

Winter at Kosciusko, 1898

B. Newth

WITH the emergence of meteorology as a practical science, common-sense dictated a collation of high-level records. In December, 1897, Wragge, of Brisbane, established his Kosciusko high level station on the summit with its essential control at sea-level, at Merimbula, 100 miles away. It had its four and a half years handicapped disastrously by want of telegraphic or telephonic communication with Jindabyne, the one thing which all Wragge's personality, influence and determination failed to bring about.

Initially, Wragge had as observer-in-charge a nephew, Bernard Ingleby, and myself as second observer, both young men in our twenties, and an older man, a Captain Iliff, who was generally responsible. We shared a stout canvas Arctic tent which lasted us (it had to) the first four months, pending the building of the hut for the coming winter. It finally succumbed to one of the great wind storms of its day.

On this occasion we had had four days of wind more furious than ever we had experienced and each day worse than the day before. The three of us did all we could with rope and rock to save our tent and with it ourselves but, on the evening of the fourth day, there was still no sign of the weather abating so we packed all we had, stacked it in the centre of the ground space in the tent, chopped through the central mast at ground level, released the guy ropes, collapsed the tent over ourselves and everything in it. We then crawled out from under, manoeuvred rocks into position on the canvas, and made our way back in the teeth of the hurricane, for it came from the direction in which we had to make. At times spread-eagled on the ground, using each of us every hand and foothold we had, we fought our way off the summit until the Etheridge ridge ahead broke the force of the gale.

And so, in wind and rain, we set off for Jindabyne, via a shepherds' camp between the branches of the Snowy River where they meet the main stream to the navy's camp on the old road to Kosciusko with its heavy wind breaks and its hospitable and helpful occupants.

While at the Summit we kept our four-

hourly records, day and night, summer and winter, of pressure, temperature, humidity, wind, cloud, rain and snow.

It happened to fall to me to make the first winter contact with the outside world, to Jindabyne and return. I went down in one long day and made the return journey, much the greater undertaking, in two days. I very nearly indeed failed to get all the way, thirsty, tired-out, snow-sleepy and, at the last, beset by fog and failing light.

Later that winter, in August, McAlister, likely the toughest of the local mountaineers of those days, took two tough-enough tourists to Klandra, where he won the championship (18 chains in 16 seconds) at the Snow Carnival.

Kerry had McAlister as his right hand man in his first winter ascent of Kosciusko, and there were ten witnesses of this feat. Letting his skis take him he rode them, all the way down the side of the mountain from the summit till arrested by the rising grade afforded by Etheridge.

Skiers in those days preferred simple leather loops engaging the foot, stirrup fashion. The feet were never fastened, as it was taboo as dangerous so to do. Some of the runs that even I have done, by no means an expert, I would certainly not have attempted with my feet fastened in.

Spectacular indeed was the speeding skier, as, sitting astride his brake pole, he ploughed a foot-deep furrow in the loose snow, throwing up behind him high twin fountains.

The second winter contact with Jindabyne was made for us, again in the month of July, by Donald McRae, a professional out-door photographer, of Wagga, some of whose photos were equal to the best I have ever seen.

Encumbered by a large plate camera and its heavy tripod, an outfit even for those time old-fashioned, as well as other gear, McRae, undertook the winter trip solo, and, as with me, very nearly failed to complete it.

After a day's rest for him, for just once leaving out one set of observations, we two and he, in favourable weather, accomplished a first mid-winter expedition to the Blue Lake. Next day, the weather holding out, McRae made Townsend Summit and return,

the first winter ascent of this mountain with its magnificent outlook in all directions.

Not long after this my one assistant, Burcher, broke down, and I secured in his place two of Mr. Wragge's sons. We got them and their outfit and certain stores to the summit with the aid of a sledge, an iron frame made by the Jindabyne blacksmith and mounted on a pair of skis. This we three plus a local tourist guide, Collins, and McRae, pulled to the top of the Friday Flat hill. Months later dreadful tragedy only was by the narrowest margin averted, when I allowed the elder of Wragge's sons, sturdy and eager for the venture, to tackle Jindabyne and return. A fog caught him and utterly lost him and wore him out on the plateau, and only by good luck he eventually got back again to Friday Flat. There he lost everything he had with him but his

coat, trousers and boots, fording the Thredbo River which was swollen by the melting of the winter snow. With no food, no matches even, somehow he survived a wet night, but he laid down to die before he had managed more than about three miles of a return to Jindabyne, his only chance.

Miraculously his brother and I inferred the possibilities and, leaving our hut on the summit as soon after 4 a.m. as we could get away, we made for Friday Flat ourselves and so on to where he was.

I had two years and three months of it all before I finally got away in mid-February, 1900: of the rest of the history of Wragge's mountain station I am afraid I know little: just that it had to close down in the winter months, the observers getting away valuable instruments and their belongings with some difficulty.