

Kosciusko or Townsend?

By E. K. and T. W. Mitchell

THERE seems to me to be no doubt that Strzelecki did climb Mount Townsend and name it Kosciusko. In this district to this day all the old hands (and numbers of the young ones, too) will point out Mount Townsend as "Kosci". From this side Townsend is definitely the "highest protuberance of the Australian Alps". The eye automatically picks it out and leaves Kosciusko unnoticed. The peak we know as Kosciusko cannot be seen from the Murray Valley itself near Towong; one has to move further into Victoria, in the vicinity of Corryong, before Kosciusko comes into view.

Conversely, Towong and the Murray are clearly visible from Mount Townsend, but not from Kosciusko, owing to the intermission of Mount Townsend, Mount Abbott and the ridge which runs south from the latter peak to the mouth of the Wilkinson Valley.

In an endeavour to obtain helpful data contributing to the discussion, we examined two old records of trips to "Kosciusko". One is a faded diary of our aunt, Mrs. Chisholm (née E. I. Mitchell) who, in company with Messrs. Jas. and R. Findlay, W. Stuckey and her brother, P. Mitchell, left Bringenbrong on Tuesday, 30th December, 1884. Early on in the faded, fifty-six year old writing, runs the sentence: ". . . and refreshing the inner man about a mile from the Wall we faced this 'our first difficulty'. We admired (through Mr. F. Sen. glass) Kosciusko, and longed to be on top." Now what we know as "Kosciusko" cannot be seen from the top of the Geehi Wall, but Townsend can.

The route of approach this party used would be almost identical with Strzelecki's.

Later on, after describing the ascent via the Leatherbarrel, Miss Mitchell (as she was then) records: ". . . and after admiring several small lakes near the top we left our horses and climbed up to the top." This again points to Mount Townsend as, had they gone to the top of our Kosciusko, they would not have been obliged to leave their horses.

The next document in our possession that we examined was a pink-covered, printed pamphlet published in 1887 by a Melbourne chemist, Charles Agar Atkin, recording a trip he made to "Kosciusko" and illustrated with some of the writer's photographs. He left Towong on Monday, 17th January, 1887, and, riding up the "Kancoban River" (i.e. the Swampy), spent the night at "Tom Groggins". After crossing the Indi he ascended the Leatherbarrel and records seeing over 30 wild horses. He continues: "We camp alongside the lake for lunch . . . After taking a photo of the range . . ." (The photo shows Lake Cootapatamba) ". . . We pack our traps and make another start; our last stage before reaching the object of our visit, the top of the highest peak of the Australian Alps—Mount Kosciusko'. It is the same kind of climbing, up one steep range and down another, till at length we come to a halt at the foot of the Mount; the horses can go no further . . . We reached the summit with some difficulty. There are thousands of immense granite boulders and shapeless rocks, some of which are balanced one upon another as if a good push would put them over. On the highest point is erected a high cairn . . . erected by Mr. Alexander Black, now Surveyor-General of Victoria, as being the highest point."

An indication of the spirit of the age is contained in the next paragraph:—"Here we drank the Queen's health, and with hats off sang 'God Save Our Gracious Queen'." He then continues:—"On a piece of tin were inscribed the

names of three ladies—Miss Mitchell, of Bringenbrong, who, I am informed, was the first lady to ascend the mount (with her brother), Miss Findlay and Miss Wilson, who went with my esteemed friend, Mr. Findlay”.

Mr. Atkin is under the impression that Mount Townsend, as we know it, is Mount Kosciusko, and Australia's highest point.

In the early part of Mr. Atkin's pamphlet he quotes a letter, written by Dr. von Lendenfeld, in Sydney, on the 21st January, 1885, to the “Honourable J. P. Abbott, M.P., Minister of Mines”. It is headed “Report by Dr. R. von Lendenfeld on the Result of his Recent Examination of the Central Parts of the Australian Alps”. The first paragraph records:—“The summit is rather flat—a hundred people might have room on it at a time, but still the plateau of the summit—the Gipfel Plateau—is not near so tame, flat and extended as on Mount Townsend. . . . This is the peak, in all probability, previously ascended by Baron von Mueller, Professor Neumayer, Count Strzelecki, and many others”.

This seems to us that he is calling our Kosciusko Mount Townsend, as the summit area of our Kosciusko is much wider and flatter than the boulder-studded rounded summit of Mount Townsend. He seems to be still under the impression that Strzelecki's Kosciusko is the highest peak of the continent. No one could call the top of our Mount Townsend tame, flat and extended. If von Lendenfeld announced to the world that our Townsend was not the highest peak, as stated in the A. & N.Z.Y.B. article, he must have done it later in 1885 than the 21st January.

Mr. Atkin also quotes from a work entitled “The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia”, edited by Andrew Garran, M.A., LL.D. On page 189 of what Mr. Atkin describes as a most graphic and faithful description of the Bogong Range, runs the script:—“For picturesque variety, the Bogong Range can scarcely be surpassed . . . teeming as it does with lofty peaks and softly rounded domes, solitary heights which no human foot has trodden since the beginning of the world. . . . During the winter months, the summits of the higher mountains are clothed in robes of dazzling snow, stainless as an infant's soul, which glitter like helmets and cuirasses of plated silver in the sunlight. . . . (Note by authors: He has obviously never come a really good, fast Imperial Jamieson on Main Range skavla or he would refer to it in terms other than the purity of infants' souls.)

. . . A chain, seventy miles in length, and culminating in a peak attaining the elevation of six thousand five hundred and eight feet. . . .”

If, as it seems indisputably evident, Strzelecki climbed our Mount Townsend, to whom goes the honour of the first ascent of Australia's true highest peak, the uninspiring upward bulge of granite we now call Kosciusko?

Since writing the preceding we have found, in the Mitchell Library, some more information which throws light on this subject. In Strzelecki's own book, “Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land”, he describes “Kosciusko” thus: “Standing above the adjacent mountains, which could either detract from its imposing aspect or intercept the view, Mount Kosciusko is one of those few elevations, the ascent of which, far from disappointing, presents the traveller with all that can remunerate fatigue. . . . Beneath the feet, looking from the very verge of the cone downwards almost perpendicularly the eye plunges into a fearful gorge 3,000 feet deep, in the bed of which the sources of the Murray gather their contents, and roll their united waters to the west”.

This seems to be one of the clearest proofs of all that Strzelecki climbed Townsend and named it Kosciusko because it is quite impossible to see into Geehi from what is now known as Kosciusko.

He also mentions later on in the book that . . . " . . . as far as I was able to ascertain, mica slate in New South Wales is only to be met with on Mount Kosciusko and Mount Pinabar (Australian Alps) . . ." This is a chance for anyone who knows anything about the composition of Kosciusko and Townsend to follow out another clue to the riddle. But later on he says: ". . . mica slate which crowns Mount Kosciusko, the peculiarity of this last rock in this country being, that it appears in high and steep cliffs, such as I am not aware of its presenting in any other. The general aspect of the mountains where this rock abounds is undulated, presenting long elevated ridges, but nowhere else crowning the highest tops in such fantastic, such heaped-up and picturesque peaks as here in the Australian Alps".

" . . . high and steep cliffs . . . such heaped-up and picturesque peaks as here in the Australian Alps." This seems to indicate without doubt either Townsend or the Ramshead; but, in this latter quotation, Strzelecki speaks in the plural—"tops" and "peaks". Is it possible that Strzelecki, when he named the highest eminence of the Australian Alps, grouped together Townsend, Kosciusko and the Ramshead as does von Lendenfeld in the following extract from "Central Australian Alps":—"I consider that part of it as belonging to the Kosciusko group of mountains which lies between the junction of the Main Range with the Ramshead Range and the main source of the Murray"?

Von Lendenfeld, while realising definitely which mountain of the group was the highest, refers to it as Mount Townsend. "Connected by a broad and flat saddle, with the western flank of the apparent main range is a high and pretty sharp, rough and rocky peak. This is Mount Kosciusko proper, or 'Mueller's Peak', as it is locally termed". He continues his description of Mueller's Peak:—"Mueller's Peak. The rocky peak at the point where the main range forms a right angle open to the north east; it is marked with a large beehive shaped, artistically built stone cairn. . . . Identical with the 'Mount Kosciusko' of the county maps of Selwyn and Wallace, 7,171 feet high and identical with the Ramshead of the Victorian geodetical survey calculated by them 7,266 feet high". Von Lendenfeld's statement that it is "identical with the 'Mount Kosciusko' of the county maps of Selwyn and Wallace" is directly contrary to Mr. E. Axford's statement in the 1940 *Year Book* when he says that, in these county maps the name Mount Kosciusko is "against the peak which is in the same geographical position as the Mount Kosciusko of which we now know".

The reason for Strzelecki's failure to build a cairn on the peak he named Kosciusko has always seemed an obscure one for a man of his scientific ability. The reason is that Strzelecki was not on an organised scientific expedition at the time he climbed the Alps, but simply accompanying the reconnaissance party of a drought-stricken grazier looking for grass and water. It is therefore quite probable that he was restricted for time and could not wait long enough to build a cairn before joining the waiting party for the trip south.

[Anyone who has climbed Townsend from the Geehi can think of another good reason.—V.G.W.]

It was, incidentally, on this trip that Strzelecki observed particles of gold amongst decomposed ironstone, but was persuaded from mentioning it on his return by Governor Gipps, for fear of causing unrest amongst the convicts and labourers.

A lecture by J. M. Maiden, Government Botanist, is recorded in the "Sydney Morning Herald" of 1899. *Inter alia* the description ran: ". . . from Mount Kosciusko the lecturer then took his audience to Mueller Peak, two miles distant, on which is a well-built beehive cairn. This peak was for many years looked upon as the true Mount Kosciusko and the highest peak in the range".

Lastly, we found "The Biography of Count Paul Edmund de Strzelecki, Explorer, Scientist and Surveyor of Australia, 1796-1873. In Memory and Spirit of Centennial Jubilee of Discovery and naming of Mt. Kosciuszko in 1835". By Boleslaw J. Strzelecki. N.Y.

The author of this, somewhat surprising work, is a great nephew of the explorer. He says: "In his surveying of the mountains of Australia, Count Strzelecki named the highest mountain in the Australian Alps Mt. Kosciuszko".

Boleslaw Strzelecki then quotes his uncle's own words describing the discovery (from "The History of Discovery of Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand", by Wm. Howitt, published in London in 1865): "'Mount Kosciuszko', highest mountain in Australia, 7,328 feet or 2,234 meters. . . ."

Continuing, Boleslaw Strzelecki says: "With five faithful members of his expeditions, who witnessed the ceremony of hoisting a Polish flag on the top of Mt. Kosciuszko in 1835, Count Strzelecki sends a message of goodwill towards freedom of Nation and refuses to recognise invaders of Poland".

There are three strange things in these paragraphs. The first is the date of the discovery which is put at five years earlier than is the accepted date, the second is the fact that the height given for the highest mountain is correct to a few feet, and the third is the mention of the hoisting of the Polish flag. Further on in this biography the author makes a rather extravagant suggestion that Strzelecki had annexed this part of Australia for Poland. He also mentions Strzelecki's discovery of gold and says: "The Britishers bestowed upon Count Strzelecki many honours and diplomas in order to keep him occupied while in the meantime they planned to take away the wealth discovered by him in Australia". Somehow one feels that Boleslaw Strzelecki holds the British Government, at any rate of that period, in deep distrust. The biography closes by saying that Count Strzelecki died a mysterious death in London, and that his grave has never been found, while, just as mysteriously, his great wealth vanished completely.

The solution of the question would also probably be helped if we had some knowledge of the appearance of the "tumulus elevated in Krakow over the tomb of the patriot Kosciuszko". We would then know which peak in our mountains reminded Strzelecki of it. In the Mitchell Library are two pictures of Kosciuszko memorials, near Krakow, overlooking the Vistula. One is an old print and shows a type of column, while the other (published in the "Sydney Morning Herald" in 1933) shows a figure on horseback surmounting a circular base rather like a section of a wedding cake. Which one did Strzelecki have in mind, if either?

Probably both these have shared the fate of the Kosciuszko memorial in Lodz which was blown up as the first ingratiating act of the Nazi invaders. This was in "Liberty Square", and the Nazi chief, doubtless with the lines "Freedom shrieked when Kosciuszko fell" in mind, made as his first declaration "the Germans are masters and should behave as such. The Poles are servants and must only serve".

As a final note, Strzelecki says that the tumulus was elevated in Krakow over Kosciuszko's tomb; the "Sydney Morning Herald" (17/10/17) says that his remains were buried in the cathedral; M. Noskowski ("S.M.H.", 8/7or/4/33) says that he was buried in the "royal vaults of the ancient castle". One of these days we will probably find that he was buried under the cairn on Kosciuszko, or possibly Townsend or again perhaps on the Ramshead or Mueller's Peak.

were able to have for one night. The next night we thought we would have to sleep on the station, as our train didn't leave till 6 a.m. the following morning. But while we were fortifying ourselves for this with dinner and champagne in a large and palatial hotel, the manager took pity on us and said we could sleep on the floor of his drawing room. A kind waiter, looking like Groucho Marx, stole a mattress and some sheets for us, and we spent a most comfortable night surrounded by gold leaf and marble pillars.

We nearly missed the train next morning, as it took so long to find a taxi, but we just got there, having no time to look for our luggage, which we had registered, and, of course, never saw again.

We seemed to change trains all day, running from one packed platform to another. That evening we arrived at Rennes, in Brittany, and saw the first British soldiers we had seen, thousands and thousands of them marching along the cobbled streets behind the railway station. In Rennes we were told that our train went no further, but that next morning a train would probably be leaving for Saint Malo. The station was full of Red Cross trains, packed with wounded, and crowds of refugees, everywhere that there was a place to rest or a seat to sit on.

A British officer gave us some dinner, told us that Italy had just declared war, and tried to find a place for us to stay the night, but that was quite impossible. Eventually he had to leave us and see that his men were moved off somewhere, and there we sat on a completely blacked-out railway station surrounded by hundreds of refugees, and a rope barrier round the station beyond which we were not allowed to go, as Curfew was declared at 9 o'clock. Then the officer returned, put us in his car, where we sat wedged amongst bully beef, bullets and his batman, and drove us to Saint Malo. As we came to the military controls outside villages, we would lie flat on the floor, so as not to be seen. We drove along miles and miles of straight French roads in pitch darkness, except for very lights that now and again would shoot into the sky. We arrived at St. Malo about 3 a.m., but had to sit in the market square till daylight, as no hotel would take us in, apparently in the belief that we had come by parachute, as no trains were running and only army cars were allowed in at night.

In St. Malo we waited three days for a boat, with more and more English people arriving every day—one lot being the last train load to get out of Paris. On the third day a troop ship arrived, disembarked a number of Scottish troops and sailed at six that night with "all British subjects wishing to return to the United Kingdom", which definitely included us.