

## The Trouble with Trouble

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For the exhibition *Deadpan* I have continued to build on my ongoing investigation into newspaper archives including coroner's inquests, police reports, obituaries, public houses, and advertising that have direct links to my colonial settler ancestors from the mid 1800s. Several of my ancestors around this time held leases to a number of public houses around Adelaide. Colonial publicans often brewed their own beer, distilled their own spirits and made wine. The local brandy had a poor reputation and was described by one drinker as 'a villainous, vitriolic, biting compound of deadly intoxicating qualities'.<sup>1</sup> Pubs, however, were also important meeting places, and as main local public buildings, inquests also were conducted in hotels, usually the one close to where the death had occurred.

One event I uncovered in the archives was a murder at Skillogalee Creek, north of Adelaide. The victim, John Mansforth, known as 'the sergeant', was a distant ancestor who worked as a shepherd on a farm by Skillogalee Creek. He was brutally bashed after a drunken argument at the nearby Port Henry Arms hotel. Accounts of this incident from 1850 survive in newspaper archives and in the biographies of Kudnarto, a Ngadjuri/Kaurna woman whose witness statements form part of a compelling account of evidence leading to the murderer's arrest. John Mansforth's badly mutilated body was kept at the Port Henry Arms stables while the inquest was being held at the pub.

The Port Henry Arms was a watering hole for bullock drivers carting copper ore from Burra to ships at Port Henry (now Port Wakefield) as well as for a mix of gnarly characters such as miners, farmers, shepherds, hut keepers and troopers. One visitor to the hotel described the clientele as 'the most debased set of animals in South Australia'.<sup>2</sup> In 1850 its regular customers included John Mansforth, who had a reputation for becoming impassioned with rage when under the influence of alcohol, and his murderer, hut keeper James Yates, an ex-convict from Van Diemen's Land, was described as 'having that low, brutal expression of countenance so common among those who have led a life of crime'.<sup>3</sup> Gothic names such as *Hellfire Creek* and *Devil's Garden* defined other sites along the bullockies' copper route to the gulf, recorded today on stone steles by the modern highway.

In contrast, John Mansforth's son Thomas developed a life in hotel stables. From 1855 he ran the livery at the Sir John Barleycorn hotel in Rundle Street, operated by my great great great grandmother Mary Bailey, and he soon married into this family of publicans, only to drown on the wreck of the *Admella* in 1859 while helping to transport horses to Melbourne. Mary Bailey was widowed in 1854 but continued to work in pubs including the Angel Inn for the next twenty years to support her seven children. Meanwhile, other ancestors ran a butcher's shop in Rundle Street and a drapery store on Hindley Street that stocked fine goods such as imported French lace.

This landscape of contrasting brutality and gentrification has inspired a broader personal investigation of this colonising period. My works seek to reflect an admixture of the genteel entangled with the darker undercurrents reflecting the lives of my colonial ancestors.

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<sup>1</sup> H.E. Laffer, *The Wine Industry in Australia* (date, publisher, place of publication), p 71

<sup>2</sup> Robert Noye. *Clare: A District History*. Fourth edition, District Council of Clare and Gilbert Valleys and Clare Regional History Group, 1997, (place of publication) pp 220-221.

<sup>3</sup> *The South Australian Register*, 5 August 1850, p 3