

Rangitoto Island

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The following account is of a visit to Rangitoto Island by the Naturalist Field Club on 9th December 1882, with Cheeseman as the secretary.

An Afternoon with the Naturalist Field Club

On Saturday afternoon, shortly after one o'clock, the members of the Auckland Naturalists' Field Club, with a number of friends, left in the *p.s. Tainui* (Captain Baker) on one of their weekly excursions—the objective point being Rangitoto, the ascent of which was to be attempted by a number of ladies and gentlemen. Among those on board were Colonel Haultain, Dr. Murray Moore, Capts. Payne and Broun, Messrs. Cheeseman, Pond, Champtaloup, Cotter, Cooper, and other gentlemen. The professions of arms, law and medicine were well represented, while there were no less than three representatives of the Fourth Estate on board. A brief half-hour's run took the steamer to Rangitoto where a landing was effected immediately opposite the North Head. Few of the party had ever been on the island, or attempted the ascent, and as no indication was given through the press by the promoters of the expedition as to the nature of the task, or the equipment required, a considerable amount of personal discomfort was experienced which might have been averted.

The ascent of Rangitoto has only been attempted at very rare intervals until within the last few years. The first ascent is believed to have been made shortly after the foundation of the colony, or about 1841. There are said to be three or four ways of making the ascent - by Drunken Bay, or from Rangitoto Jack's place, by which routes the cone can be approached along the spurs of the mountain ranges; or from the point selected on Saturday, by which following up a series of lava streams the bush is reached, penetrated, and a bee line made for the mountain. The number who determined to make the ascent, was about 35, ladies and gentlemen. Some who had previous experiences in that way declined to do the summit, but remained behind fishing or catching specimens of the *musca domestica*. The preliminary preparations on the part of the gentlemen consisted in doffing coats, &c, tying the legs of their trousers with flax, and securing stout pieces of wood to do duty as alpenstocks. With a profound faith in human nature which was scarcely justified, after the accident which befel a man the other Saturday night on the Queen Street Wharf, while rescuing a drowning woman, the superfluous garments were left piled on the beach and the party moved off, Mr. Cheeseman acting as guide to one division, while the popular captain of the "A" battery

took a forlorn hope on the left front. Two parties of young men who had been up before pushed on ahead – the first (of two) making the ascent from the lagoon to the trig pole in 40 minutes, and the second (of three) inside the hour, and were on their way back before the main body had reached the base of the mountain. The lava streams traversed were composed of boulders of scoria, angular shaped, almost as sharp as broken glass, but they were preferable to the undergrowth, where the pedestrian stepped trustingly on a plot of coarse grass, only to find one of his legs go down in a fissure in the rocks, barking the skin of his legs. Scarcely a member of the party but had clothing, boots, legs, or hands cut in the rough-and-tumble scramble to get through. In the deepest gullies not a trace of moisture was to be found, and here the troubles of the party began, as few had provided themselves with liquid refreshment. The sun's rays beating down on the boulders made the heat, and consequently the thirst intense. As the saliva ceased to be produced, the power of speech became impaired, and some of the party chewed the leaves of the koromiko shrub in order to promote the flow of saliva. At last the foot of the cone was reached, but exhausted by the struggle so far, its steepness made the ascent of it a severe matter for most of the party, while any troubled with heart disease would have had a bad time of it. The formation is so loose that on catching hold of the fern it immediately comes away in one's hand, as if growing in sand, and the ascent is made by zigzagging. Once on the crest of the cone, the traveller is rewarded for all his toil, and there is nothing comparable with the view save that from Kauri Forest, Titirangi, or from the top of Maungarahe, above Tokatoka, on the northern Wairoa. The county of Eden seemed spread out like a map at one's feet. The Thames ranges were visible to the eastward, while the Tangihua ranges peered through the blue haze to the northward, and up the Waitemata the whole course of the river could be traced to the Whau portage on one side and Riverhead on the other. In the Naturalists' Field Club, as in life generally, only those who "continue to the end" reap the reward. From the top of the mountain those who had succeeded in reaching it – about a score out of 35 – saw far below the struggling groups in the distance, ladies and gentlemen – some of the ladies after successfully

reaching the base of the mountain having to give up the hope of ascending the cone. Several gentlemen also found that they had pressing business to attend down at the beach, and retired. Of the ladies, four reached the summit – Mrs. Cooper, the Misses Cheeseman, and Miss Haultain – and successfully solved, not only woman's rights, but woman's endurance. Most of the gentlemen proceeded to make the circuit of the cone. The crater is much larger than that of Mt. Eden. There was no sign of animal life (save lizards), nor song of bird – but eternal silence, while through the still clear air could be heard the whistle of the *Tongariro* as she recalled her passengers at St. Helier's Bay. As far as the eye could reach along the slopes could be seen the streams of lava as they had flowed down. The impression left on one's mind on a view of Rangitoto suggested the query put by the American poet in his "Ode to Skidder":

Ime most doggone mazed
 Few guess how yew was raised
 Was yer contracted for, or did yew grow ?
 Or, was yew bursted up by a volcane O !

The illimitable stretch of boulders and ash recalled Burns' line about "the riddlings of Creation," for it looked as if Vulcan for ages had raked out his furnaces on this reserve. Here and there are to be seen patches of pohutukawa, dwarfed rata, koromiko, and phormium tenax, while the lichen-covered rocks contrasted strongly with the scarlet bloom of the pohutukawa flowers. Thirst still pressed upon most of the party, and those who had been prudent shared the precious liquid in thimblefuls with their less fortunate companions. Slices of lemon were carefully handed round, while the man who was suspected of possessing an orange would simply have been assassinated. Mr. Champtaloup, an old campaigner, who had "done" the Pirongia, seeing the Press at its last gasp, passed the flask, and "saved a life." Some of the party were rampant Good Templars, but they would have unanimously voted for a "conditional license" at the cone on Saturday afternoon. As the evening drew on, a start was made, and the descent accomplished with much less difficulty – one party

going to the lagoon to bathe, to mitigate their thirst, the luxury being pleasantly exciting owing to the presence of stingarees and sharks. The return was marked by the Law, for once, getting wounded in the tendon Achilles, and being more solicitous about his "poor feet" than the city by-laws; the gallant captain of "A" Battery had been battered and pained enough to be surfeited of glory for one day; and even the Press came to the conclusion that the spectators saw much more fun in the game than the players. Some stalactitic crystals were obtained on the cone, also some botanical specimens. Among the mountain mosses secured was one which is common in both the North and Middle Islands, on mountains, but singular to say, is only found at Rangitoto, growing at the sea level. On getting on board the steamer a general rush was made for "that water butt," which was resorted to again and again, with every vessel from a custard-glass to a jam tin, till thirst was slaked. On reaching the city, a little past eight o'clock in the evening, the foot-sore travel-stained pedestrians wended their way homewards, to tell "their sisters, their cousins, and their aunts," that "they had had a most delightful day's outing." Our impression of Rangitoto after making the ascent, may be briefly given in another quotation from the poet already referred to-

Yer air a kawshun, sartainly fer snaix
 Jerusalem how my legs aix !
 Tremenjus altitewd, adew ! I guess the sublime
 Will wait a few, afore again I klime. "

Source: *The New Zealand Herald*, 11 December 1882, p. 5

The Naturalist Field Club went on to visit the Manukau Heads (Whatipu) with its cottage and the by then abandoned sawmill in the next couple of weeks in December 1882, leaving from Onehunga on the slower steamer *Oregon* instead of the *Manukau*. On that trip the *Orpheus* graves in the iron sands were disturbed by the unknowing party and under the impression that the large quantity of human bones were Maori remains, a few were taken away with them.

Source: *The Evening Star*, 27 December 1882

