

CHARLES SPENCER THE FORGOTTEN ONE OF NZ POSTCARDS?

A year or two ago, I was chatting with Alan Jackson and told him I was keen to do an article on the postcards of Charles Spencer. His reaction to this suggestion was frank and was along the lines that, apart from his botanical studies, there weren't many cards that would be of interest to postcard collectors. This comment made me think a bit and with other projects looming, I decided to put this idea on the back burner.

Now as my time as your editor runs short I have decided to go ahead with my article on Spencer because while the situation regarding his output hasn't altered one bit, he is such an interesting person that it would be like 'cutting off my nose to spite my face' if I forego my instinct to write him up. Besides, I'm sure that once readers have become familiar with his story, I will be forgiven for indulging myself.

In *Wish You Were Here*, Alan and I gave Spencer a paragraph and a sample card from his Tarawera eruption series. We also mention his birth and death dates which were 1854-1933. For the life of me, I can't recall how we obtained these. My personal notes and files occupy many pages, but none mention these dates or anything pertaining to his background prior to 1878. So I immediately went into Google to see if anyone had added to our knowledge.

I found one entry in thousands of others pertaining to other famous Spencers throughout the world. This was to do with a book called *Out of Time - Maori and the Photographer* by Michael Graham Stewart & John How, which was subsidised by the John Leech Gallery in Auckland. This reference only mentions him in connection with other photographers who made landscape photographs of New Zealand. So it would seem my files, which consist mainly of photo copies of newspaper articles featuring his exploits in the Southern Alps, Rotomahana and the Bay of Plenty, are the only ones of any consequence - I hope I'm proved wrong in the fullness of time.

Using these I take up the story in April 1878, when it is reported that Charles and his brother George were engaged in a photography expedition on the West Coast of the South Island, taking photographs for Burton Bros. of Dunedin! It seems that when bad weather set in, they turned their hands to gold prospecting. This activity kept them in the eyes of the newspapers, for their gold finds, with photography taking a back seat. However, when Charles, in the company of an important photographer from London called Mr. Edwards, left Auckland for what was then called 'The Hot Lake District' we can follow his activities through to the 1890s, when he finally left Tauranga in the Bay of Plenty for a more settled period in Auckland.

All of the following newspaper references came to me via a colleague, the late Stewart Wood, who was engaged in researching the development of tourism in New Zealand. In his notes he went so far as to nominate blocks of photographs in Burton's catalogue of

views that could have been made by Spencer.

The *Bay of Plenty Times*, April 15 1879, reported that Spencer had opened a studio next to Mr. Wrigley's Brewery in Tauranga where he was prepared to take portraits at 15 shillings a dozen. From here on Spencer's activities are reported constantly in the *BoPT*, including an 1882 article on experiments with Silk Worm Culture in N.Z., Trips to White Island (1883) and a photographic expedition to the 'Hot Lake District' in 1884 which led to an *Illustrated Guide to the Hot Springs of Rotorua and Taupo*, published by Murray & Spencer in 1885. As well, to keep his hand in with the local community, he delivered a talk to members of Tauranga's Mutual Improvement Society on 'Photography in the Southern Alps' (1885).

With all this to his credit, it is no wonder that when the Government Geologist James Hector appeared on the scene after the Tarawera eruption, that he would automatically choose Spencer to accompany him on a Government expedition to document the effect of this catastrophic event which occurred on the night of June 10 1886. Although it seems Spencer was not the first photographer on the scene, his coverage was extensive spread over three trips to the area and formed a series of 14 negatives which he forwarded to Hector at the Colonial Museum in Wellington. For a time, I thought some of these these appeared under the Muir & Moodie imprint, but I was wrong.

With his *Guide Book* now serving as a reminder of what the Pink & White Terraces were like, he sold up his business interests in Tauranga in 1891 and moved to Auckland, where his address is given as Vincent Street through to 1906. It is interesting to observe that his profession in this period was given at this address as Process Engraver. From here it is assumed he engaged upon his Huia postcard series, both black and white and colour, which feature native plants. While Process Engraving may seem a bit of a come-down for a man who led such an exciting and active life, it was a profession that opened so many doors. Hence it's no surprise to see him submitting photographs to the *Auckland Weekly News* on the North Island Main Trunk Railway in 1906/7.

In his later years, he moved around a bit. For instance I have an excellent action photo of a canoe being negotiated through rapids in the Wanganui River. Then again in 1930, a few years before he died, *Wanderlust Magazine* published an article by W.S.Dale M.A. featuring 16 Spencer pre-eruption pictures of the Hot Lakes District. Evidently, these were not part of his sale of negatives to Burton Bros. so it demonstrates that at that time he still retained some aspects of his photographic past.

Finally in the 1990s, one of his cameras appeared for sale in a collectors' auction. Unfortunately, I did not attend this sale and I have no idea what make it was or any of the circumstances pertaining to how it came to be put up for sale.

CHARLES SPENCER'S postcards do not turn up very often. When they do, it's likely they will be unrecognised because they turn up without any attribution to Spencer. Or they don't appeal to collectors who aren't interested in postcards of New Zealand Wild Flowers. For a list of these see the *Postcard Pillar*, issue no.66, May 2003, where upwards of 50 cards are listed in various series under the Huia imprint. On top of this slender resource, I have discovered he also provided general scenic views for the A.D.W. Huia Series, No.4 and a beautiful Maori study No.289 on an undivided back unnamed series which also has The Wairoa Waterfall (see accompanying illustrations). Finally, I have discovered two of his Tarawera studies were printed under the C.P.Parkerson's name. There could be more added to these in the fullness of time.



G. P. Parkinson. Ruins of Mr. Hazard's House, Wairoa, caused by Tarawera Eruption, where several of the family were killed.



The Wairoa waterfall, Wairoa.

Spencer, Paris.



Māori.

C. Spencer, Paris, Auckland. No. 27



The Mission Church Wairoa

G. P. Parkinson.

The Mission Church Wairoa, immediately after Tarawera Eruption.

Spencer, Paris.

