

# Kosciusko Fifty Years Ago

B. Newth

*(The writer was assistant to the meteorologist, Mr. Clement Wragge, who built and occupied an observatory on the summit of Mt. Kosciusko in 1897.)*

I AM, it seems, after nearly fifty years, to disturb ghosts of the nineteenth century, surely haunting the Kosciusko Plateau, which J. M. Curran, the geologist, aptly described as the gray Australian veteran in the earth's household of hills.

Coming much nearer in time, there came to Australia a race of prehistoric modern man, the Australian aboriginal and his dingo, and populated it and survived. These first named the mountains on the plateau the Bogongs.

Who, of those interested, has failed to notice the many summits in Victoria and New South Wales, to which the name "Bo-

gong" has been applied? To the highest mountain in the former State, to Jagungal in the latter, and to many others.

The aboriginals, as I had it from local men, who had it from their fathers, favoured the bare, cold, windy, unprofitable heights for just one thing, the collecting at the right time of the year in the right places, of gallons of certain gregarious moth, in their tongue the Bogong. Hence came the name Bogong mountains, or they called these mountains Bogong, and the moth after them—who knows?

Eventually came to Australia the White Man, and inevitably an intrepid first ex-



Wragge's  
Observatory  
on the Summit  
of Kosciusko, 1897

Photo, the late Charles  
Kerry

plorer, Strezlecki, a little over one hundred years ago ascended the western heights of the Plateau, and gave to its highest mountain the name now used to cover the whole area it dominates.

Later came the discovery of gold on the high plateau, and the gold rushes of the sixties, at Kiandra, and of more interest in connection with the Thredbo approach to the Summit, the Crackenback diggings, all around the Little Thredbo tributary ten miles from Jindabyne.

More or less at the same time came graziers with their cattle and sheep. Again the upper Thredbo valley is prominent for, from Victoria, men crossed at the Monaro Gap, south of Ram's Head, while from New South Wales they crossed the Crackenback Range, eight miles from Jindabyne, at Perderlea.

Ten mines upstream from Little Thredbo is Friday Flat. Here graziers ascended to the plateau, camping where, at 6000 feet, the inhibitions of their nature limit the further advance of the trees. This was called Merritt's Camp, under the lip of the Plateau, reached by a route sheltered, incidentally, all the twenty-three miles from Jindabyne.

To Kosciusko from Merritt's Camp, across the Plateau, is two miles, with an easy passing over the Etheridge Range to southward of the mountain of that name.

But to resume with history. Some way back in the eighties, with the appearance of Townsend calculated to deceive the trustful tourist, it was convenient in certain interests, to transfer Kosciusko's name to the more remote hill, and Townsend became the highest mountain, for maybe twenty years of tourist venture.

So to the plateau came Lendenfeldt. He, taken in due course to the spurious highest mountain, made his demand. "Take me to that mountain over there." The guide did so. Nearing his objective he hastened ahead of those with him, exclaiming, "I have discovered a higher mountain than Kosciusko. I name it Mueller's Peak."

Correction by authority of the misunderstanding left in its wake a re-naming of Mt. Townsend, locally at any rate, which persisted until about 1905 as Mueller's Peak. Since then, I notice, a third mountain has taken over the name.

Organised and led by Charles Kerry, a party of thirteen men in 1897 successfully negotiated a first deep winter ascent of Mt. Kosciusko, accomplishing this via Friday Flat and Merritt's Camp. It is doubtful whether a party, except at great personal exertion and taking considerable chances with very changeable weather, and with no road distinguishable in winter and no snow poles, could have achieved this by the present tourist route, which has at least seventeen miles of plateau to traverse and return as against only two miles by the route selected.

(Mr. Kerry's own account of this trip was published in the 1928 Year Book.—Ed.).

The following December, Clement Wragge, an extremely competent meteorological enthusiast (forecasting officially, in those days, for all Australia) with Ben Nevis experience in his younger days, and America's example to follow, established on Kosciusko summit his high-level meteorological observatory.

I look back with pride that I, myself, shared with two other men all the adventure of the first five months on the summit,

housed in a stout canvas Arctic tent with Arctic sleeping-bags and primus stoves. Next year I spent another five months, the winter of 1898, in a 24 ft. by 12 ft. two roomed, flat-roofed weatherboard "hut," as we called it, erected in April before the set in of winter, in a shallow excavation and walled against the big winds, close and high and wide with hard packed loose stones. All of it was more or less completely buried during the winter months, in accumulated snow and ice.

Snowed in we were for six months, but trips to Jindabyne and back we made nevertheless.

I am proud, too, that at the end of that time I was entrusted with charge of the observatory. I stayed on a second summer and a second winter. We discarded our big stone fireplace in favor of being more closed in, we built a much needed spare storeroom in its place, and an enclosed stairway with an exit above roof level. We went in for more primuses, and obtained a primus range, our consumption reading a four gallon tin in six days.

Thereafter I resigned, but was persuaded to extend my term of service through the greater part of a third summer. I left 15th February, 1900, having by that time served in a good cause twenty-seven months, well repaid in interest, experience and adventure.

A little over two years later the observatory had to be closed down, and under the difficulties attendant on getting valuable instruments and other possessions away too near the end of the worst winter. Mr. Wragge's eldest son, I understand, was last in charge.

One could write a book about it all. I feel, however, I must not just encroach more upon available space than to write further as follows.

Two names were given to local features only: "Wragge's Lake," a pool below the mountain on the western side, and a pool near the summit of Mt. Townsend, certainly the highest of its kind in all Australia, "Lake Clare."

We had hurricanes, one experience of severe return shock when our conductor took to earth a primary lightning discharge, the spectacular night-time St. Elmo's Fire, the day-time Spectre of the Brocken, we have been marooned under a clear blue sky on an island in an ocean of cloud, we have seen singular distortions of the sun, rising and setting behind a depressed horizon eighty miles away. Winter weather—two-thirds of it bad.

Kiandra men called their skis "snowshoes." Following their practice we inserted the toes of our gum-boots loosely in plain stirrup leathers, attaching stout cords between these and our belts to save losing our snowshoes in accidents. We carried just one light pole in two hands, our "brake pole"; we touched the snow on one side or the other to make curves; we sat on it, ploughing a furrow, to check excessive speed.

Winter trips between Kosciusko and Jindabyne, I have made exactly fourteen times each way, some of them solo, including trips in July, and always of necessity heavily loaded.

The great drift over Lake Cootapatamba in winter attains an altitude over the snow-covered water of six hundred and fifty feet: rather a wonderful run with snowshoes and brake pole, a descent at first vertical, then a parabolic gradient. Two of us have done it, one of us twice.

A final word about Merritt's Camp. It is of interest that, though it is two thousand feet above Friday Flat in a distance of only about two miles, nevertheless to my certain knowledge horses have brought up drays, and even "buggies" in the nineties.

It is of more interest that lives have been lost on the plateau for want of the forethought of carrying a compass and knowing the direction in which to go to this haven of utter safety in emergency.

Under stress of necessity the winter trip from the summit to Friday Flat, and the first five miles of the rest of the journey to Jindabyne, has been successfully negotiated at night, carrying one ordinary kerosene lantern, a moonless night at that.