

Anti Chinese Riot: Lower Albert Street

by Raymond Evans

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1888, the first Centenary of white settlement in Australia, was a year of intense racial panic. Anti-Chinese Leagues mushroomed as thickly as One Nation branches; anti-Asian demonstrations and riots erupted in colonial towns and on goldfields across the continent; and in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, six ships carrying 840 Chinese passengers were prohibited from berthing. In New South Wales, the Premier, Henry Parkes – soon to be hailed as the Father of Australian Federation – spoke of the Chinese presence as ‘a poison running through the veins of our society.’ With a racist mob invading the Sydney Parliamentary buildings, Parkes (somewhat like John Howard turning back the *Tampa* asylum-seekers) declared that he would terminate the landing of such migrants forever. And like the *Tampa* detainees, the hapless Chinese, confined on board the *Afghan*, the *Burrumbeet*, the *Tsinam*, the *Menmuir*, the *Guthrie* and the *Chang Sha*, were described as ‘battoned down below and watched over by an armed guard,’ everyday ‘from sunset to sunrise,’ for months on end.

The historian, Graeme Davison believes that the wave of anti-Chinese demonstrations which swept around the Australian coast in the late autumn of 1888 was possibly ‘the most concentrated attack of xenophobia in Australia’s colonial history.’ And, in the midst of it all, he adds, Brisbane was to host ‘possibly Australia’s worst episode of mass violence’ in that year of racial strife. This took the concentrated form of a four hour race riot which spread across the city and Fortitude Valley, involving thousands of participants and attacking every Chinese business premises or residence in sight. As the weekly *Queenslander* newspaper noted succinctly, ‘None of the Chinese establishments in town were left unvisited.’

If you happen to be dining *al fresco* today at one of the sidewalk bistros in Albert Street, between Elizabeth and Charlotte, and look directly across the road to the noisy video games amusement parlour, you will be focusing on the spot where this terrible rioting began around 8 o’clock on the evening of 5 May 1888. All around you on the footpath that night would be a swelling concourse of excited and largely inebriated people, yelling ‘Go the Chinkies!’ and ‘Chinkie go home!’, and hurling large stones and pieces of road metal at the windows of a small Chinese general store, owned by Youen Sing Tai and Ding Chee.

The store was located next to the Royal Exchange Hotel on the corner of Elizabeth and Albert Streets, at the western periphery of a seedy inner-city area, then known as Frog's Hollow. This was formerly a stretch of swamp land, running along what was to become Albert Street, from Elizabeth to Alice, and spreading outwards to the rising ground along which George and Edward Streets extend. Newer commercial and industrial enterprises were built upon the partially reclaimed land, interspersed with groups of older residences and boarding-houses in various states of physical decay, constructed upon subsiding foundations and inundated by rot, mildew and damp.

This dilapidated, unsanitary zone was also associated with moral decay, for it was the home of Brisbane's 'red-light' district, with its cluster of brothels in Margaret street, owned by Mary O'Brien and Marie Naylor, as well as Brisbane's small 'Chinatown,' located virtually at the centre of Frog's Hollow, along Albert and Mary Streets. Here, Chinese shops, residences and boarding houses subsisted alongside gambling rooms, opium parlours, pubs and sly-grog shops. To these 'hot-beds of crime and vice', it was said, 'prowling gangs of wolf-like larrikins' were attracted like magnets, mixing with a 'filthy swarm of cursing slatterns,' (ie prostitutes) and young blue and white-collar workers 'out on a spree.' The area was forbidden territory, exciting, dirty and dangerous; and, in any one year, yielded up hundreds of charges of 'obscene language,' disorderly conduct and riotous behaviour to the Brisbane Magistrate's Court, due to the over-policing of its streets.

It was therefore a logical enough spot for a riot to begin; but the district's notoriety was in no way sufficient to explain the extent of the mayhem which was to follow that autumn night. The culprits for this lay elsewhere...

For years prior to the riot, the Queensland press had been running hot with anti-Chinese rhetoric. To the *Queensland Figaro*, a weekly muckraker edited by J. Edgar Byrnes, the Chinese were 'the abomination of Queensland' and 'the greatest transgressors in our midst.' Nor did the more cautious and liberal *Brisbane Courier* (owned by the entrepreneur, Charles Hardie Buzacott) mince its words. The Chinese, it declared sweepingly, were 'the most depraved people on the face of the earth.' Considering their low-class 'dens' in Albert Street, the paper concluded it was clear that each 'Chinaman' was 'essentially a dirty animal' who 'lives in open violation of the plainest and most elementary level of health.'

Yet the so-called Chinese 'dens' of Albert Street were no more 'loathsome' than a range of European industrial and business premises in the area, as the city's Health Inspector, Dr Joseph Bancroft, discovered. The, as yet, poorly unionized white workers sweated in overcrowded, badly ventilated premises which were at least a match for the Chinese tenements. Around a quarter of all homes in the area were also deemed virtually uninhabitable. Yet Bancroft found

the row of Chinese shop-houses in Albert Street, known as 'the Nine Holes', to be quite adequately ventilated and 'not more insanitary than the state of things found in many small cottages of Europeans.' And this Dr Bancroft, in turn, was himself one of the founding members of the Brisbane Anti-Chinese League!

By early 1888, such Leagues had been established all over Queensland due almost single-handedly to the zeal of a racist orator named John Potts, an architect from the United States. Speaking in Brisbane at a huge anti-Chinese rally at the corner of Wharf and Queen Streets the previous year, Potts had identified Albert Street as a centre of 'Chinkie' abominations, where 'the Celestials' herded together, smoked opium and bartered 'bananas and lollies to little girls, for the pleasure of indulging...[their] amorous passions.' During 1888, Potts's allegations were reinforced by the pounding, almost mesmeric prose of William Lane, who campaigned obsessively against the Chinese presence in the pages of the popular working class weekly, the *Boomerang* – clearly the most vociferously racist journal in the Australian colonies at the time, outdoing even the Sydney *Bulletin*.

During January and February, the *Boomerang* had run a series of *exposes* on the Chinese of Frog's Hollow and their 'swarming strength.' It urged Brisbane-ites to carry out 'an unceremonious expulsion' and 'clean out these Hells!' The alternative, Lane declared, was that '...our towns will become vast warrens of Albert-streets: insidious vices will establish themselves among us: a patient wily race will root itself upon Australian soil and...pollute the purity of our western blood.' Lane followed this alarmist hokum with a futuristic serial about race-war, set in Brisbane, called 'White or Yellow?', which climaxed with a 'White Rising' to drive out the Chinese: '...the roll of drums resounding through the streets...all moving towards the Chinese quarter of North Brisbane, known far and wide as Chinatown.' The last chapter of this bloody epic appeared on the day of the Albert Street riot.

Saturday, 5 May 1888, was also significant for another important reason. It was polling day in the North Brisbane election which pitted the Liberal Premier, Samuel Griffith against his Conservative adversary, Thomas McIlwraith. Griffith and McIlwraith were at this time bitter personal enemies and the election campaign had become a struggle of no quarter. About the only thing the two agreed upon was the need to oust the Chinese, but instead of this logically becoming a dormant issue in the campaign, it was fore-grounded by each party's plan for how rapidly and dramatically they would accomplish this. McIlwraith promised the most drastic action and won the election that day by the biggest majority ever obtained in Brisbane. His all-male voters were well primed with beer and spirits supplied by liquor interests supporting the Conservatives; and throughout the day there were incidents of excess and violence near the polling booth at the corner of Adelaide and Edward Streets. Premier Griffith himself was

assaulted by the drunken mob when he came to vote. Individual Chinese on the street were confronted and every vehicle 'from carts to trams that contained Chinese' was stopped and disrupted by the crowd. The entire inner-city area was placarded with anti-Chinese slogans.

Given this combination of forces – a hot-house political climate; a rabid, threatening media and the simmering racism of white people of all classes against the so-called 'slimy heathen', the escalation and vehemence of the anti-Chinese riot is not hard to understand. It began with a fight between a European larrikin and a Chinese storekeeper over the payment of produce; but, as the alcohol-soaked McIlwraith voters joined in, it expanded into wild mob violence, involving, at its peak, more than 2000 people. This swelling crowd rampaged several times up and down Albert and Mary Streets, smashing windows and pillaging shops, homes and boarding houses occupied by Chinese. The reactions of the frightened occupants, 'shrieking and yelling' in terror, only intensified the crowd's enthusiasm and glee. Larger Chinese stores in Elizabeth and Queen Streets – Soy Chow Loong's and Kwong Nam Tai's – were also attacked, their big plate-glass windows demolished and the contents rushed. Chinese men, seen on the street, and European women believed to be consorting with them, were chased and harassed.

Eventually the mob moved off at a rapid pace along George Street to attack other Chinese businesses near the Roma Street railway yards. Here the shops of Sun Wing Chong and Wai Sang Loong were plundered. A cry was then raised: 'Now for the Valley!' and the crowd began a general stampede along Ann Street, stopping *en route* to assault George Shue's furniture factory near Petrie Bight. It was well after 11 pm when the thinning ranks started to besiege On War Tai and Co's store in Wickham Street in Fortitude Valley; and a further exhortation from the ring-leaders to raid the Joss House at Breakfast Creek was only luke-warmly received. Nevertheless, Chinese premises in lower Queen Street and even Melbourne Street, South Brisbane would also be blitzed before the riot finally petered out in the early morning hours.

Police had been present throughout the vast disturbance but had done very little to protect the Chinese and their property. Like the authorities upon a far more portentous 'Night of Broken Glass' in Germany in early November 1938, they had mainly stood back and let the mob have its head. Police Inspector Lewis's explanation for his constables' inaction was tellingly lame. He had not baton-charged the stone-throwing youths who had led the riot, nor called in mounted police, he reported, 'as...the majority of the people in the street were respectable citizens and would probably have been injured had this been done!' Only one arrest was made; and this young man, tried on a charge of malicious damage, was almost instantly acquitted. Though the riot was of sufficient magnitude for news of it to reach the pages of the London *Times*, it was not

debated in the Queensland Parliament. The *Queensland Figaro* and *Boomerang*, the principal journalistic 'soothers' of the lawlessness, never even reported on it. Less than a month later, when L.A. Bernays, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, was asked by his NSW counterpart what steps were contemplated if a mob were to invade the Parliamentary precinct, and 'disorder seems rampant,' he replied peremptorily, 'These sort of things don't happen in Queensland'!

And what were the statistical dimensions of the Chinese 'threat' which the avid rioters of 1888 believed they were contesting? The Chinese at this time composed 3% of Queensland's population and only a miniscule 0.23% of the residents of Brisbane. In 1887-88, around eight times as many Chinese had left the colony as had entered it. Only six of the 840 Chinese, quarantined under guard in southern ports, were bound for Brisbane – and four of these were prior residents. One of these men, H. Yet Eng, born in Stanthorpe, was the owner of the On War Tai company store, wrecked in the lawlessness of 5 May.

The last word should be left to the Chinese themselves who, in a measured petition, recorded some of the few sensible words printed on the matter. 'Chinese subjects who are engaged in trade in a small way are constantly reviled and assaulted by vagabonds collected together in parties of three or four,' they wrote:

In serious cases their conduct takes the form of throwing stones and even using firearms and other weapons. The motives for such doings are entirely beyond comprehension... But the evil treatment of the few that are here or who have been recently turned away from these shores is a different matter altogether... [B]y the hasty and violent conduct of various colonial Governments, which should have held the scales of justice evenly balanced, the more ignorant portion of the population have been incited... to outrage the feelings and show contempt and hatred to our countrymen... [I]njustice, inhumanity and violence afford a poor foundation to build up the life of a young nation and however popular in the meantime they may be with the unthinking multitude... it is righteousness alone which exalteth a nation...

Sounds eerily familiar, doesn't it?