

Seen From Australia

Film Commentary



From a historical and biographical point of view, the film *Traces of Paul Edmund Strzelecki* is not accurate and quite often misleading. For biographers, Strzelecki is an enigmatic figure because all his records were burnt after his death. An extensive paper by Strzelecki's cousin Narcyza Zmichowska, published in 1876, contained unbelievable gossip referring mainly to Strzelecki's youth and was used afterwards in many press articles. In Poland, in 1950, Wacław Slabczynski began a thorough biographical study of the life of the explorer.

There also were other attempts, successful or not, to compile the biography of the discoverer of Mount Kosciuszko by Australian authors, but it wasn't until 1997 when the writer and historian Lech Paszkowski, after forty years of research, published the most comprehensive biography of Strzelecki that comes in at four hundred pages. It is referred to by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Volume 53, Oxford University Press, 2004.

The so-called abduction of Adyna by Strzelecki from her father Adam Turno's Wieckowice Estate depicted in the film is unlikely. Adyna resided with her grandmother Mrs Prusimska in Sedziny, who brought her up and was well-disposed towards Strzelecki.

Moreover, the other episode in the film where Adam Turno sets off from Wieckowice in pursuit of Adyna and Strzelecki is improbable. Turno lived at the home of his widowed sister-in-law (he was practically supported by her) in Dobrzyca 120 km from Sedziny. It should be noted that Turno was not in Wieckowice at the time of the supposed abduction of Adyna (Wieckowice was most probably under a judicial sequestration or leased).

The scene when Turno thrashes Strzelecki is not only improbable, but also ridiculous, taking into account the sense of honour among gentry at that time. Wacław Slabczynski emphasises that the youthful liaison of Strzelecki was excessively exaggerated. He also called attention to the fact that this love affair had no impact on the journeying career of the adventurer as was suggested in the movie, because Strzelecki left Poland 10 years after the events.

There are substantial gaps in the film. For example, in Strzelecki's voyages around the world there isn't even a mention of his explorations of the Pacific Ocean: Tahiti, Marquesas, Hawaii as well as New Zealand and Tasmania. It's also incorrectly stated in the film, by one of the non-academic commentators,

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that Strzelecki became withdrawn and lived a solitary life after returning to England.

It was just the opposite. He led an active social life, where he was engaged in academic activities as well as carrying out welfare work. For a couple of years he was the head of a relief body during the Great Famine in Ireland, he served in the British Admiralty in Crimea, and also on the aid committee for emigrants proceeding to Australia. He was a member of The Royal Society in London as well as a member of The Royal Geographical Society. He maintained acquaintance with eminent people such as Lord Herbert, Lord Palmerston, William Gladstone, and Lord Overstone.

Strzelecki was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Civil Law by Oxford University. He was also awarded The Order of Saint Michael and Saint George as well as The Order of the Bath and was knighted by the Queen of England.

The film demonstrates some ignorance of Australian reality. For example, the recurrent scene of climbing the summit with a horse in the thickly falling snow was actually impossible. In-fact, while discovering the highest summit of the Australian continent, Strzelecki had only a backpack with food and his measuring instruments. The diary of James Macarthur, who was Strzelecki's companion in the expedition, recorded the fact that it was a hot day and the temperature was over 32°.

Strzelecki performed four separate searching expeditions in Australia; however, in the film they are all entangled. It's incorrect that Strzelecki, while exploring the new areas of today's Gippsland, was dying from thirst because he actually discovered seven rivers and many lakes during that expedition. There was an abundance of water, particularly considering that it was constantly raining for the final three weeks. However, they suffered from hunger because they couldn't hunt, due to the gunpowder being wet, or light a fire due to lack of dry fuel.

Although the final comment by Professor L. Trzeciakowski tells us that Strzelecki made a worldwide career, it is not evident from the film. The movie *Traces of Paul Edmund Strzelecki* cannot be called a documentary about Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki. In fact, the film, accompanied by miscellaneous statements by various commentators (predominantly not about the famous Polish explorer), only depicts a holiday taken by a couple of nice young people.

Witold Lukasiak
Melbourne, December 2008
Translated by Leslie Wyszyński



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