The ‘Count’ and Illawarra

Paul Edmund de Strzelecki’s Supposed Excursion to Wollongong, December 1839

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‘Strzelecki’s foray to the eastern seaboard could have led from Camden to Appin and either down the Old Mountain Road to Bulli or down Mitchell’s newer Mount Keira Road. His map ‘Carte Geologique’ indicates a spur-line from somewhere near Lupton’s Inn to Lake Illawarra…..’ (L. Paszkowski, Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki - Reflections on his life, 1997, p.100)

It was one of those strange quirks of fate which, during the Christmas / New Year period of 1839-40, supposedly saw Illawarra visited by three of the most distinguished geologists ever to set foot on Australian shores. In this instance the three wise men - James Dwight Dana (American), the Reverend W.B. Clarke (English), and ‘Count’ Paul Edmund de Strzelecki (Polish) - were not bearing gifts, but rather, were seeking earthen treasures in the form of rocks, fossils, minerals, and knowledge. During later life each went on to achieve fame (though not necessarily fortune) in the relatively new scientific field of Geology, while dipping their toes into the waters of associated branches of science such as mineralogy, palaeontology, meteorology and geography.

Of the first two (Dana and Clarke) a great deal is known about their Illawarra excursion at the beginning of 1840. Both travelled together, and Clarke kept a detailed diary of their adventures (Mitchell Library MSS139). Dana went on to publish a monograph dealing with the geology of New South Wales (Dana, 1849), and over the years Beale (1957, 1959), Grainger (1982) and Middleton et al. (1994) have discussed at length the Clarke/Dana collaboration and visit to Illawarra.

Clarke’s diary records their adventures at Wollongong, Kiama and the Shoalhaven between the 2nd and 9th of January 1840. Dana arrived in Illawarra a day or two before Clarke, accompanied by some fellow American scientists. During that brief visit the two geologists studied the local rocks and geography, collected numerous fossils for later identification, and prepared maps and drawings. This collaboration was a significant episode in the annals of Australian earth science history, and pivotal in the ongoing quest to delineate the geology of New South Wales, and the Sydney Basin in particular.

The Reverend W.B. Clarke (1798-1878), a Church of England minister and Cambridge University trained geologist with some twenty years field experience, had arrived in Australia with his family on the 27th of May 1839, just four weeks after Count Strzelecki. Clarke was to remain resident in New South Wales until his death at St Leonard’s on the 16th of June 1878.

Clarke’s specific goal upon arrival in the Colony was to delineate the sedimentary formations of New South Wales, and report back to fellow geologists in England such as
the Reverend Professor Adam Sedgwick and Roderick Murchison. By December 1839 he had geologised around Sydney and Parramatta, but was yet to visit Illawarra or the Blue Mountains.

The American geologist and mineralogist J.D. Dana (1813-95) spent just a few months in Australia during 1839-40. On the 29th of November 1839 he arrived in Sydney as a member of the United States Exploring Expedition, under the command of Captain Charles Wilkes. Clarke and Dana subsequently met up on the 18th of December aboard the Vincennes and talked at length about local and overseas geology. They continued their discussion at the home of Dr. Charles Nicholson on Monday, the 23rd of December.

The previous Friday (the 20th) Clarke - possibly in the company of Dana, though this is not certain - was introduced to 'Count Strzelecki' during a formal welcoming ceremony for the Americans held on Sydney Harbour at Fort Macquarie (site of the present Opera House) and hosted by Governor George Gipps. Apparently the two geologists (Clarke and Strzelecki) had not met during the previous eight months (May-December 1839), though Clarke was obviously aware of the Count's presence in Sydney through media reports and word of mouth among the small local scientific community. This lack of contact is somewhat surprising, especially in light of the dearth of earth scientists in the Colony at the time, and Clarke's subsequent efforts to seek out a meeting with Dana. It is perhaps
explained by the fact that Clarke was fully occupied during his first six months in the Colony, recovering from illness suffered during the voyage out, settling his family in (he had a wife and two young children), taking care of various clerical duties, and running the King’s School, Parramatta, in his role as headmaster.

Paul Edmund de Strzelecki (1797-1873), a Polish nobleman (though not a Count), is most noted in the annals of Australian history and science for the European discovery and naming of Mount Kosciusko. He is also recorded as the discoverer of the Gippsland district of eastern Victoria, and author of the scientific treatise Physical Description of New South Wales. Accompanied by a Geological Map, Sections and Diagrams, and Figures of the Organic Remains (London, 1845). This book was the first substantial scientific text to deal specifically with Australia. Upon publication it was warmly received, despite being somewhat old-fashioned and Wernerian in its geology.

Strzelecki had arrived in Sydney aboard the French barque Justine on the 25th of April 1839. New South Wales was yet another leg in a round-the-world tour which had commenced in 1834 and taken him to America, the Pacific Islands, and New Zealand. A hardened, solitary traveller, his main aim in visiting the Colony was to ‘examine its mineralogy’ (Physical Description, p51) though this was to change somewhat to a more general study of the geology and meteorology of southeastern Australia, along with a trigonometrical survey to assist with mapping.

Strzelecki’s precise movements are not clear for the period between his arrival in April and the end of August 1839, when he set off on an expedition across the Blue Mountains to Bathurst, Wellington Valley and Orange. No newspaper reports have been located, though during those four months he apparently developed friendships with Governor Gipps, Stuart A. Donaldson (an old acquaintance from South America), Phillip Parker King, and members of the Macarthur family, most notably Hannibal Hawkins Macarthur and the elder James Macarthur of Camden Park.

In May he visited Captain John Lort Stokes and the HMS Beagle, then in port, and on the 7th of June attended a dinner at Government House hosted by Gipps. There he met Lady Jane Franklin, wife of the Governor of Tasmania, Sir John Franklin. Both would prove valuable friends. At the time Lady Jane had only just completed an overland journey from Port Phillip, with a stopover in Illawarra during May (Organ, 1987). Whilst in the region she was entertained by Captain Robert Marsh Westmacott and his family, then resident at Bulli. Enchanted as Lady Franklin was with the district and its lush vegetation, perhaps she spoke of it to Strzelecki during the Government House dinner, spurring him on to contemplate his own visit.

Late in August 1839 the Count left Sydney, heading west on foot for the Blue Mountains. He was accompanied by a single servant, with both men carrying their provisions and scientific equipment on their backs. On the 8th of September he was at Mount Tomah, and on the 17th wrote a letter to Stuart Donaldson from the farm of James Walker at Wallerawang, near Lithgow. Whilst en route he found evidence of gold near Hartley Vale and Bathurst. By the 16th of October he was carrying out mineralogical investigations in the Wellington District and on fossil bones at Wellington Caves.

Strzelecki’s subsequent journey west extended as far as Mount Canobolas (near Orange) and the Lachlan River near Parkes. A report in the Sydney Gazette of the 7th of November
noted his presence at Wellington and an intention to visit the Snowy Mountains region. All told, some 2000 miles were covered on foot during this period.

Strzelecki was back at Sydney by the 28th of November 1839, taking up residence at the Australian Club (the old Pulteney Hotel). Upon his return he informed Governor Gipps of his mineral discoveries, noting the presence of gold and silver near Bathurst and Wellington. Gipps in reply warned him against making this public, afraid it might stir the convict population to revolt. The Reverend W.B. Clarke received similar advice from Gipps in 1841 after he also found gold near Hartley. Upon being shown a specimen, the Governor supposedly uttered those famous words: “Put it away Mr Clarke or we should all have our throats cut!”

Following his return to Sydney at the end of November 1839, Strzelecki met up with young James MacArthur, a potential squatter and the son of Hannibal Macarthur of the Vineyard, Parramatta. They decided on travelling to the Snowy Mountains together and exploring the supposed undiscovered Gippsland district of eastern Victoria. Hannibal supplied Strzelecki with £500 towards the expedition, and while it ultimately proved a great success in opening up that part of Victoria, there was widespread controversy in the Sydney and Melbourne newspapers over whether Strzelecki and Macarthur’s claim to discovery had precedence over that of Scottish squatter Angus McMillan. McMillan had taken up land there during 1839, but kept his so-called discovery a secret. Strzelecki and Macarthur made no secret of their exploring efforts, presenting a detailed account of their travels, with a map, and therefore claimed the discovery.

After arriving at Melbourne on the 19th of May 1840, Strzelecki spent approximately six weeks there recovering from the expedition and promoting his discoveries. He then travelled on to Tasmania, arriving at Launceston on the 24th of July and remaining in the island as a guest of the Franklins until late September 1842. During this time he travelled extensively and carried out scientific experiments in connection with his proposed book.

Upon returning to Sydney on the 2nd of October, Strzelecki spent the following six months undertaking further research in the northern part of the Colony and, with the assistance of Phillip Parker King, compiling his notes on the geology and mineralogy of southeastern Australia and Tasmania. He was based at King’s residence Tahlee, on Port Stephens.

The Count finally departed New South Wales on the 22nd of April 1843, bound for England via Hong Kong and China. Strzelecki had achieved much during his four years in the Colony, and the supposed visit to Illawarra was just one incident in a hectic schedule. In order to consider this episode we need to return to December 1839, just prior to his setting off for the Snowy Mountains and Victoria.

Strzelecki and Clarke

At the Fort Macquarie meeting on the 20th of December 1839, the Count spoke to W.B. Clarke of his recent visit to the Blue Mountains, noting that ‘the geology was “very tame.”’ There is no indication any collaborative field excursions were discussed at that meeting, or a combined visit to Illawarra even considered.
Clarke was somewhat suspicious of Strzelecki from the start, and there was a certain coolness between them. This was most likely initiated by the Reverend gentleman, who was possessed of many prejudices and perhaps jealous of the Count’s ability to pursue his geological studies in New South Wales unencumbered by any financial constraints, and supported to a degree by Governor Gipps. Clarke was keen to get out into the field upon arrival, but was held back by commitments to Church and family. As a result, it was very likely Clarke who was behind some vitriolic editorial comments cast in Strzelecki’s direction by the Sydney Gazette on the 22nd of June 1841. These followed on similarly hostile sentiments expressed in a letter to the British geologist Roderick Murchison, dated the 14th of August 1840, and published in London the following February. Of the mysterious Pole, Clarke had this to say:

‘...You are aware that there is, in this part of the world, a foreign traveller who styles himself Count Strzelecki; he is a well-informed, intelligent, and active person, and a most gentlemanly, pleasant companion. His residence here, with funds at his command apparently unlimited in extent, is as
great a mystery, if he be really a Polish emigrant, as he calls himself, as it was to the Americans with whom he lived, and amongst whom he journeyed, before he came hither. He may be a Pole; but I believe there is no title of Count attached to that surname in Poland; or he may be a Russian or Galician; at any rate he was known to Captain King as Count Strzelecki in America; and at the dinner given in Sydney by the officers of the United States Exploring Expedition to their British friends, I heard him most affectingly (or affectedly), in a brilliant speech, discourse on the hardships of his condition. He manages, however, here to go whither he wishes, and see what he likes...." (The Literary Gazette, London, 20 February 1841)

In this letter Clarke proceeds to cast doubts (perhaps 'mock' is a better word) over Strzelecki's claim to the discovery of the Gippsland region - calling the Count pompous, whilst at the same time praising his scientific skills and personal traits. When Phillip Parker King, a friend of both geologists, became aware of this piece in 1841 he severely rebuked Clarke, who in turned apologised to the Count. King noted in a letter to Governor Franklin that "Mr. Clarke is much ashamed of [the article] himself..." (Heney, p129). It is perhaps ironic that Strzelecki and Murchison went on to form a long-standing friendship, while Clarke's relationship with the famous English geologist and promoter of the Empire was often strained.

While Clarke was therefore no great fan or supporter of his "brother geologist", he came, with time, to recognise the Pole's skills and talents. Strzelecki was aware of this initial antipathy, along with that of fellow Sydney scientists W.S. Macleay and Dr. Charles Nicholson, though the Count did send all three a copy of his book when it was published in 1845.

What do we know of Strzelecki, the man? He was something of an enigma - very intelligent, good looking, athletic (during his 4 years in New South Wales and Tasmania he walked over 7000 miles!), of noble stock and seemingly independent means, able to speak a number of languages, a loner with a mysterious past, though at ease in company, an able speaker and indefatigable worker. He was a man on a mission during his time in the colonies, focussed on pursuing his scientific researches. As a result, he was able to achieve a great deal during the visit, most obviously in the way of collecting fossils, recording geographic, geological and meteorological data, carrying out chemical analyses, and preparing a detailed geological map of southeastern Australia and Tasmania. His resultant 460+ page book is testament to his skill and dogged determination. However, while he was warmly welcomed and supported by individuals such as Governor Gipps, others in the Sydney scientific community were somewhat suspicious of his talent and motives. They had been caught out by the so-called charlatan Lhotsky, and Clarke, Macleay and Nicholson were wary of the Polish Count's claims and motives, especially when he did not actively seek to address their concerns. Strzelecki on the 5th of June 1845 referred to them as 'the three tried friends of mine' (Paszkowski, p216). Perhaps 'trying' would have been more appropriate. Whilst in Sydney he appears to have more often than not disregarded such negative opinion, going about his researches largely in isolation.

It is unfortunate that Clarke and Strzelecki did not work in some collaborative fashion. The two obviously had much in common - both were knowledgeable in the burgeoning earth sciences of geology, mineralogy, palaeontology and geography. Both arrived in the
Colony hoping to carry out scientific investigations. Both were experienced workers in the field. Yet it was not to be, and following their brief meeting at Fort Macquarie there did not appear to be any further contact. In contrast, Clarke actively pursued his relationship with Dana and made a special effort to meet up with him at Wollongong on the 2nd of January 1840 so that both could share the experience of investigating the local geology.

South to Wollongong?

Little is known of P.E. Strzelecki’s supposed visit to Illawarra in 1839 apart from what is contained in Paszkowski’s recent book. The Count does not appear to have been written into the annals of Illawarra history by previous workers, and Paszkowski is apparently the first to suggest a visit taking place at the end of 1839. W.L. Havard, author of an important 1940 biographical work on Strzelecki’s visit to Australia, spoke to the Illawarra Historical Society on this topic during September 1949, however there is no reference to a Wollongong excursion in notes subsequently published in the Society’s Bulletin. Whilst Physical Description contains a number of references to the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions, and the collecting of geological specimens there, no substantial account of a visit exists. It can only be inferred. This is largely due to the fact that, while Strzelecki was something of a social butterfly and in company a real charmer, he was also (especially when it came to his colonial scientific investigations) decidedly a loner and reticent with regards to publicising his activities whilst in New South Wales. Adding to this is the strange fact that in his will he decreed all his papers (correspondence, journals diaries, notes, etc.) be destroyed. As a result, any original diaries covering the years 1839-42 have not come down to us, and letters are scarce. We can try to reconstruct his itinerary from extant manuscript material and newspaper reports.

Having decided on travelling overland to Melbourne, Strzelecki left the Australian Club, Sydney, on Sunday, the 22nd of December 1839, bound initially for Goulburn via Camden Park. He was accompanied by a ‘covered cart, 2 horses, and a servant,’ and planned to meet up with the young James Macarthur at Ellerslie Station, near Goulburn. He most likely spent the evening of the 22nd at Liverpool, and arrived at Camden Park on the afternoon of the 23rd. According to the personal diary of Emily Macarthur (wife of the elder James Macarthur), on the 24th she returned to Camden Park from Parramatta with her husband and a Mr. Merewether. On arrival she “found Mr. West & Count Strzelecki there.” Christmas day was supposedly spent quietly - Emily simply noting in her diary: “…went to prayers. Took a walk.” An extract from Strzelecki’s diary (reproduced in Physical Description, pp379-81), describes a tour of the estate with James Macarthur and a meeting with German settlers there on the 26th. Finally, Emily notes that on the 27th of December “Count Strzelecki left.”

According to Paszkowski (p100), the explorer and his party had left Camden by the 1st of January 1840, and on the 20th of January they were at Bogolong, between Yass and Jugiong. Paszkowski assumes that Strzelecki must therefore have visited Illawarra sometime between the 24th of December 1839 and the 1st of January 1840, based on the sixteen references to the Illawarra in Physical Description, and the available time frame. However, if we incorporate the information from Emily Macarthur’s diary, this period is
shortened to between the 24th and 27th of December. It can be shortened further still if we take into account the fact that on the 26th Strzelecki was at Camden Park meeting the German settlers, and, according to Helen Heney's 1951 book (In A Dark Glass - The Story of Paul Edmond Strzelecki), spent his first Christmas in Australia with the Macarthurs.

Emily Macarthur makes no reference to any visit to Illawarra by Strzelecki or members of the Camden Park household during that Christmas week of 1839, though she does record one involving the Macarthurs and Macleays during late January 1840, by which time Strzelecki was well on his way to the Snowy Mountains. The evidence therefore suggests that there was no time for an excursion to Wollongong at the end of December. The fact that the road to Illawarra was somewhat treacherous and little known points to the Count and his party not making the trip unaided. On the other hand, Strzelecki was an experienced traveller, whilst the Macarthurs and others at Camden Park had made regular visits to the region, and a guide could have been secured relatively easy.

It is still possible that the trip to Wollongong took place. Strzelecki could have left Camden Park on the 24th of December, arrived in Wollongong the following day (25th), spent that afternoon collecting fossils, and returned to Camden Park by the 26th for his meeting with the Germans that afternoon. It all seems very rushed, and therefore most unlikely.

The possibility therefore arises that Strzelecki’s visit to Wollongong - if it took place at all - occurred at some other time. Perhaps during the period May-August 1839, prior to his journey west over the Blue Mountains; or between the 2nd of October 1842 and the 22nd of April 1843, following his return to New South Wales after some two years in Tasmania.

Of the Illawarra region, Strzelecki only makes the passing comment that, it, and the Shoalhaven ‘possess the most picturesque, and the most gloomy and savage scenery’ (Physical Description, p61). Are we to infer from this that he saw it first hand? Apart from this brief statement, there is also a geological note on the strike and dip of the sedimentary formations in Illawarra - an observation that they slope generally to the north-west and form the southern edge of the Newcastle Basin (now known as the Sydney Basin). Strzelecki’s manuscript map ‘Carte Geologique de la Nouvelle Galle et Van Diemans’ (Paszkowski, p.xix) does indicate a path travelling eastwards from Lupton’s Inn (Bargo) towards the Illawarra Escarpment and Lake Illawarra. Whether the Count actually followed that path is unclear. The most substantial Illawarra references in his book are to fossils collected at Illawarra and Wollongong and later identified in England by J. Morris and W. Lonsdale.

A number of these fossils were also collected by Clarke and Dana during January 1840 and later refigured by the American (Dana, 1849). It is telling that of the many New South Wales fossils listed and described in Physical Description, the majority were collected either in Illawarra or the Hunter region. Strzelecki did not appear to collect any for description during his 1839 excursion west across the Blue Mountains. Though he was mainly in search of minerals at the time, it would have been physically difficult for him and his servant to bear the load of heavy rocks and fossils upon their backs. This perhaps points to the Count initiating a more detailed investigation of New South Wales palaeontology only after his return from Tasmania in October 1842, or with the asisstance of long-time residents and collectors such as the Macarthurs and Kings. It is also possible he obtained
his Illawarra fossils from a dealer in Sydney, though we should not disregard the possibility that he collected them himself.

Conclusion

Did P.E. Strzelecki visit Wollongong during the last week of 1839? Whilst no definitive answer can be given at this stage, the weight of available information would suggest not. Until conclusive evidence appears, such as a letter or diary account directly referring to a trip to Wollongong, we are left with precious little to verify the visit.

Strzelecki had the opportunity to travel to Wollongong between the 24th and the 26th of December 1839, though this would not have given him much time to collect the Illawarra fossils described in Physical Description. It is the current author's opinion that Strzelecki did, at some stage, travel to Illawarra, either between May-August 1839, or late 1842-early 1843. A December 1839 visit seems highly unlikely.

References


Heney, Helen, In a Dark Glass, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1951, 255p.


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