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## TARAWERA – AN ACCOUNT OF A VOLCANIC ERUPTION

### The Tarawera Eruption 10 June 1886



*Mt. Tarawera from Maririre showing ash photo 131 by  
George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

#### Introduction

When growing up, I was told many family stories which included that of my great grandfather James Stewart, 1832-1914. James was a Pioneer Surveyor and Civil Engineer in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Auckland Province of New Zealand. I was also fortunate to be shown or given a number of photos from areas where he had worked in the course of his supervision of Railway Construction which included that of the Rotorua Railway. In my childhood years, I was also taken by my father Jack Morton Stewart to many of these places and again the stories were told to me. One such place was near Tarawera – the volcano that erupted on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1886. I was taken by my father to Te Wairoa (the buried village) and Waimangu Valley.

James, in his lifetime was fortunate to see the absolutely beautiful Taonga of Otukapuarangi (Pink) and Te Tarata (White) Terraces. He also witnessed the subsequent destruction and disappearance of the Terraces and the devastating aftermath of the eruption both for the damage to the terrain and loss to the people who lived there. He led a government party to both see what could be done for survivors (both European and Maori) and to assess the damage particularly to the Terraces, Rotomahana.



*Pink Terrace L Rotomahana photo 28 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*



*White Terrace L Rotomahana photo 15  
by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

Now in 2007, 121 years after the event, it is time to record this story in writing rather than the mainly oral story told to me by my father Jack Morton Stewart. Jack was probably was told it by his grandmother Mary, mother Annie Morton Stewart and Aunts Dibby, Christian and Mary. (it is said probably, as he was only 5 years old when James Stewart died and even though Jack lived in the family home “Tirorangi” it may be unlikely that he would have been told it by James)

### **The Family Story of James Stewart and the Tarawera Eruption**

At the time of the eruption on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1886 James Stewart was surveying and constructing the Rotorua Railway. He had a survey camp near Ohinemutu. ( Puna Atua Hoe) One of his engineer / surveyors (Mr. Roche) working with him, wrote an eyewitness account of the eruption. Mr. Roche and some of the workers from the camp were involved in the first rescue parties that went to Te Wairoa. Here there was a small European Community in the store, hotels and schoolhouse and a larger Maori community.



*Te Wairoa McCrae's Hotel, Sophia's Whare and Terrace  
Hotel photo 125 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

James knew Mr. McCrae, the owner of one of the hotels and was concerned for his safety. James was asked to lead an exploration party by Government as he was working in the area and knew the area. He also had concerns for the men in the Survey Camp

(which may have included his son James) at Rotorua as the eruption had been heard in Auckland and no one had any idea of what had happened to the area.

James arrived in Rotorua just after the eruption which was 10<sup>th</sup> June 1886 and checked on the Survey Camp to find it still there. It was not an easy journey to Rotorua as volcanic ash was still falling especially closer to Rotorua.

He formed an expedition at Rotorua which was to look for survivors (both Maori and European) and to see what damage the eruption had done including if the terraces in Lake Rotomahana were alright.

The party which included several men from the Survey Camp, left early on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1886.

The damage was immense. The Tikitapu Bush which was travelled through to reach Te Wairoa was damaged extensively by the force of the eruption. What was beautiful ferns and native trees was stumps and blackened trees which had caught fire.



*Tikitapu Bush Devastated by the Eruption  
Brett, Auckland Star Photo*

Te Wairoa was desolate. The mud was feet thick and almost to the top of the poplar fence posts around the old mill. It was a wonder that anyone survived the eruption.



*Old Mill Te Wairoa photo 121 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

The expedition left Wairoa The mountain was still erupting from parts. The incredible natural power of nature in a volcanic eruption – just like Krakatoa. The landscape was like a desert – thick ash and mud everywhere. All was very still. The expedition made its way around the Green Lake (Rotokakahi) and towards Waimangu and Rotomahana. It was hard work walking through the ash and mud. The maori village here had fared a little better from the eruption.



*Echo Lake and Hole in the Wall Crater Rotomahana  
photo 140 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

The expedition continued on. There was a huge crater that looked like a great black hole . This was named the Black Crater because that is exactly what it looked like. The eruption of Mount Tarawera had made a rift about 9 miles long – a huge split in the countryside.



*The rent in Rotomahana from the Black Crater photo 138  
by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*



*South Crater the termination of Rotomahana Rent  
from photo 142 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

On reaching Te Hape- O- Toroa there was an amazing sight down in the valley below of Rotomahana and the surrounding country. Incredible devastation from the eruption.



*Rotomahana from Hape O Toroa  
from photo 146 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

The lake (Rotomahana) had emptied out. An empty lake bed with deep gouges were what was left to be seen then. Where the terraces should have been, they were no longer there. There was just gaping holes and where the Pink Terraces should have been there was a lot of steam.



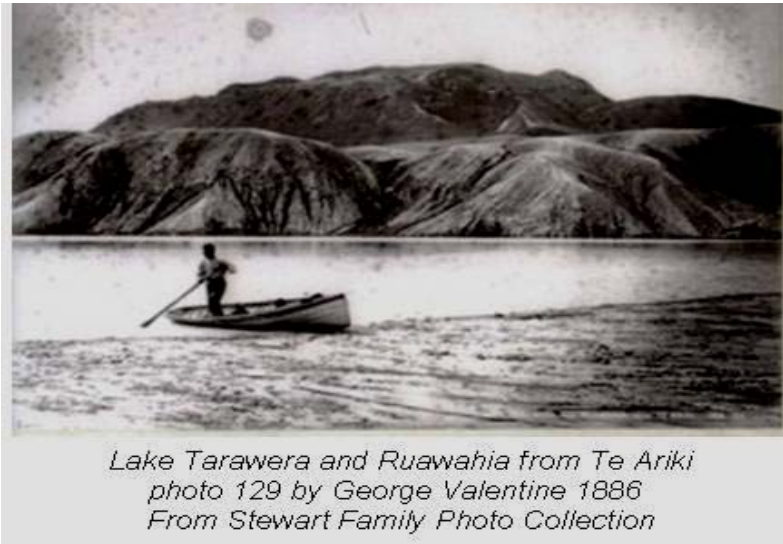
*Rotomahana showing site of White Terrace  
from photo 135 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*



*Rotomahana looking to site of Pink Terrace  
photo 133 by George Valentine 1886  
From Stewart Family Photo Collection*

The beautiful terraces had been completely destroyed and that is a big lesson to all of us – nature gives and nature takes. there is a need to respect the special things of nature and not abuse or take advantage of them as they are not ours to do so.

The two Maori villages ( Moura and Te Ariki) could not be seen and lay completely buried by the ash and mud from the eruption. Those poor inhabitants of the villages Nothing could be done for them.



Some of the expedition went back to Rotorua and some back to Te Wairoa, there being nothing that could be done about rescue of or the terraces at Rotomahana. At Te Wairoa they had just dug out from his buried whare, an old Maori Tohunga, who was still alive. No maori would go near him as they believed he had caused the eruption. It was said it was a punishment because of their ways with excessive drink. The European rescuers took him to hospital where he died a few days later, which they would have done for any injured person regardless of belief.

Jack Morton Stewart also told me that James arranged for some of the survivors to go Wharekawa Harbour (Opoutere) for some recuperation after such devastation and loss. Some stayed on at Wharekawa and some came back to Rotorua after a time.

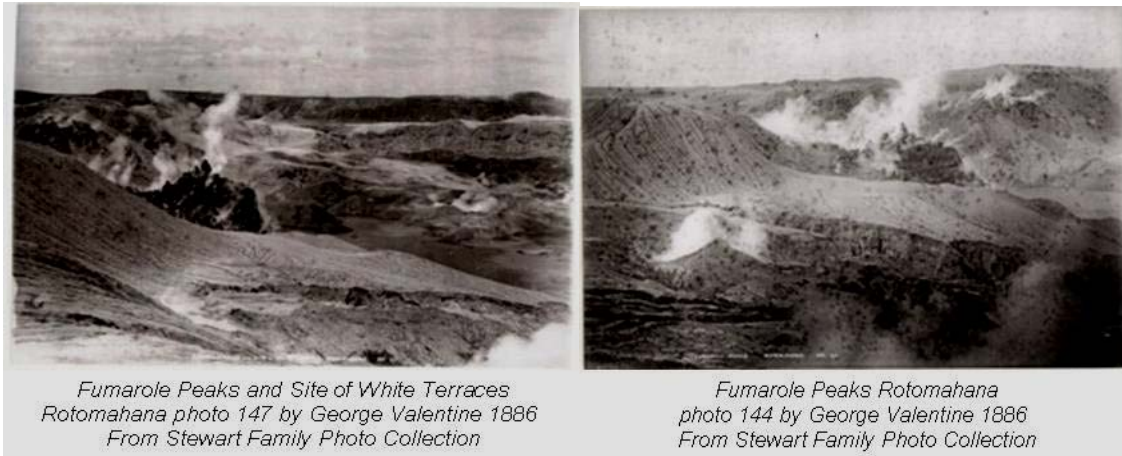
James took further survey measurements of the proposed Rotorua Railway route after the eruption so that he would be able to tell if there had been any movement as a result of the eruption. In a paper he wrote and read to the Auckland Institute on the Rotorua Railway in 1891 he made reference to the "awful calamity of the Tarawera Eruption".

It is known from the family stories passed down to me that James felt deeply for the people that lost their lives in the eruption and for the survivors trying to rebegin again.

### **My Childhood Memories of the Debate on the Fate of the Terraces**

About 1959 – 1960 my father Jack Morton Stewart took me on a visit to the Buried Village, Te Wairoa. I remember him discussing with the then owners of the store/café about the photos we had at home. He told them the terraces were not buried but gone and the photos would show this. Some in that era believed that the terraces were not destroyed but lay buried deep under Lake Rotomahana which had refilled after the eruption.

I remember my father going home and as we had photos of the terraces both before and after the eruption, he used a piece of tracing paper to draw a line of the horizon. This, even in 2007, shows clearly where the terraces once were.



My father took the photos down to Rotorua that week and allowed both the people at Te Wairoa Buried Village store and the Rotorua Museum to take copies of the photos. To my knowledge both of these places still hold those copies. Unfortunately Jame's diary which we believed was in safe keeping is now in unknown places.

My father remained adamant throughout his life, that the Terraces were not buried but destroyed in the eruption. I have memories of him showing the many people who visited him, the photos and telling them the story. This included tramping and climbing groups. He also told this story to my children and they share guardianship of the photos with me. The photos were taken by George Valentine.

### **Footnote Reference**

James Stewart's involvement with the Tarawera Eruption aftermath rescue and exploration is confirmed in the following:

1. Roche, H., *Eyewitness Account Tarawera Eruption* qMS- 1714, The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
2. Thomas W. Leys, *A Weird Region: New Zealand Lakes, Terraces, Geysers and Volcanoes, with an account of The Eruption of Tarawera*, New Zealand Newspapers Ltd, reprint 1953.

**Family Story recorded in writing 10<sup>th</sup> July 2007  
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