

A Journey to the Head of Dart River February 1881

This is a piece from the Wakatipu Mail 18th March, 1881. There is no indication as to who the author is. The Chinese merchant is probably Sew Hoy and Ben Eden, whose leg bone he thinks he found, drowned in an earlier gold mining venture. No mention of the sandflies at the Paradise Flat.

I told you some time ago that I would give you a description of the Upper Dart Valley the next time I went up there. But it will take a far abler pen than mine to do justice to the scenery. The occasion of my late visit was in consequence of arrangements made with a Chinese merchant to conduct a party of his countrymen to the Upper Dart River, in search of gold. We left Glenorchy, Head of Lake Wakatipu, on the 12th of last month. There can be no doubt that the east side of the Lake is the best for tourists in search of scenery, as a full view of the basin of Mount Earnslaw can be got from that side. Besides the Valley of the Rees River (where the scenery is truly magnificent) where there is a good road to the Upper Rees, where one can get a splendid view of the glaciers, both of the Dart and Rees Rivers. At the Mount Earnslaw Hotel every accommodation is provided, in the shape of horses, both for ladies and gentlemen, so that the journey can be made easily in a day with a good guide, which mine host also supplies. We reached Paradise Flat the first day and camped. The place well deserves its name, as a nearer approach to a perfect Paradise the mind could not conceive. There are a series of little fairy dells, while the water of Diamond Lake, which lies at the lower end of the Flat is so beautifully clear that Mount Alfred with all its rugged outlines, seems to be actually rising in a reversed position from the bottom of the Lake.

We made an early start the next morning, and

reached a nice piece of clear ground, belonging I believe, to Mr D. McBride and known locally as "Dan's Paddock". The scenery about this place is something splendid. Fancy a few hundred acres of ground completely surrounded by mountains with a dense bush down to the very edge of the grass which is of so deep a green, owing to the shadow of the mountains, that it reminds one of an emerald set in jet. After a short journey the next day we reached the first gorge, where our troubles really commend. When I went up the Dart before, the river was so low that we could travel for a mile up the bed of the river, but we could not do so this time as the river was very high owing to the hot weather we had this summer melting the snow. So I came to the conclusion there was nothing for it but to cut a track for four miles through the bush – which would save us crossing the river six times - and then to cut another short track which would connect our present track with the track I cut last time I was here, so that we would only cross the river twice instead of nineteen times! Well, I set the Chinese to work at once after I had laid the road out, and after two weeks' work they finished it, and a capital job they made of it; in fact, for nearly two miles it was all pick and shovel work, so that a horse can go right through with a heavy pack.

The next morning we found the river had fallen low enough to take the horses over, so I determined to proceed at once, as our tucker was getting low, and I knew I could finish my contract with Chinese the next day. So I commenced putting them across the river at once; and a pretty job I had with them. But after an hour's hard work I had the satisfaction of seeing them all over. We reached our destination the next day early.

The following morning I shewed(sic) them the ground where they could get gold, and made ready for my return back. I found a human leg bone on my way up – it

was the bone between the knee and ankle, and must, I think, have belonged to the late Ben Eden. It was lying on the beach ten miles below where he was drowned. It was the only portion of his remains I could find. I buried it in the bush, and started on my return journey the next day. There is some of the grandest scenery at this part of the Dart that I ever saw – in fact, for about twenty miles the tops of the mountains are all ice, and so low does the latter lie that it is right down to the timber – particularly the glacier of Mount Christina, where the snow and ice have cut a passage right down to the river. One can stand on one side of the river and see the snow falling by hundreds of tons shaking the ground like an earthquake, and making a noise like thunder’ filling one with awe at the grandeur of the sight. I made Paradise Flat the next day, and camped. The following afternoon I reached Birley’s Glenorchy Hotel, which is one of the best in the district.