

Celebrating 50th Anniversary of Polish-Australian Diplomatic Relations

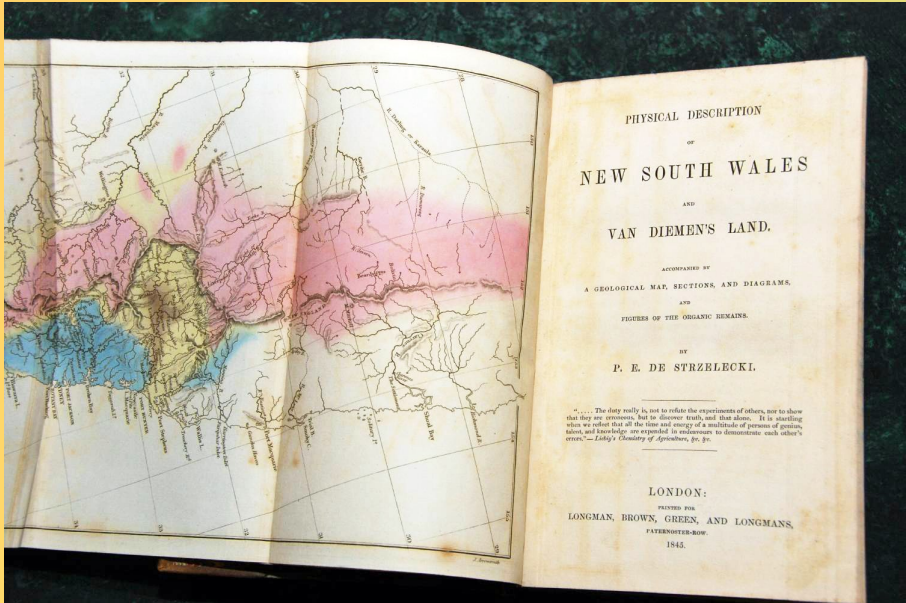
Welcome to Geehi Flats!

Geehi Flats is a gateway to the historic Hannells Spur track leading to the summit of Mt. Kosciuszko. At 1800 metres it is Australia's steepest vertical ascent. This iconic ascent starts right here, near the confluence of the Geehi and Swampy Plains rivers. Since 11th March 1840 it's been the site of Strzelecki's spirit.



On Sunday the 22nd December 1839, Strzelecki left the *Australian Club* in Sydney accompanied by James Nolan, his Irish convict servant, and a pack horse. After spending a night in Liverpool, next day at Camden Park he celebrated his first Christmas in Australia with James Macarthur, landowner and politician, son of John Macarthur, the famous Australian Merino wool pioneer.

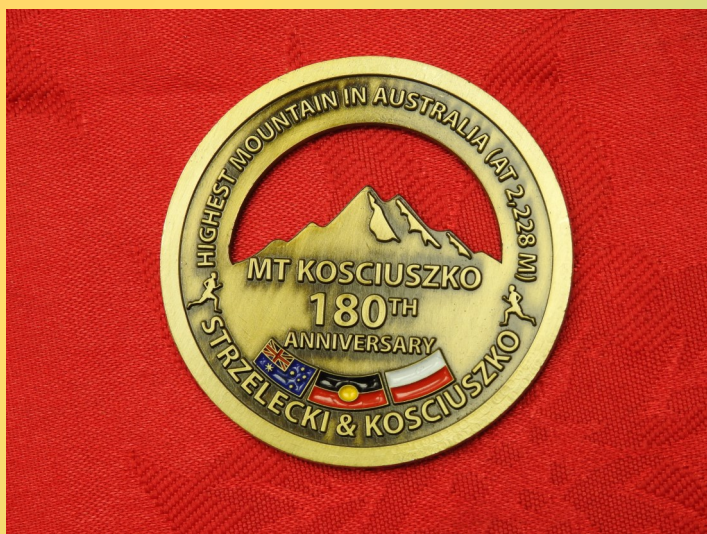
Some time before 1st January, he left Camden Park to go to Goulburn. On his way he most probably stopped at Arthursleigh Station, then owned by Hannibal, nephew of the great John Macarthur. According to Strzelecki's book "*The Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*", this station on the Wollondilly River served as his base for several local excursions.



On 20th January Strzelecki reached Bogolong (between Yass and Jugiong). He visited Philip Gidley King, his good friend's son. King Junior gave Strzelecki a letter of recommendation to John Hay of Welaregang Station.

Strzelecki arrived at Ellerslie Station (near Adelong) on 5th February. Here at Hannibal Macarthur's farm he waited to rendezvous with Hannibal's son, James Macarthur and the rest of the exploratory team. At Sydney at the time, James left Parramatta on 17th January. Travelling with him were James Riley, a 19-year-old jackeroo protege, John Rent, a convict, an African from London and Aboriginal guide Charlie Tarra. They all rendezvoused at Ellerslie on 21st February.

Strzelecki spent a month in Ellerslie to explore the local district. We believe that he travelled to Welaregang with his letter of recommendation where he was hospitably received by John Hay. While at Welaregang he would have set his bearings for the next leg of his trek taking advantage of the Line of Site visibility of Dargal and Tumbarumba mountains and the Kosciuszko Massif. Strzelecki used his spare time to visit Dutzin (Dutson), a station owned by King family.



Back at Ellerslie, he and Nolan were joined by Macarthur's group. Strzelecki notes in his book that on 26th, 27th and 29th February he took temperature readings and made meteorological observations. James Macarthur, Riley, Charlie Tarra, Nolan and the African were busy with lambing. With all done, the expedition team was ready. They left Ellerslie "*on March 2nd in the afternoon*", as specified by Macarthur in his March 1856 letter to the "Argus" editor.



On Saturday, March 7th, the multicultural team arrived at Welaregang. It was decided that the two convicts would remain at the farm to help with the shearing. Here the explorers were joined by local Aboriginal guide Jackey, who had previously accompanied other Aboriginals on their trips up to the High Country to feast on the delicious and nutritional Bogong Moths. The team of 5 set off for the High Country on March 9th.



From Strzelecki's writings we have no information about what they did on their way to Mt Kosciuszko and back. What information we do have comes from James Macarthur's *Field Notes* that were discovered about 100 years later, were donated to the Mitchell Library and made public.

According to the *Field Notes* the team left Welaregang on Monday March 9th, immediately crossed Murray River, trekked along the present day Towong Hill Road where they passed Guise's Station, before arriving at Nowang (Bringenbrong Ford) on the Murray River. Here they camped.



The next day (March 11th) they crossed the river. By following it they reached the heavily forested Geehi area. There they encountered a rapid creek (Black Creek) and stopped on a nearby clearing. They decided that it was wise to leave the packhorses and baggage here in the care of Riley. Strzelecki with Macarthur and two Aboriginal guides walked on and up to Geehi Walls.

The top of Geehi Walls is important, because there the Line of Site is clear all the way to Mt Townsend, so they no longer needed the services of their guide.



Now they needed to descend the Geehi Walls, a drop of some 1,000 feet. Though the drop was steep they were able to negotiate it safely by clinging to the shrubs and small saplings.



Finally, at the foot of the drop they had to cross the Bogong Creek, somewhere close to the junction of Walls Creek. A little later they found themselves on a flat area close to Swampy Plain River, more or less where we are gathered today.



They decided to cross the river and start the climb in the moonlight. But they did not walk too far. They camped somewhere on the lower slopes of Hannells Spur. They had a nice meal of lyrebird. Nice meat, but no water.

On Thursday, March 12th the party left their night camp on what was to be their final day of ascent. After 5 hours of tedious ascent they probably arrived at Moira's Flat. Taking advantage of a fine spring they ate a hearty breakfast. From here they had to climb the steep and rocky slopes towards Abbott Range. It was so steep they decided to leave the guides and supplies behind. With Line of Site visibility to the top of the range, they continued alone. Moreover, Strzelecki could freely choose his own way. As Clews remarked, Jackey knew the natives' usual route around the end of the Abbott Range into the cirque at the head of the Wilkinson Creek. This obviously would make a much easier approach than the rocky, spiny-backed Abbott Range. But Strzelecki, who had seen the Abbott range approach from the top of Geehi Walls, was more inclined to follow the shorter, rocky way.



After a 2-hour laborious climb, at about 1 pm, Strzelecki and Macarthur reached Mt Townsend. As Macarthur recalls, "the Count by the aid of his instruments quickly detected one of the peaks as being considerably higher than where we stood". The higher one was about 2 miles away. The configuration of the peak as viewed from Mount Townsend reminded Strzelecki of an elevated tumulus in Krakow named in memory of Kosciuszko, a great national hero. He stated that "although in a foreign country, on foreign ground, but amongst a free people who appreciate freedom and its votaries, I could not refrain from giving it the name of Mount Kosciuszko". He did this in the presence of James Macarthur the only witness to document this historic moment.

Now Macarthur decided to get back to the camp. Strzelecki was happy to scale the peak alone. He reached Mt Kosciuszko at about 3:30 pm and was busy there for some 3 hours, admiring the views, taking notes and making measurements. The views were breathtaking. Today we are not sure which views he saw from which mountain. Strzelecki mentions a “fearful gorge” as seen allegedly from Mt Kosciuszko. But Major Clews claims it is something that we see from Mt Townsend. He wrote: “From Mt Townsend one can see the upper reaches of the Geehi River, which he calls the Murray. Strzelecki mentions a fearful gorge 3 000 feet deep – well this is rather underestimated. The drop from Mt Townsend to the bend in the Geehi river turning north is not 3 thousand but 5,350 feet – the biggest clean drop in Australia!”.



As Strzelecki was savouring his discovery, Macarthur walked leisurely back to the camp. Yet there was no sign of the camp or the natives. So, he fired a shot, but still there was no response. After he got his camp fire burning, he heard a faint coo-ee. He finally discovered the natives’ camp on the top slopes of Wilkinson Cirque, some 100 feet below. Clews speculates that the natives did not see much sense in climbing back on to Abbott Range where there was probably no water and little firewood, and so they preferred to camp below.

Strzelecki had several falls while coming down from Mt Kosciuszko. Walking down a grass covered slope strewn with rocks can be treacherous even in good moonlight. He himself was unhurt but his scientific instruments were damaged.

Macarthur sent Jackey to locate Strzelecki and the native soon had him back at camp. The party reunited about 9 pm and all happily sat down at the fireplace. It was a memorable night. As Macarthur described it: “The air was alive with the Bogong Moths causing a deep sounding humming noise in character like that of a gigantic beehive. On the most shaded side of the mountain there was still an extensive patch of snow”.

Early in the morning of March 13th they began their trek back to the Black Creek camp where Riley was waiting with the horses. Exhausted, here they camped. The next day, March 14th they spent the whole day there, with Strzelecki taking notes and making computations.

What about the 15th of March? If we believe Strzelecki’s *Journal*, “my steps were consequently retraced to Cowrand (Corryong) Creek” which means that the party came back to Nowang from where they turned south towards Omeo. But according to Clews and Organ they did return to Welaregang where they dropped off their Aboriginal guide, picked up their two servants, supplies, gear and possibly horses and got ready for the next great stage of their expedition. They would travel along Corryong Creek, passing several stations marked on Strzelecki’s Map and via Mount Gibbo to Omeo. From Omeo they trekked further down to a fertile land later to be named Gippsland. But that’s another story.

References. Strzelecki’s Ascent of Mount Kosciusko 1840 by Lt Col. H.P.G. Clews, https://khuts.org/images/stories/attachments/Strzelecki_Ascent_Mt_Kosciuszko_Major_Clews.pdf

Quo Vadis Count? by Michael Organ, <https://documents.uow.edu.au/~morgan/count.htm>

Field NoteBook by James Macarthur found in the Clews’ booklet, pp. 20-22, https://khuts.org/images/stories/attachments/Strzelecki_Ascent_Mt_Kosciuszko_Major_Clews.pdf

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2019-2020 Bushfire of Kosciuszko National Park

As a result of 2019-20 bushfire season – the most catastrophic ever experienced in the country's history, 33% of the *Kosciuszko National Park* completely burned, threatening many unique and previously endangered species with extinction.



In an expression of solidarity, on the initiative of volunteer firefighters from Poręba Spytkowska in southern Poland, 420,000 PLN were collected for the restoration of the park. The funds were symbolically handed over to the Australian Ambassador to Poland, Lloyd Brodrick at the ceremony on 13th February 2021 in the presence of the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda. Additional funds for the restoration of Kosciuszko Park were also transferred by the Polish community in Australia.



On 18 February 2021 a joint field trip to the Kosciuszko National Park took place with the participation of Michał Kołodziejcki – Ambassador of Poland to Australia, Mick Pettitt – Director of Southern Ranges Branch, *NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service* and David Pumphrey – Director of the *National Parks and Wildlife Foundation* and Chair of the Projects Committee.



They visited the areas where the ongoing recovery works are funded by Polish donations. In addition to the significance of the amount of support provided, prompt transfer of funds was of great importance. In order for the damage not to be irretrievable, first protection measures had to be taken without delay, before winter. These were possible thanks to rapid fundraising by volunteer firefighters and assistance in transferring the money offered by the *Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife* (FNPW).

Supported by



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