

# Tracing the Tiger

## Police participation in the hunt for the Tasmanian Tiger

by Darcy Erwin

In the years following the death of Tasmania's last captive Thylacine, experienced police bushmen led a number of searches to unearth evidence of the animal's existence in the wild. More surprisingly, hardened police detectives were employed to interrogate individuals who had claimed to have come into contact with the elusive 'Tiger'.

The Tasmanian Tiger, *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, had never enjoyed popularity; at least not in its lifetime. Poisoned by trappers, maligned by shepherds and landowners, and mercilessly pursued by bounty hunters, it was virtually doomed from the time white settlers landed in Van Diemen's Land.

Large scale bounty hunting, together with habitat loss and disease, led to sightings becoming rare by 1915. The last verified sighting of a Thylacine in the wild, was of one killed in 1930. By this time, the only chance of viewing a living animal was to peer through the bars of the old Hobart Zoo.

Originally, the zoo opened in 1895 and was run by Mary Grant Roberts from her private residence. Born Mary Lindsay, in Hobart on 15 April 1841, she was to marry businessman Harry Roberts, and together they purchased two acres of land in Battery Point between Newcastle Street and Montpelier Road, on which they built Beaumaris. Very much a business-woman, Roberts traded in animals such as Tigers and Devils, paying trappers for specimens which she sold to overseas and mainland zoos such as London, Wellington, Durban, Melbourne and Taronga Park. With a strong interest in wildlife, Roberts was also involved in the formation of the Game Preservation Society. She was also the founder of the Girl Guide movement in Tasmania.

After her death in 1921, the Beaumaris collection was left to her daughter Ida who eventually negotiated with Hobart City Council to take it over on a new site. To this end, the old freestone quarry (the source of Parliament House sandstone) near the entrance to Government House and the Botanical Gardens was developed to house zoo exhibits including lions, polar bears, zebras and an elephant, as well as a number of exotic birds.

Retaining its former name of Beaumaris, the zoo, although unfinished, was officially opened on 2 February 1923. The last captive Thylacine died on the site on 7 September 1936 and the zoo itself

closed on 31 October 1937, following concerns about the animals' well-being and rising costs. Ironically, it was in the year that the last captive Thylacine died that the animal was declared by the government to be a protected species. By then, of course, it was far too late. That last Tiger was trapped by Walter Mullins at Tyenna in February 1924, along with its mother and two siblings. Fondly called 'Benjamin', the animal was actually a female and was one of a number kept by the zoo during its operation.

From this time onwards, a succession of expeditions were mounted, both officially and unofficially, often spurred on by sightings, most of which were unsubstantiated.

Beaumaris House, Battery Point, as it is today



In 1937, the Animals and Birds Protection Board organised a major search for the animal. By law, the Board alone could grant search permits, although this didn't deter others from embarking upon quiet expeditions.

Popularly known as the 'Fauna Board', the Animals and Birds Protection Board was a regulatory body working under the charter of the Animals and Birds Protection Act which came into operation

on 15 April 1929. This Act was a major change, shifting control from the police to a representative and non-political board which had the functions of the protection, conservation and regulation of wildlife and habitat.

The Board comprised the Commissioner of Police (who was ex officio chairman until 1940) and ten others appointed for three year terms, usually including a seconded police officer. The Board was in the habit of arranging police officers to be seconded to it to carry out the inspectorial functions,

but these were gradually replaced by wildlife officers. Undoubtedly, it was due to the Commissioner's influence as a Board member that experienced police bushmen were able to be seconded. The expenses they incurred while on patrol, however, were claimed against the Board itself (Police Gazette Notice 16/1931).

Section 17 of the Act provided for the Commissioner to detail members of the Police Force for special duty as rangers, performing duties assigned by the Board. The section also included provision for members of the Police Department's clerical staff being made available to assist the Board.

The 1937 search was led by Sergeant Mervyn Summers and included another police officer and a bushman. The search concentrated on remote portions of the north-west, but found only traces, and heard only stories of sightings of the animal. Summers recommended that a sanctuary be established in the Arthur-Pieman region, but nothing came of it.

Summers, a station hand at St Leonards when he joined the Force in 1901, had seen service in South Africa as a troop sergeant in the 1st Imperial Bushmen. He had a chequered and varied career, much of it as a detective, and had a good knowledge of bushcraft and horsemanship. Commended in

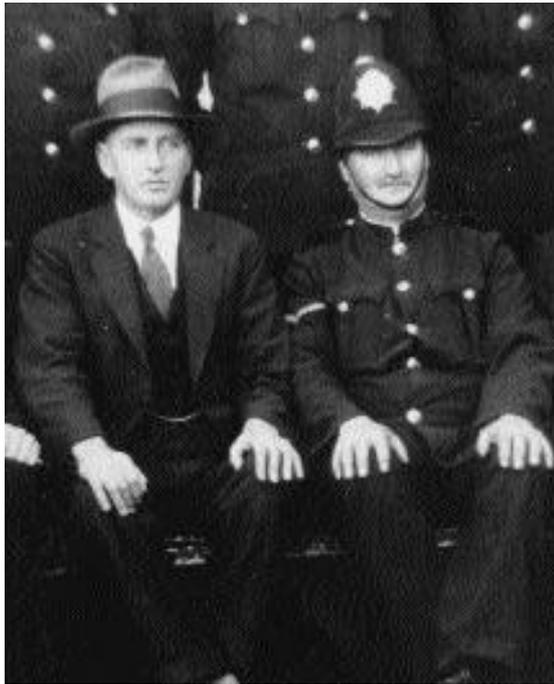
1926 following the search for William Weston, lost on the overland track from Mount Read to Queenstown, Summers had a career of almost 43 unbroken years when he retired on 4 November 1944. According to his daughter, he never used his third baptismal name of 'Percival' as he thought it was 'sissy'. Mervyn Alfred Percival Summers was certainly no sissy.

In November 1937, the Animals and Birds Protection Board sent Trooper Arthur Fleming, together with Leslie Williams, a prospector, to investigate the Raglan-Cardigan area of the west coast ranges, but again, no significant traces were found.

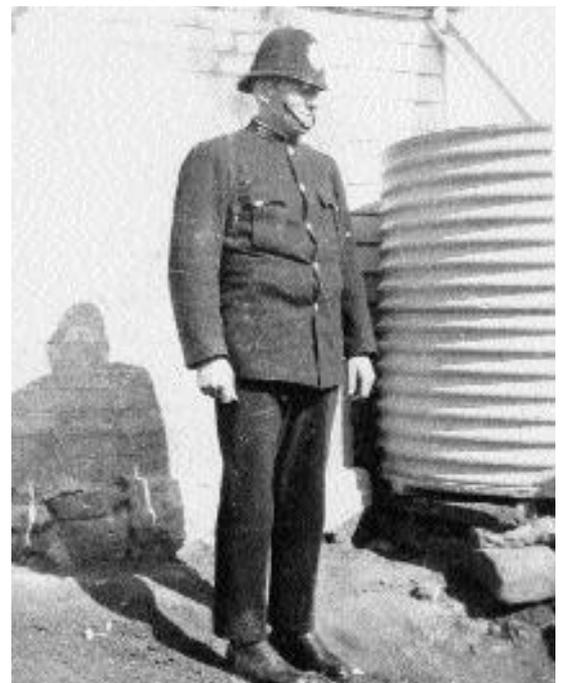
This was arduous work, carried out in severe and rugged conditions, and Fleming was an ideal person for the job. Born on 3 November 1899 and appointed in 1932, he was a labourer from Oatlands, and a powerful man, just over six-feet in height. He was seconded to the Fauna Board on 10 December 1942. Fleming was very strong, and a most capable bushman who seemed to revel in the difficult country and conditions. Ralph Gowlland (author of *Trampled Wilderness*) recently described his old friend as "an amazing man who led a full life." He had, said Gowlland, the strength and ability to always keep going regardless of conditions, and was what some would call 'a man's man'.

In November 1938, Fleming, in a party of six including Trooper Boyd, Constable Royal, two gold miners from the area (A.J. Best and C Gordon), and the noted naturalist Michael Sharland, again set off under the auspices of the Animals and Birds Protection Board to search the area around the old Jane River goldfields in the Raglan/Collingwood Ranges and near Frenchman's Cap. Following this ten day expedition, Fleming and Sharland too were to recommend a sanctuary in the Jane River area.

Some may still remember Robert Boyd, who served



Mervyn Summers with fellow Boer War veteran Louis Herbert



Arthur Fleming at Parattah Station in 1933



Arthur Fleming in his element

for 40 years until his death in 1971. He was then gaoler at Launceston, a position he had filled since 1963. He is often said to have been the last mounted trooper (at Fitzgerald) but this is incorrect.

In November 1945, the director of Victoria's Sir Colin Mackenzie Sanctuary at Healesville, David Fleay, gained permission to capture a breeding pair of Tigers. The tireless Fleming was again in this party which headed for the Jane River – yet again with no result. Eric Guiler was later to pay tribute to these men, especially Sharland and Fleming, who "endured tough conditions which were utterly miserable at times and this was without the benefit of modern, light-weight gear and waterproofs. Arthur Fleming humped a 70 pound (approximately 32kg) pack on these trips over rugged country which is difficult even without a pack – a feat which is still talked about around campfires. These men had to walk everywhere, whereas nowadays we can drive a four wheel drive vehicle nearly to the Jane River. These factors made their feats even more remarkable".

Prior to joining the Force, Arthur Fleming had been a shepherd on Skittle Ball Plains, and in common with many others who battled to earn a living during the depression years, he had hunted in the winter, and carried supplies into the osmiridium mining town of Adamsfield. His epic crossing of The Thumbs, east of Adamsfield, carrying a 204 pound (92kg) pack is legendary. The extraordinary load consisted of two bags of sugar, a barrow wheel, and hopper plates. Fleming resigned while a trooper at Hobart in 1951 and worked thereafter with Freshwater Fisheries until his retirement in 1964. At the time of his retirement, he held the position of chief inspector of the Inland Fisheries Commission and was succeeded by Ray Haslock.

During his lifetime Fleming's interest in fishing and fisheries was great, and he had served in almost every capacity in the interests of fishing. The Annual Report of the Inland Fisheries Commission for 1963-1964 said of Arthur Fleming that "His experience is unique in Tasmania, in that it embraced a wide range of interests including inland fisheries, wildlife, geology, sea fisheries and legal matters." He died aged 77 on 19 November 1976.

Not long after Arthur Fleming's resignation, another police officer, Trooper William Chequer of Hamilton, was fishing near the head of the Florentine River in March of 1952. According to Michael Sharland, he saw an animal which looked like a large cat, but when it leapt onto a log about 30 yards away, both he and his companion identified it as a Tiger. Bill Chequer resigned as sergeant at New Norfolk in November 1963, just over two years after earning a high commendation for a river rescue in very cold waters.

The first official search organised by the Animals and Birds Protection Board came about after a number of alleged sightings in the Corinna area, the name itself being an Aboriginal word for the Tiger. Sergeant George Hanlon, who was seconded to the Fauna Board on 19 July 1954, and another Board member, Phillip Wigg Sergeant, searched in April 1957; they were both very capable men and they found nothing.

Hanlon was a bushman of substantial experience and reputation, and in his own words, had had considerable experience since his school days. Born in 1916, appointed a special constable in 1940, and a constable the following year, he was a carpenter from Ellendale, and like Fleming, was a big man.



George Hanlon

He was commended for his involvement in a number of searches, particularly the search for Richard Fahey of Nabageena who went missing in the north-west in 1956, the recovery of the body of John Stuart at Scoparia Saddle in the Eastern Arthurs in the same year, and (together with Robert Martyn and Earl Stewart) the recovery of human remains in a remote area of the west coast in 1963. In the words of his commendation, the latter highlighted his "fortitude, courage and tenacity in circumstances involving danger and discomfort over a period of more than two weeks." On 1 January 1964 he was awarded a British Empire Medal (Civil Division) for services to the Animals and Birds Protection Board since 1954, particularly in organising and executing bush rescue work. Dr Guiler, then chairman of the Board, had approached the Premier's Office to 'recommend some form of tangible recognition of George Hanlon's outstanding services', and this was supported by the Commissioner of Police.

Robert Martyn himself was an interesting individual and an excellent bushman who had a vast knowledge of the southern part of Tasmania. In 1955 he played a central role in the search for, and

rescue of, Norman Ridler on the Jane River goldfield, and later assisted Hanlon with special duty on the west coast in the latter part of 1961. For this he earned a letter of appreciation from the Board for his own untiring efforts. Both Hanlon and Martyn had carried out a very difficult task and were subjected to considerable hardship in rugged country.

After Inspector McIntyre brought further sightings to the Board's notice in September 1958, an area near Rossarden was monitored by McIntyre, Guiler and an assistant for almost a year and traps were set to no avail. Norman Douglas ('Doug') McIntyre, born in 1909 and appointed to the Force in 1936 was from Ouse and a shepherd by trade. He was seconded to the Board on 1 July 1945 for four years and again on 20 November 1950.



Doug McIntyre

Arthur Fleming, still on the trail of the Tiger, visited the site at least once, while McIntyre himself sighted tracks there on 1 November 1960. At this time, George Hanlon was still investigating reports of sightings. McIntyre was also involved in the follow-up of a sighting in the Trowutta area in 1959 (it was only a few kilometres from Trowutta that the last known killing of a Thylacine by Wilf Batty occurred). Both Hanlon and Guiler were to investigate another alleged trapping in the same area not long after.

The second Woolnorth expedition of May-June 1960 included Hanlon, Guiler and Tom McMahon of the University of Tasmania Photographic Section. A third expedition took place in 1961.

It was in the same year that George Hanlon was returning home from duty in the midlands and was

dragged it outside and left it, but it had disappeared on their return to camp.

When Morrison appeared in Hobart, he was subjected to police questioning but his story remained unchanged. He was even accompanied to the Museum by McIntyre to view a Devil, in case he was mistaken in his identification. On the basis of this incident, Inspector Hanlon, Reuben Hooper and Eric Guiler went to Sandy Cape and found that the scene matched the story in every detail. Although the story itself was to change over the years, and Morrison himself drowned in 1980, Guiler regarded him as "a most convincing and unshakable witness in the face of skilled cross-questioning by police".

By 1962, the number of reported sightings led the Government (prompted by the Animals and Birds Protection Board) to financially back an expedition which took place in 1963-1964 and consisted of five members under the field supervision of Inspector George Hanlon. He was assisted by wildlife officers Reuben Hooper and Ken Harmon, snarer Ray Martin, and Eric Guiler. This time, the search area was on the west coast, covering the area from Woolnorth to Balfour. Again, the Tiger was not to show.

Later, Guiler was to describe this outing as being tedious, and hard work in most wretched conditions – rough, wet, miserable and exhausting, culminating in three of the expeditioners being hurt when their vehicle overturned. Time, said Guiler, had since dulled such gruesome things as Hanlon's wallaby stew!

The search for the Tiger has, of course, never really ended and many are firmly convinced that it lives still, in the vastness of the Tasmanian bush. After the expedition of 1963-1964, police took no further part in the searches – at least not officially.

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attacked when he approached Norman Stephenson, an escapee from Lachlan Park Hospital (New Norfolk) on 4 May 1961. Left unconscious on the Midlands Highway and later admitted to hospital, he was off duty for almost two weeks afterwards. Some years later in 1976, George Hanlon collapsed and was dangerously ill for a number of weeks. He eventually recovered from what came to be recognised as the aftermath of that attack, but was not to work again. He was compensated for his injuries and retired on the grounds of ill-health on 12 October 1977.

Probably the most talked about sighting occurred at Sandy Cape in August 1961 where two fishermen, L. Thompson and B. Morrison, were camped. Allegedly, Morrison clubbed a marauding animal during the night, and next morning found the body of a half-grown Thylacine on the floor of the hut. He

Unfortunately, most of the old police bushmen mentioned in this story have also disappeared, but they still live on in our memories of them. These were tough and very capable bushmen, bred to survive and with an intense love for the Tasmanian wilderness and the protection of its natural assets. Hopefully, one day, the rich lives and exploits of these men and many others like them, will be properly documented for posterity.

In the compilation of this article, I am indebted to the work of Eric Guiler relating to the Tasmanian Tiger; to Ralph Gowlland for his comments and photographs; to Viv Spencer of Inland Fisheries for sharing memoirs and photos of the Fleming family; to the Tasmaniana Collection of the State Library for records relating to the Beaumaris Zoo, and to those extant records of the Police Department which provide background on the officers mentioned.