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First Swiss to make Mountaineering History in New Zealand

In 1777, John Webber, artist to Captain Cook was the first Swiss to set foot in New Zealand but it was not until the 1850s that more Swiss arrived. The names of several are recorded as land claimants in that decade. Many spoke French and Italian, but later arrivals were predominantly German-speaking. In the 1860s a number arrived in search of gold. One of these gold seekers was Jakob Lauper.



Jakob Lauper (1815-1891), nicknamed "Zagi" came from Chevrières/Giffers, canton Fribourg. He served as a Swiss Guard at the Vatican before turning his attention to gold prospecting, exploration and later, mountain guiding in New Zealand.

Lauper had already crossed Harper Pass (in today's Arthur's Pass) twice before setting out in 1863 with John H. Whitcombe, a young civil engineer and Canterbury's Provincial Road Surveyor. The idea of the expedition was initiated by political and business leaders who wanted a direct link between

Christchurch and the West Coast in advance of the imminent West Coast gold rush. The Southern Alps of New Zealand are well known as one of the most mountainous and heavily glaciated landscapes in the temperate world. Rising to more than three kilometres in height, the peaks that make up this 600 km chain of mountains have proved a daunting challenge to cross-island travellers.

Lauper was born for the mountains but in contrast, Whitcombe seems to have been ill-suited to life as an explorer in this difficult terrain and was heavily reliant on the skills of his Swiss companion. Lauper's job was made the more difficult by having to challenge Whitcombe's greater authority with his own better judgement.

The two men reached Rakaia Pass without undue effort and believed they now had an easy ramble down the Whitcombe River to the West Coast. Lauper wrote: "We were . . . cheerful and considered we had passed the worst part." He could not have been more wrong. Before night fell, they sought shelter on the pass but could find none. They were forced to spend the night seated on an exposed rock and soon regretted leaving the tent behind. Lauper records: "It snowed without ceasing the whole night. Several times we had to shake the snow off our blankets, whenever it got too heavy." Dogged by 14 days of violent storms and half-starved, the two men traversed the Main Divide by a pass that now bears Whitcombe's name, and struggled down to the western beach. There the exhausted Whitcombe drowned while attempting to cross the flooded Taramakau River. Against extraordinary odds, Lauper survived and made his way back to Christchurch.

Following a request by the NZ

government, Lauper recorded their entire journey in German which was translated into English and published in July 1863 in the Canterbury Gazette. Lauper returned to Switzerland a hero. He published a revised account, still to be found in the Swiss National Library called, "Reisen und Erlebnisse des Herrn Jakob Lauper von Giffers (Kanton Freiburg) in Neu-Seeland (Australien)." He continued to make return trips to Australia and New Zealand where he remained as a settler in the 1880s.

Almost a century after the epic journey, historian and writer John Pascoe revived Lauper's account as a slim volume entitled *Over the Whitcombe Pass*, published by Whitcombe and Tombs in 1960 and long since out of print. Pascoe, reliant on the English translation was baffled by some apparent inconsistencies in Lauper's account and had written a footnote about them. In 2007 Swiss traveller and author Damian Zingg published *Zagi* based on Lauper's writing and other accounts. Then in 2010 Hilary Low, interested in the story and spurred by Pascoe's footnote, went back to Lauper's original hand-written manuscript which had been languishing in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington since being deposited there in 1938 by one of Henry Whitcombe's grandsons. She began a painstaking re-translation. It soon became apparent that errors and omissions abounded in the first translation.

Lauper himself had made one significant geographical mistake, and this had been compounded by other errors made by his translator. *Pushing His Luck* provides for the first time an accurate translation of Lauper's vivid account, and explains the significance of the new information brought to light.

Nearly 150 years after the event, the truth about this journey – one of the enduring stories of early New Zealand exploration – is finally told.

Jakob Lauper is memorialised on New Zealand maps. He has Lauper Peak (2485 m) in the Butler Range, Lauper Stream (still misspelt) and a bivouac named after him.

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