

## Chapter 5 Dear Death, how Deep your Sting!

As summer returned to the antipodes in 1856 Dad and I rode up through the coastal forests towards the top of the western escarpment, heading to the relative cool of our tableland home. Not only had I survived my introduction to the lifestyle of the men of death but I had been introduced to the locals way of living in the luxurious bounty of the bush. My life had been changed and enriched in ways I could hardly even begin to comprehend.

To Lodi, I owed my release from the drudgery of white man's work. Lodi introduced me to his exciting life of hunting and fishing and taught me how to read the forest, the art of bush survival. As his initiation ceremony approached, he shared his excitement and eager anticipation until the elders got wind of his plan to let me attend. As it turned out, I missed it anyway as we headed for the tableland before all the clans assembled. Dad was keen to head for home for many in the cutters camp seemed to be spooked by fear of what these unknown people were planning. Each night brought an increasing crescendo of throbbing local chanting as the gathering clans prepared for the approaching Corroboree.



A halt near a fern tree trail<sup>1</sup>

The frantic energy of their incessant song and dance accompanied by the rhythmic clack of clap sticks pounded through the forest and tended to bewitch my mind as Dad and I set out towards our Highland home. Sadly I waved goodbye to Lodi at the Buccarumbi camp of his clan where the Nymboida River flowed into the Boyd. He had shared so much with me and I felt I was leaving behind a brother. Dad decided to try a direct route home heading west instead of swinging to the south-east through Ebor. We followed a westerling bridle trail along the Boyd River then swung northerly to cross the Henry River just outside the settlement of Newton Boyd. Youthful sadness is easily washed away and as the Mann swept in from the West, we turned our horses upriver towards home. With still a few days of difficult country to cover we followed wheel ruts of some drays that had recently begun to travel wool to the coast via Grafton. Running south of the Mann we followed the wheel ruts until they turned north-west to ford the river.

The Mann was then at its mightiest following spring rains that made the ford impassable. The torrent roaring through nearby rocky ravines near deafened us. So we

continued west until we heard the Mann again very close to its junction with what I later learned was the Yarrow River flowing in from the south. Heading that direction, the terrain became gentler and we easily forded it to emerge from the escarpment heading west to Glen Innes near Red Range. This route brought us into the Glen a full day earlier than the northerly trail through Bald Nob. Just another few hours in the saddle saw us home to Vegetable Creek.

Such was my first bit of bush bashing with Da and was he ever surprised at my newfound bush skills. Country and the bush seemed to talk to me, as I took my time and listened, just as Lodi taught me, to what the land was saying. This shorter all weather route stood me in fine stead several times in the years ahead. Initially, it gave me an edge in my upcoming weekly mail service on horseback between Clarence Mouth and Armidale<sup>2</sup> Then twenty years later, I was able to call a public meeting in Glen Innes to present Quinn's Route as the shortest for a proposed railway line to Grafton<sup>3</sup>. This trail included safer upstream fording of rivers in any season and combined with shorter overall distance. It was estimated at the time to reduce the cost of rail to the coast by half a million pounds. The bullock track to the north came out near Bald Knob but forded the river further downstream where larger dangerous torrents were always tricky and often impossible to ford.



High rainfall and extreme storms regularly swelled our coastal rivers causing them to run a banker and be virtually impassable for weeks on end. Following Lodi's logic, we left Yarrow River just after Sheep Station Creek. Little did I know that a quarter century into the future, this area would be the site of my Kingsgate #1 Mine.<sup>4</sup> From a bend in the Yarrow that cut through to the plains, we headed due west and on to Glenn Innes. I loved life in the saddle, camping by night, travelling by day, reading the land with all the sensitivity I had picked up from living with Lodi. He had asked me to connect with his older sister who was now married to a local Aniwan warrior then encamped near Armidale. Life I loved. Our land I loved. Its people also. Life was good.. And we currency colonials were 'of the land' as much as Lodi's people being born and bred in the land. Such simplicity in Lodi's logic I also loved.

Dad and I were looking forward to celebrating Christmas with Ma and all us 'kids' together again. But shadows were looming on the horizon like a hazy dado of storm clouds. James was all of 12 years old and man of the house while Dad and I were away working. Rosanna now 7, and Patrick 5 were Mum's daily companions. A truly fine time was in the offing. I had so much to share with James and the others. Home sweet home was our slab hut, perched on flats near a water course running its way through a straggle of lush green gardens tendered by the ever fortune-seeking Chinese. Their gardens gave our settlement its original name, Vegetable Creek.<sup>5</sup> After the mining boom had brought prosperity, Vegetable Creek was renamed Emmaville in 1882 to honour the wife of the then state Governor Lord Loftus.

Homecoming was also a time to reconnect with my 'Celestial' friend Ah Yee. His uncle ran a general store in Glen Innes with the help of his brothers who had emigrated with him from Shanghai. For the Chinese, business was always a family affair. Long hours were never a problem for they valued their customers, although some of the local store owners objected

to their being open seven days. Whenever business slowed, there was always work for the family in their garden and later in mining and reworking the mullock heaps thrown up by other diggers.<sup>6</sup>

We arrived home from the coast in November of 1856. Mum we found in very poor health. Not only was she eight months pregnant but almost totally worn out and strained by the solitude and drudgery of pioneering life and the daily struggle to care for the other kids. When I left with Dad in April, I did not even realise she was pregnant. During the years we kids were growing up, we hardly noticed Mum's daily deterioration. Returning after absence abruptly opened my eyes to her condition. So many things fell into focus. Listless and vague, Mum was only able to focus for so short a time. Her recourse to her tonic, as she called her frequent tippie, had gradually become a daily want.

In hindsight, it was obvious that to ease the pain of loneliness and isolation Mum had taken to a demon that was now her nemesis. In our innocence, of course, we thought no less of Mum. Mum was Mum! And she scraped and scrimped to provide for us, leaving little time to consider her own needs. Mum it was, had taught us letters and how to write and read. Such a gentle lady must have found herself so out of place amid the rigours and deprivation of pioneering life. The photographs included in this chapter give some idea of life in a frontier town. They show a home among the gum trees and a bridge to a home and garden. They were taken twenty years on at Solferino, about 20 miles NE of Glen Innes.<sup>7</sup>



Dad could see immediately that his wife, Selina was in trouble. Her emaciated frame and ashen grey face belied her 38 years. He set off with Mum for Armidale and the resources of its hospital. Travelling in the dray must have been such an ordeal for Mum as it trundled and bumped its way along the miles of track towards the safety of medical succour. However, good news came with the birth, on the first of December, of our new baby sister Catherine.

We all expected Mum, now released from her confinement, to recover soon and return with our new sister. But this was not to be. Complications set in as Mum, skin and bones as she had become, was not able to provide milk for her baby. Christmas that year took on a whole new meaning as a bittersweet time of suffering and pain and family sorrow.

Da stayed in Armidale leaving me at home looking after Pat, Rosanna and James, till well into the New Year. Then like a wild dog

on the prowl, news finally came that little Catherine only lived for two months. Pain piled on pain for she outlived her Mum by only four days. Both mother and child died in February 1857, Mum on the third and her daughter on the seventh. Both were buried on the day following each death, in the grounds of the doctor's residence in Armidale then in use as a hospital. Years later I unsuccessfully tried to track down the grave site but found it was possibly, only possibly, in the yard of an early hospital cemetery in Faulkner Street.

What a dreary doleful day it was when Dad drove home to us in an empty dray. My mind was in a whirl of turmoil unable to take it in. Why did my mother have to die? Who was her departed daughter that we never knew? Time is just the simplest thing but what is at the end of time? The finality of this double deathly call struck me deeply. This twofold tragedy, my first bitter taste of grief, was painful in the extreme. And misery like a maelstrom seemed

to suck me like a leaf into a vortex of sadness and sorrow. Bad tidings indeed travel fast, and ferociously. They swept into this summer of our lives like the winter storms that sweep across the windy wilds of the Land of the Beardies.

My Mum, Selina Lought was gone, lost from my life.<sup>8</sup> And within a week, her baby Catherine was also taken.<sup>9</sup> All due to lack of nourishment they say. Some blamed the demon drink for her poor condition. I don't think my father Patrick Quinn, ever fully recovered from this tragedy. Somehow he lived on for more than thirty years to die at Glen Innes in 1889 on June 25 aged seventy-four.

Clouds of desperation and depression swirled around me in my youthful gloom as I struggled to come to grips with the final reality of life. I feel sure it was my new job, trailing mail from coast to plateau on horseback, which saved me from despair. Solitude on the trail echoed with my emptiness and loosed me from the void of my deep sorrow. As I rode the rivers and ranges between Armidale and Clarence Mouth, the rugged, ragged beauty of the wilderness struck deep into my pain and seared away the unhappiness of loss. My love of horses and my life with Lodi combined to make a joy of my first adult job, mail rider carrying mail between tableland and coast. My sorrow I lost as I lost myself in the living world of nature. And as none other could make the journey in better time, the job belonged to me. A door to life slowly opened as those graves were closed in solitude and my childhood days so sadly ended.



Growing a town in the Tablelands 1873

Ah Yee consoled my spirit during the initial shock of sorrow. Ceremony to honour celestial ancestors of our Chinese neighbours took on real meaning for me. Childhood excitement at their annual festivities grew to a deeper understanding of their value placed on souls departed. Ah Yee led me to see into the meaning of the term 'celestials' so often applied derisively. Their cemetery processions for ceremonial 'Feeding of the Dead' emphasised that departed souls lived on in another realm. Each year, in May and September, the living shared food offerings with their deceased. I found great consolation in their annual festival 'regaling the ghosts of departed celestials'<sup>10</sup> that so lavishly entertained the souls of those who had passed over.

Ah Yee shared with me his celestial wisdom on life after death, which he called life after life. 'As humans we believe in life and death, but in reality, only life exists. Death is not our final state: life continues. We are so easily distracted as we busily go through our cycle of reincarnation.'



Truly a remarkable community of many cultures was developing in the tableland. Different races were living side by side with any underlying hostility not always obvious. In its midst was I, all of fifteen years of age, and already working at men's work. I was only just beginning to sense the complexity of fear and hatred that can combine to warp the simple world of childhood. For me, ignorance was bliss so it was folly to be wise. Only later did I become aware of the low regard in which Aboriginals and Asians were held by many of my fellow colonials. Race stirred deep animosity amongst so many pioneers. It was more than just dislike of Orientals by some in our community. And for many, Blacks were simply vermin to be eliminated, better sooner than later. Dad tried to open my eyes to the adult world but I persisted in enjoying the richness of exploring other cultures through my childhood friendships. I resisted a general initiation into White adulthood that required many to prove their manhood in bloodsports on the pretext of fighting a common enemy. Sadly, only in later life, did I become aware of colonial atrocities routinely committed against the original inhabitants of the land and at times against our oriental neighbours. My Mum had taught me well the Irish molten memory of 'the strangers' Waspish oppression.

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- 1 Hodgkinson, Clement. (1843). Halt near a fern tree scrub. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135586665>
  - 2 Armidale Express Centenary 1856 1956 NLA Nef 99.4.44 ARM Mail by horseback.
  - 3 Glen Innes Examiner, May 5 1875, Railway movement meeting
  - 4 Glen Innes Examiner, October 28 1879 Bismuth discovered at Kingsgate.
  - 5 HQ obituary G I E 8/8/1915 indicates several homesites: Armidale c1871, Oban, Glen Innes c1875, Emmaville.
  - 6 Crossle, Robyn, ed Pioneer regi New England, Armidale F H G.p341 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2482758> P. Young.
  - 7 Lindt, J. W. Solferino c 1870 <http://www.acmssearch.sl.nsw.gov.au/search/itemDetailPaged.cgi?itemID=457760>  
State Library of New South Wales [PXA 1128].
  - 8 Death Certificate of Selina Lought NSW BDM Ref#1857/1980
  - 9 Death Certificate of Catherine Quinn NSW BDM Ref#1857/1983
  - 10 Ferry, John, Colonial Armidale, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1368738> as held in Tingha Chinese community c1870
  - 11 Story Copyright © T Quinn. All rights reserved.