renison Bell Silver Mining Company, N.L. just in time for the crash of the Bank of Van Diemen's Land in 1891 which crippled the west coast mining sector.⁶⁸ Prematurely, Bell moved his family to Hobart in anticipation of settling them at Zeehan, where he had set up as a mining agent and obtained work on William R. Sale's survey of a railway from Waratah to Zeehan.⁶⁹ Not until the discovery of the so-called Gormanston Nugget, a three-ton boulder studded with cassiterite, in 1893 was there any inkling that the Renison Bell gossan contained a tin lode.⁷⁰

Tate River tin and Kalgoorlie gold

Finally the quest for cash drove Bell to the mainland, where he remained for most of the 1890s. Mine managers were far better paid in the larger colonies, although Bell's employment opportunities were probably limited by his ignorance of how to work a stamper battery.⁷¹ However, on this occasion an old mining connection worked in his favour. Former Launcestonian Alec Corrie, of Corrie and Company, Brisbane, offered him management of the Tate Alluvial Tin Mining Syndicate N.L. operation in northern Queensland. Bell's experience

sluicing tin in north-eastern Tasmania would have been crucial here. He arrived at the Tate in July 1893, his first task being to cut a six-mile head race through hard granite in order to facilitate hydraulic sluicing of 90 acres of ground.⁷² Race cutting took more than a year, as the tin price sank.⁷³ Flooding in March 1895 damaged infrastructure.⁷⁴ Bell was appointed a justice of the peace (magistrate) of the Tate River during that year, but there are no further reports of the mine's activity before his replacement by William A. Waddell, suggesting that either his job was done or Alec Corrie offered him better money in Western Australia.⁷⁵ While at the Tate, Bell severed his ties with the Society of Friends, one reason being that the society forbade oaths, making it impossible to carry out his duties as a magistrate. The second reason was that he superstitiously linked the society to his 'misfortunes'.⁷⁶

Divining rods, rather than prospecting dishes, might have been the making of millionaires when the cry of 'Gold!' rang out in Western Australia. Water, so often the prospector's bane in Tasmania, flooding his shafts and his river fords, here overrode even gold as his greatest need.⁷⁷ Desalinating condensers hummed in rippling heatwaves on the salt pans, and 'gnamma holes', natural wells in granite outcrops, were concealed by Aborigines as a means of curbing the white man's incursions. With the scarcity of water, a man's breath was too precious to waste on curses. 'Dry blowing'—blowing the dust and light particles from the prospecting dish, leaving the heavier ore behind—replaced cradling or sluicing. This extraction technique, both manual and mechanical, was so prevalent that at Coolgardie, Menzies recalled, the red dust from dry blowing

hung over the field like a cloud. It billowed and waved and disappeared into thin mist, to return again to settle into eyes and ears and mouth. This red dust, how we walked in it, breathed it, cursed it and wished for cold water to wash it away!⁷⁸

'Specking', simply studying the soil for nuggets, was also commonly employed.⁷⁹

In 1896, after prospecting at Roebourne and Nullagine, Bell managed the Wheel of Fortune group of gold mines at Smithfield near Kalgoorlie, until, having failed to float the mines in London, Moran and Company of Perth pulled the plug.⁸⁰ He hoped that while working for wages he would find claims he could work profitably for himself, and was forever seeking backing for new business schemes.⁸¹ For instance, he proposed pumping fresh water from outlying lakes to Kalgoorlie,⁸² and when that centre received its lifeline, the government water scheme, he tried to raise a company to prospect along the pipeline.⁸³ There were no takers.

Bell liked the country, although the new mining 'capital' itself, Kalgoorlie, was 'a horrid place, hot *dusty* [sic] and uncomfortable ...'⁸⁴ In March 1896, in early autumn, the dry heat still approached 40 degrees centigrade, and the flies were bad, but at least the nights were cool and free of mosquitoes and fleas.⁸⁵ Bell's eyes were constantly inflamed, and the cold nights and mornings that followed seemed to exacerbate the problem.⁸⁶

After being released by Moran and Company, Bell decided to return to prospecting the north-western goldfields for the winter, but eventually settled instead on working some gold shows he had leased.⁸⁷ The regular income which had trickled home to Phoebe was renewed when he took charge of a prospecting party near Balagundi, then managed the Adelaide-based Big Blow Gold Mining Company nearby at Bulong (a place previously known to miners, appropriately, as IOU).⁸⁸ For provisions he had to cycle twelve miles to Kalgoorlie, and he paid

another cyclist to cover that distance every day with his mail and telegrams. Many made a living serving isolated miners in this way.⁸⁹

Bell correctly forecast big things for the Bulong goldfield once its star, the Queen Margaret mine, started crushing.⁹⁰ However, when the Big Blow collapsed in March 1897, Bell joined the Lake Lefroy (Kambalda) gold rush.⁹¹ Ironically, for seven months he then battled a ‘wet’ shaft at Yerilla, 160 km north of Kalgoorlie, using the power of three horses to pump out the water, which presumably was put to good purpose.⁹² During this period he wired between £20 and £30 per month to his bank for his family’s sustenance, and tried unsuccessfully to interest speculators in a large quartz reef near Yerilla.⁹³

Bell’s pension: the final showdown

In 1898 Bell returned to Paradise, the rented family home at the Roman Catholic Glebe, Hobart, but the quest for money sent him to Zeehan to report on the Renison Bell mine; prospecting at Port Davey and the Huon River on behalf of Mount Lyell supremo Bowes Kelly; to the north-eastern tin mines and to Melbourne.⁹⁴ Bell reported that the Renison Bell mine had been revealed as ‘an immense mining property’ assaying 10 per cent tin, but that more development work was needed to prove its extent and value. Unfortunately for Bell, that work revealed a low grade deposit that was unworkable during his lifetime.⁹⁵ His absence in Zeehan when Mabel, his eldest daughter, died, must have caused him great anguish.⁹⁶

Figure 3: *George Renison Bell at Pelion huts while prospecting for the Great Western Railway Company in 1901.*



Source: Photo by J.W. Beattie courtesy of the West Coast Pioneers Museum, Zeehan

Yet the absences from home continued. Contributing regularly to newspaper columns, Bell turned each new prospecting expedition into a geological primer for that district. Such was a case when in early 1901 he adjourned to Pelion Plain, in the centre of today’s Cradle Mountain Lake St Clair National Park, prospecting for the Great Western Railway Company, which hoped he would make a mineral discovery to justify its grand railway scheme from

Hobart to Queenstown.⁹⁷ He also brought memories of his youth to bear, recalling how Bothwell grazier Humphrey Howells cleared a cart track from Great Lake to the Mersey River in order to establish a grazing run at what became known as Howells Plains half a century before.⁹⁸

By this time it would have been fair to ask why, if James Smith's pension justly rewarded him for contributing to Tasmania's prosperity, men like George Renison Bell, Mick and Bill McDonough and Steve Karlson, of Mount Lyell fame, had not likewise been rewarded. All of them had contributed to Tasmania's mining boom. Yet while Smith was a gentleman investor, Bell scraped a living as a mine manager and the remainder still chased a few colours while exposure to the wet and cold fixed itself in their ageing constitutions.

Table 1: Government pensions/annual allowances received by nineteenth-century Tasmanian mineral prospectors and their wives

Name	Discovery or achievement	Classification	Year first paid	Date of death	Annual amount	Total amount received
James 'Philosopher' Smith	Mount Bischoff tin	pension ⁹⁹	1879	30.05.1897	£200	£3,800
Mary Jane Smith widow of above		pension ¹⁰⁰	1897	09.01.1928	£100	£3,000
Frank Long	Zeehan silver-lead	gratuity ¹⁰¹	1903	07.12.1908	£50	£300
Mick McDonough	Mount Lyell gold	allowance	1906	30.04.1919	£100	£1,200
George Renison Bell	North-eastern tin	allowance	1907	02.09.1915	£100	£817.4.5
Phoebe Bell widow of above		allowance	1915	03.06.1922	£50	£338.4.5
George Meredith	Mount Heemskirk tin	allowance	1910	25.07.1917	£50	£353.7.2
Owen Meredith	Mount Heemskirk tin	allowance	1910	23.08.1927	£50	£790.11.10
Tom Currie	Cutting a track to the Queen River goldfield	allowance	1910	01.07.1919	£52	£468

The *Mining Act (1905)* allowed for rewards for the discovery of valuable mineral deposits, and several were granted, as set out in Table 1. When the Bell annuity of £100 finally went to committee in the House of Assembly in November 1905, the doubts voiced as to the legitimacy of his claim echoed the Smith pension debate 27 years earlier. The same personal biases and loyalties were brought to bear. Legislative Councillor R.G. Sadler, a well-known mining investor who had worked in partnership with two of Bell's rivals, Charles Adams (who claimed to have told Bell where to look for tin) and John Brooks, moved to defer the vote on the grounds that if Bell was rewarded without laying the doubts to rest, other claimants might apply for the same and prove the House in error. Another member, Batchelor, agreed with Sadler: a man from New Zealand had declared a prospector named McLoughlin the rightful north-eastern pioneer!¹⁰² Bell's pension was shelved.

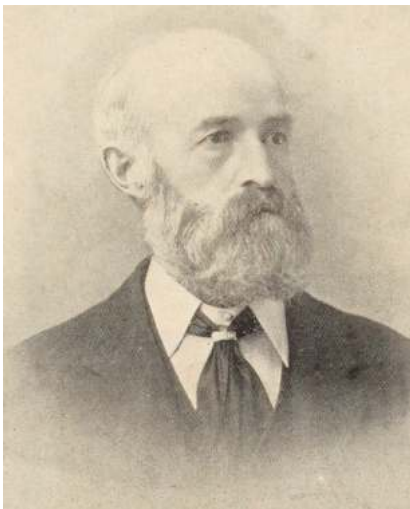
In 1907 a proposal to reward Bell with a pension was again vetoed by the government on the grounds that his claim had not been proven. An inquiry set up under Commissioner Edward L. Hall to settle the matter, once and for all, took evidence from ten applicants. John Brooks

claimed to have found tin at Patersonia with his father in 1872, and at Mount Cameron in 1873 on land later worked by the Purdue Mining Company.¹⁰³ Samuel Harrison stated that he had found ‘Ruby and Black Tin’ in the Golden Fleece Rivulet about three kilometres west of Georges Bay in 1873. Furthermore, he claimed to have introduced John Hunt and S.H. Wintle to tin at Georges Bay and Ruby Creek respectively, blaming illiteracy for his failure to publicise his finds before this.¹⁰⁴ There were no other serious applicants.

Hall found in Bell’s favour. He concluded that the first discovery of tin in the east or north-east was that claimed by John Brooks, at Patersonia in December 1872.¹⁰⁵ This was, however, ‘a bare discovery ... not turned to any profitable account’, and Brooks himself, Hall wrote, ‘being at the time of the discovery a minor probably acting under directions from his father, was not entitled to much credit’. Bell’s subsequent finds, on the other hand, were ‘the real beginnings of prospecting and tin mining in the district mentioned’. Samuel Harrison, Hall concluded, may have been a contemporaneous discoverer with Bell at Georges Bay, but had produced no evidence to back his claim.¹⁰⁶ Amid further bickering, Bell’s pension was finally agreed to by the House of Assembly on 23 October 1907, more than 30 years after his agitation for a government reward began.¹⁰⁷ It is possible that obtaining the pension absorbed more of

Bell’s time than making the mineral discoveries which his pension rewarded.

Figure 4: *George Renison Bell in 1907*



Source: Photo by Konrad, *Weekly Courier* (Launceston), p.23

Final years and legacy

In the first years of the 20th century the Bell family resettled in north-western Tasmania, from which base the inveterate prospector casually tested the hinterland and even his old stamping-ground of Ringarooma in his sixties and early seventies. Yet in 1907, when the Bells were tenants on a 78-acre farm at Spreyton, near Devonport, he explained to a puzzled tax commissioner that the reason his income was so small was that for years he had been kept by his sons, making him one of few parents who welcomed their adult children home as income relief.¹⁰⁸

Still, Bell remained full of ideas and energy, being a great reader and prolific letter writer. He wanted to turn the

‘neglected wonder’ Mount Anne in the south-west of Tasmania into a tourist destination, believing the chasm (‘Judds Chasm’) containing Lake Judd to be ‘the most wonderful natural curiosity in Australia’.¹⁰⁹

In 1908, at the age of 67, he won a £20 contract to cut a track from Tyenna near Mont Field to Port Davey via Mount Anne.¹¹⁰ By 1911 George and Phoebe Bell were renting Sunnyside, a house in Appledore Street (now Formby Road), Devonport, from William R Sale, the surveyor whom Bell had assisted in west coast railway survey work.¹¹¹ It was here that he died in 1915, aged 73.

Bell’s pension, redirected to Phoebe after his death, paid only £1,155 (see Table 1). His benefit to the Tasmanian economy is incalculable—although no amount of economic stimulus

constituted an obligation that Tasmania should find him a livelihood. Metals X’s Renison tin mine is now the largest tin lode mine in Australia. Its success was hard won through perseverance and technological advancement, particularly during the 20th century.¹¹²

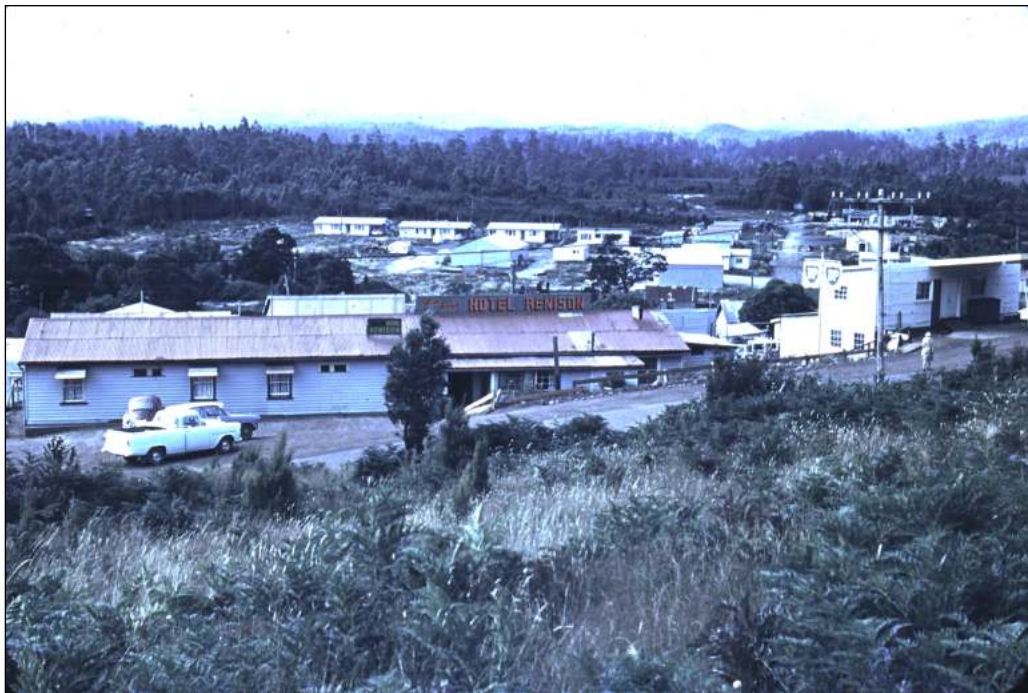
As the Renison mine’s centenary approached it was asserted by some that since Bell identified galena, not cassiterite, in the Renison gossan, the palm of discoverer should be given instead to Ringrose Nicholson, who pegged a cassiterite lease on the Ring River soon after Bell pegged the Renison leases in 1890.¹¹³ This punishment of a prospector, working in remote bushland with nothing but a geological pick, for failing to divine the principal ore in a lode merely outcropping on the surface, is reminiscent of efforts to discredit James Smith for the discovery of the Mount Bischoff tin lode. Smith, it was said, was looking for gold, and did not recognise the tin when he saw it.¹¹⁴ Never mind that it was too dark to properly identify the mineral when he washed it, or that he had probably only seen cassiterite samples sketched in a book or in a mineralogical display.¹¹⁵ Perhaps it would be fair to recognise the efforts of both Bell and Nicholson, who were working independently of each other in the same area, in Renison’s origins.

When the Mersey Bluff Cemetery at Devonport was closed, Bell’s grandson John Bell removed his headstone, which was later placed at the Renison mine as a memorial to

George Renison Bell
Pioneer and Mining Expert
Sept.3 1915
Born Bothwell, Nov. 1840

In 1974 a monument was erected outside the Derby School House—now the local museum—by the Ringarooma Council to commemorate the centenary of George Renison Bell’s first payable discoveries of tin in north-eastern Tasmania.

Figure 6: *Renison Bell Township 1960s.*



Source: Photo by Bery Fowler courtesy of Thomas Gunn.

Endnotes:

¹ George Renison Bell diary, 13 January 1912, NS2709/1/1, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office (hereafter TAHO).

² E.A. (Alec) Bell, 'The Origin of Renison', *Advocate*, 5 January 1974, p. 11.

³ Communication with Scott Bell, Launceston, March 2016.

⁴ James Smith to George Renison Bell, 8 July 1876, NS234/2/1/3, TAHO.

⁵ Sarah Bell's life history, Book 9, pp. 368-70, r by Scott Bell, Launceston [hereafter referred to as SBL].

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 373 and 27 September 1841, pp. 381-82.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 February 1842, pp. 407-08.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Book 1, 11 March 1844.

⁹ G. Renison Bell, 'Woman's influence', *Mercury*, 1 July 1892, p. 2.

¹⁰ Sarah Bell diary, Book 4, 21 April and 14 May 1854, SBL.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Book 3, 13 January 1853; Book 4, 7, 10 and 13 January 1854.

¹² *Ibid.*, diary, Book 5, 21 November 1854.

¹³ Inscription in front of Bell diary, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.

¹⁴ Sarah Bell diary, Book 5, 14 August 1855; Book 8, 26 December 1856, p. 33; Book 8, 12 January 1857, p. 41.

¹⁵ 'Shipping News', *Lyttleton Times*, 17 March 1858, p. 4; Sarah Bell diary, Book 8, 2 September 1857, p. 68 and Book 9, 17 April 1858, p. 97.

¹⁶ For the Fulton family tree, see Ancestry.com.au, <http://person.ancestry.com.au/tree/55764235/person/40002559853/story>, accessed 5 March 2016.

¹⁷ Sarah Bell diary, Book 10, 19 January 1860, p.7 and 7 March 1860, p. 22.

¹⁸ George Renison Bell diary, 18 March 1860, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.

¹⁹ Sarah Bell diary, Book 12, 26 September and 8 October 1861.

²⁰ Bell, in his diary (NS2709/1/1, TAHO) stated that in 1862 he went stock riding 'at Strath Tieri [sic] to Campbell Thomsons'. Sarah Bell claimed that he returned to work for the Fultons at West Taieri. See her diary, Book 12, 4 July 1862.

²¹ George Renison Bell diary, 1867, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.

²² *Ibid.*, 3 December 1867, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.

²³ *Ibid.*, undated entry, NS2709/1/1, TAHO. Bell held gold mining leases at Pipers River and Back Creek in 1870 ('Official Notices', *Launceston Examiner*, 17 February 1870, p. 3; 'Leases of Land Applied For', *Cornwall Chronicle*, 20 August 1870, p. 13).

²⁴ G.R. Bell, 'Mountain Climbing', *Examiner*, 11 October 1913, p. 8; 'The Cradle Mountain', *Examiner*, 10 February 1914, p. 3.

²⁵ George Renison Bell diary, 24 February 1873, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.

²⁶ William Ritchie to James Smith, 1 October 1873, no. 279, NS234/3/1/2, TAHO.

²⁷ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Tin Discoveries: Prospecting the North-East: Interesting Historical sketch', *Examiner*, 22 October 1907, p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Another Piece of Wellington', *Examiner*, 18 May 1906, p. 7.

³⁰ George Renison Bell to Gilbert Clifton, London, 25 June 1896, SBL.

³¹ E.A. (Alec) Bell, 'Bell's find boosted state', *Saturday Evening Mercury*, 16 March 1974, p. 31.

³² 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Tin Discoveries: Prospecting the North-East: Interesting Historical Sketch', *Examiner*, 22 October 1907, p. 2.

³³ Donald Campbell, 'The First Discoverers of Tin on the North-East Coast', *Examiner*, 8 August 1907, p. 3.

³⁴ In 1907 Martin testified that Bell was the first to discover tin at the Boobyalla River. See Archibald Martin to George Renison Bell, 14 March 1907, SBL.

³⁵ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Tin Discoveries: Prospecting the North-East: Interesting Historical Sketch', *Examiner*, 22 October 1907, p. 2. A.W. Loone also credited 'good living' Bell with being the first to preach the gospel on the north-eastern tin fields, that is, that he read the Bible around the campfire to his fellow miners on Sundays. See, A.W. Loone, *Tasmania's North-East: a Comprehensive History of North-Eastern Tasmania and its People*, Launceston, 1928, p. 67.

³⁶ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Tin Discoveries: Prospecting the North-East: Interesting Historical Sketch', *Examiner*, 22 October 1907, p. 2.

³⁷ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Tin Discoveries on the North-East Coast', *Examiner*, 21 October 1907, p. 2.

³⁸ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Tin Discoveries: Prospecting the North-East: Interesting Historical Sketch', *Examiner*, 22 October 1907, p. 2.

- ³⁹ See, for example, 'Frome River Tin Mining Company, Registered, Ringarooma', *Launceston Examiner*, 6 September 1879, p. 1.
- ⁴⁰ George Renison Bell to James Smith, 6 July 1876, NS234/3/1/5, TAHO. Smith had married in September 1874 after the Mount Bischoff tin mine had won him financial security.
- ⁴¹ Dennis Hodgkinson, 'Looking Back', *Northern Scene*, 14 April 1982.
- ⁴² George Renison Bell to James Smith, 10 June 1876, NS234/3/1/5, TAHO.
- ⁴³ William Ritchie to James Smith, 8 May 1876, NS234/3/1/5; George Renison Bell to James Smith, 7 August 1877, NS234/3/1/6, TAHO.
- ⁴⁴ Marriage certificate, SBL.
- ⁴⁵ Phoebe Bell's diary of the honeymoon is in the possession of Judy Cole, Devonport.
- ⁴⁶ George Renison Bell, 'The Pioneer of Tin Discovery on the North-East Coast of Tasmania: a Brief Statement of Facts', AB948/5/60, pp. 5-6, TAHO.
- ⁴⁷ See Nic Haygarth, *Baron Bischoff: Philosopher Smith and the Birth of Tasmanian Mining*, the author, Perth, Tas., 2004, pp. 117-19.
- ⁴⁸ 'Bankruptcy', *Hobart Town Gazette*, 14 October 1879, p. 1116; George Renison Bell to Phoebe Bell, 21 May 1880, SBL.
- ⁴⁹ George Renison Bell diary, 1 January 1884, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ⁵⁰ George Renison Bell to Phoebe Bell, 21 May 1880, SBL.
- ⁵¹ James Smith to James Fenton, 26 May 1882, NS234/2/1/7, TAHO.
- ⁵² Donald Campbell to James Smith 6 September 1886, no. 182, NS234/3/1/14, TAHO.
- ⁵³ Glyn Roberts, 'The Tasmanian Government and the Metal Mining Industry—an Administrative History: 1880-1914', Ph.D. thesis, University of Tasmania, 2003, p. 125.
- ⁵⁴ George Renison Bell to Francis Cotton senior, 25 November 1882, DX19/87/1, University of Tasmania Archive.
- ⁵⁵ G.J. Dickens, *The Mount Cameron Water Race—a Century of Operation*, Mineral Resources Tasmania Report 1990/15, Hobart, 1990, p. 1.
- ⁵⁶ Mount Cameron Water Race plaque, erected by Mineral Resources Tasmania in 1996; cited in G.J. Dickens, *The Mount Cameron Water Race Board—a History of Management*, Mineral Resources of Tasmania Report 1992/21, revised edition, Hobart, (no publication date).
- ⁵⁷ George Renison Bell to Phoebe Bell, 6 March 1885, SBL.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ George Renison Bell diary, 1 January 1885, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ⁶⁰ S.H. Wintle, 'The Discovery of Ore at the East Coast', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 September 1886, p. 3.
- ⁶¹ John Smith, 'Discovery of Tin at Mount Cameron', *Tasmanian*, 19 February 1887, p. 19.
- ⁶² George Renison Bell diary, 22 March 1886, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1898, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ⁶⁴ George Renison Bell to James Smith, 5 June 1889, no. 213, NS234/3/1/17, TAHO.
- ⁶⁵ Francis [?] Staling [?] to George Renison Bell, 11 June 1888, SBL.
- ⁶⁶ William Moore to George Renison Bell, 4 October 1889, SBL Launceston.
- ⁶⁷ 'Renison Bell Prospecting Association', *Mercury*, 19 September 1890, p. 3.
- ⁶⁸ See the company prospectus, *Mercury*, 7 January 1892, p. 1.
- ⁶⁹ George Renison Bell diary, 27 September 1898, NS2709/1/1, TAHO; 'Railway Surveys', *Launceston Examiner*, 11 December 1890, p. 2.
- ⁷⁰ 'Zeehan', *Launceston Examiner*, 23 November 1893, p. 11.
- ⁷¹ George Renison Bell to Alec Corrie, 23 September 1897, SBL.
- ⁷² 'Tate River Notes', *North Queensland Register*, 11 October 1893, p. 33.
- ⁷³ 'The Tate Tin Mines', *Northern Miner*, 4 September 1894, p. 3; 'Tate Alluvial Tin Mining Syndicate: Annual Meeting', *Northern Miner*, 6 October 1894, p. 3.
- ⁷⁴ 'Miscellaneous', *Queenslander*, 9 March 1895, p. 472.
- ⁷⁵ Queensland Archives site, <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/Researchers/CollectionsDownloads/Documents/JPsIndex1891-1900.pdf>, accessed 23 April 2016.
- ⁷⁶ George Renison Bell diary, 27 December 1898, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ⁷⁷ David W. Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand: a Narrative of Five Years' Pioneering and Exploration in Western Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 1973 (originally published 1898), p. 126.
- ⁷⁸ Leslie Robert Menzies, *A Gold Seeker's Odyssey*, John Long Ltd., London, 1937, p. 107.
- ⁷⁹ Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand*, p. 131.
- ⁸⁰ George Renison Bell to McDonald, 24 June 1896, SBL.
- ⁸¹ George Renison Bell to Alec Corrie, 23 September 1897, SBL.

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- ⁸² George Renison Bell to G.J. Moran, 30 July 1896, SBL.
- ⁸³ George Renison Bell to Frank Moran, 5 August 1896, SBL.
- ⁸⁴ George Renison Bell to Alec Corrie, 7 March 1896, SBL.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 March 1896, SBL.
- ⁸⁶ George Renison Bell to Groom, 4 May 1896, SBL.
- ⁸⁷ George Renison Bell to Groom, 29 June 1896; George Renison Bell to Earle Eady, 24 July 1896, SBL.
- ⁸⁸ George Renison Bell to Big Blow Gold Mining Company, 31 August 1896, SBL.
- ⁸⁹ George Renison Bell to Templar, 7 September 1896, SBL; Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand*, p. 119.
- ⁹⁰ George Renison Bell to Frank Corrie, 23 November 1896, SBL.
- ⁹¹ George Renison Bell to C. Newman, 17 March 1897, SBL.
- ⁹² George Renison George Renison Bell to Alec Corrie, 23 September 1907, SBL.
- ⁹³ George Renison Bell to Corrie and Co., 18 June 1897, SBL.
- ⁹⁴ George Renison Bell diary, 1 January 1900, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ⁹⁵ Kerry Pink and Patsy Crawford, *Renison the Slumbering Giant*, Renison Limited, Zeehan, 1995, p. 26.
- ⁹⁶ George Renison Bell diary, 27 December 1898, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ⁹⁷ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'To Barn Bluff from Mole Creek', *Mercury*, 6 March 1901, p. 2; and 'Pelion Country: II', *Mercury*, 20 March 1901, p. 5.
- ⁹⁸ 'G.R.B.' (George Renison Bell), 'Pelion District: III', *Mercury*, 3 April 1901, p. 5.
- ⁹⁹ *James Smith Pension Act* (1879).
- ¹⁰⁰ *Payment of Pension to Mrs Mary Jane Smith Act* (1897).
- ¹⁰¹ Frank Long's allowance was paid in £1 per week instalments to a storekeeper, who provided Long with rations to that value. Presumably the idea was to prevent him going on a bender. See 'Payment of a Gratuity to Frank Long', TRE5/179, no. 129, TAHO.
- ¹⁰² 'Mr G.R. Bell's Case', *Mercury*, 2 November 1905, p. 5.
- ¹⁰³ John Brooks to W.H. Wallace, Secretary for Mines, 28 March 1907; John Brooks statement, 30 May 1907, AB948/5/60, TAHO.
- ¹⁰⁴ Samuel Harrison to W.H. Wallace, Secretary for Mines, 21 March 1907, AB948/5/60, TAHO.
- ¹⁰⁵ Edward L. Hall to W.H. Wallace, Secretary for Mines, 23 July 1907, AB948/5/60, TAHO.
- ¹⁰⁶ Edward L. Hall to secretary for mines, 23 July 1907, AB948/5/60, TAHO.
- ¹⁰⁷ 'House of Assembly', *Mercury*, 24 October 1907, p. 6.
- ¹⁰⁸ George Renison Bell to M. Hogg, Tax Commissioner, 28 April 1907, SBL; See also George Renison Bell diary, 5 June 1904, NS2709/1/1, TAHO.
- ¹⁰⁹ 'A Neglected Wonder', *Mercury*, 26 February 1907, p. 2; 'Mount Ann' [sic], *Mercury*, 8 January 1910, p. 4.
- ¹¹⁰ George Renison Bell to Alec Hean, Minister for Lands and Works, 1 April 1908, SBL.
- ¹¹¹ *Tasmanian Government Gazette*, 31 January 1911, p. 250.
- ¹¹² See Pink and Crawford, *Renison the Slumbering Giant*.
- ¹¹³ See discussion of this by Pink and Crawford, *Renison the Slumbering Giant*, p. 7.
- ¹¹⁴ See, for example, Ferd Kayser, 'Mount Bischoff', *Proceedings of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science*, A. Morton (ed.), vol. IV, Hobart, 1892, p. 342.
- ¹¹⁵ James Smith, 'Exploring', notes, NS234/1/14, TAHO.