

Rockhampton's Racecourse Riot

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I have called this paper "Rockhampton's Racecourse Riot", to echo an article written by Clive Moore on the Mackay Racecourse Riot. That was a fracas when at least three people died and which has been called the "largest racial disturbance between Melanesians and Europeans in nineteenth century Queensland" (Moore, 1985, p161) The Mackay riot occurred on Boxing Day 1883 and I suggest that it may have been avoided if lessons had been learnt from the similar but less serious affray which took place in Rockhampton almost eight years to the day earlier.

Before the events of 27th December 1875 are related, the nature of the town of Rockhampton requires consideration. It was then very different from the quiet, conservative and perhaps graceful place it is now. It was a town of almost 8,000 inhabitants, which had grown by almost 25% in the previous five years (Census, 1876, p.61). The first wave of pioneering was over; the pastoral region which in the previous decade had been a frontier where settlers and Aborigines met in violent encounter, had been tamed. The large stations near Rockhampton were being opened for selection, attracting men who were interested in farming. The demand for labour in the region was strong, despite the arrival in 1875 of 725 immigrants from Britain, 59% of them males. Three ships brought them to Rockhampton between June and December, the last 225 arriving just three days before Christmas (Statistics of Queensland, 1875, p.3 QVP) Many more ships carrying cargo arrived in the river port, which of course was the town reach of the river. In total 131 vessels arrived in Rockhampton in 1875, with crews totalling 4,612 (Statistics of Queensland, 1875, p.53, QVP). These were almost certainly all men.

Rockhampton was clearly a busy port with a mobile population. Only children and young adults called it their birthplace. New chums from England, hardened bushmen, wealthy squatters, Aborigines, professionals and commercial townspeople and sailors from all over the world could be seen on its streets. Three tailors, one of them James Stewart, could fit them out with a new suit, while they could choose from three hairdressers before they called at Louis Buderus or J. Wilder to have their photographs taken to send home. And there were watering places where a man could quench his thirst. There were twenty-two hotels in Rockhampton, ten of them plus two wine and spirit merchants, in East Street (Pugh's almanac, 1875). No wonder that 248 cases of drunkenness were investigated in 1875; 128 of them were summarily convicted. The most common offence in Rockhampton was to be drunk and disorderly, particularly in East Street. A first offender could expect a fine of 10/- or twenty-four hours in gaol, while repeat offenders received 20/- or forty-eight hours.

The other significant element in the population, usually passing through the town rather than remaining in it in large numbers, was the South Sea Islanders. They first arrived in Rockhampton in 1867 from Tanna, one of the southern islands of Vanuatu, and from Rotuma near Fiji, and almost immediately were sent to stations where they were put to work shepherding and fencing. From 1867 they were a regular part of the labour force on sheep stations, recruited for a term of three years after which they would be shipped back to their island homes. Some were employed near Rockhampton at Berkelman and Lambert's meat preserving works at Laurel Bank. These men were probably the first Islanders employed in an industrial situation. They included men whose first term

of indenture had expired, who had willingly taken second contracts, sometimes at much higher rates of pay. They could visit town where hostility based on racism and on competition for jobs occasionally disturbed the streets.

In April 1871 the Morning Bulletin reported an unprovoked attack on Islanders in East Street by a drunken European. Under the editorship of William Buzacott, the Morning Bulletin reported the attack in terms to appeal to its readers' notions of fair play:

"We are no warm advocates of black labour, but we say every man, whether his skin be white or black, must be protected from outrage in the public streets."

This tolerant attitude seemed to prevail at the time, at least among those who stood to benefit from the cheap labour that Islanders provided. The employing classes and the newspapers which served them were in no doubt that Central Queensland needed black labour. The few serious disturbances of racial harmony were the result of large congregations of Islanders in the town, competition for work, and alcohol. The potential for racial violence existed however, as long as Islanders were identifiable as a group whose appearance, language and religion allowed boundaries to be drawn around it.

In 1875, 210 Islanders arrived in Rockhampton. The labour vessel Flora brought 79 men and five women in June and another 87 men and nine women on 3rd December. The Lady Young brought 39 men from Maryborough on 11th December. In addition, 225 British immigrants arrived on 22nd December. The 135 Islander arrivals that December took some time to find employment at this festive time. By 13th December there were forty-eight of them at the Immigration Depot, thirty-nine at a camp on the river bank and the Depot was embarrassed by a surplus of people in its care.

In December 1875 the large numbers of Islanders in the town were the cause of some concern. The Northern Argus published reports that Islanders were lighting fires outside the men's quarters at the Depot and camping around them through the night. Many of them were intoxicated and the newspaper feared a major fire when the barracks and the nearby humpies would burn down. Its outrage was mixed with concern that such behaviour would discourage the immigration of black or white migrants, whose labour was so desperately needed. The Morning Bulletin, on the other hand, carried none of these stories. Both however printed the story of Billy, who on 16th December gave a lengthy statement in the Magistrate's Court. Unlikely to have been one of the new arrivals, Billy was charged with, and subsequently found guilty of the indecent assault of a young white girl, despite some rather shaky evidence.

Alcohol recurs as an element in racial conflict and led to calls for restricted supply to Islanders, though not to whites. Clive Moore has discussed the role of alcohol as "both an aggravation and a levelling factor allowing Melanesians to feel drunkenly equal to Europeans", and demonstrates the failure of the 1869 legislation, which made supply to Islanders illegal, to secure a sober population.

December 1875. The season, sometimes now called the "mango season", encouraged hysteria. Alcohol, the holidays of the Christmas season and horse races led to "a serious affray" on 27th December. North Rockhampton had the advantage of separation from the town by the river which was not yet bridged. It was the recreational resort of the town and offered not only horse races at

the Racecourse but entertainment at Pene's Cremorne Gardens Hotel. Alcohol could be bought at both places. The races were to start at 11.30 am and it is likely that some arrivals had already quenched an early thirst. The Northern Argus called the events that followed "a fight" and "a serious affray", while the Morning Bulletin wrote of "a disgraceful riot". Both papers agreed that trouble began when some drunken sailors struck an Islander without provocation. Other sailors joined in and Islanders rushed to defend their countrymen.

Although fighting began on the Racecourse, the combatants were driven off by the mounted police, who left them to take up their positions near Considine's Hotel. The fight raged, with broken bottles, stones and billet wood being hurled. The Islanders were vastly outnumbered by the whites, who were "some hundreds strong". The Morning Bulletin gave the numbers as 300 Europeans to fifteen Islanders. Against these heroic odds the Islanders several times repulsed the whites, as "their superior science in the art of stone-throwing went far to compensate for their inferiority in point of numbers". The Islanders were eventually pushed back across the Moore's Creek bridge and stood at bay at the edge of the scrub, hurling jagged, flinty rocks with great accuracy. As marksmen the Islanders clearly had the advantage over drunken sailors. Serious injury and murder was prevented by the efforts of six constables, two of them on horseback, but not before cuts and knocks on both sides. One white man was knocked unconscious and an Islander took to the river where he escaped serious injury by continuous diving.

Witnesses all agreed that the whites were the aggressors, and laid the blame on the sailors. They were off the Lady Young, the same ship which had brought thirty-nine Islanders from Maryborough on 11th December, so the possibility exists of some prior quarrel. The Northern Argus concluded however, that "one thing is certain - viz. that 'James Hennessy' was at the bottom of it ... Indeed, we have seldom seen so many drunken men together, and the issue is anything but creditable". It asked why the police did not put a stop to the bombardment and take everybody into custody. The Morning Bulletin laid some of the blame on the police:

"There is conventional rule on the part of our protectors not to interfere in race-course fights, and this appears to have been scrupulously adhered to until the riot had become serious."

Moreover, it reported that the race starters had difficulty getting some of the races off because of fights, and three constables were noticed drinking at the booth bar. Later in the evening there was further disturbance by a foul-mouthed drunkard "who went bellowing up East Street and then caused a row at Vesperman's Hotel. Although followed by a constable, he was not taken into custody. The newspaper called for an investigation into the day's proceedings, and the energetic suppression of what it called "these riotous tendencies".

Before the Police Magistrate on 28th December, five drunkards, one of whom was a woman, were each fined 5/-. A South Sea Islander, for disorderly conduct on the north side, was fined 5/- or twenty-four hours imprisonment.

Early and impartial policing was required to prevent fights turning into riots. The veneer of civilization is a thin one when lubricated by alcohol and fuelled by racism.