

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2217 The Force of Charles Higgs

by Emily Purser

The Force of Charles Higgs

NSW, 1850s, west of the mountains blue... strange territory to me, until I started searching for signs of my father's mother's mother's father. My quest to know Charles Henry Higgs began with an intriguing obituary¹. Apart from informing me that he died in Carcoar in 1904 and that he was born in England a good 82-year innings earlier (county of Lincolnshire, borough of Boston, parish of Kirton to be precise), that account also said his first job in the colony was with the police. Apparently, his role in the mounted patrol force gave him some "thrilling experiences with the bushrangers" before he settled down to a doubtless quieter life for the next 30 years, employed as district bailiff and Carcoar's mining registrar. Wanting to know more of what he did, I started mining other records.

Turns out young Charles had been on the beat back in England, as police there were being offered free passage to NSW in the 1850s in return for at least 3 years' service here². After landing in the colony in 1855³ Charles would have had a few months' training in Sydney⁴ before being assigned, with only the best recruits⁵, to the mounted patrol and posted to a rural area in need of more police. He was sent to the recently established town of Cowra⁶, through which many prospectors were passing on their way to the tent city gold fields at Lambing Flat (Young) and Grenfell⁷. It seems a lot of nouveau riche miners and other settlers needed protection from all the wild colonial bush-ranging going on. Lowry "the Lachlan horse stealer" was tracked down and caught by Corporal Higgs and three colleagues, according to a report in the *Empire*⁸ in 1858.

Stationed next in Carcoar, Sergeant Higgs may have crossed paths with Lowry's notorious associate Ben Hall, who moved there in 1859 and was soon helping police with their enquiries into horse thieving, before starting his rampaging career there in the early 1860s⁹. Higgs is praised again in 1860 in a *Goulburn Herald* article¹⁰, along with colleagues from the western mounted patrol, for valiant efforts in relation to thieves near Binalong, which, it was lamented, had no police force of its own. Much more than for quaint heroics of the colony, though, my quest to know more about Higgs is kept going by the stories local rags do not tell. What else exactly were the 'traps' doing out west, that warranted all the extra recruits from England?

Bushrangers posed a real threat in the Central West, even before the gold rushes¹¹. They regularly raided the vast and prosperous Coombing Park estate of Thomas Icely¹², which was built up into an empire in the 1830s with the help of convict labour¹³. Icely requested the establishment of a town nearby to protect his interests, and so Carcoar was gazetted in 1839 to provide various

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services as well as a local mounted troop¹⁴. But the threat of bushrangers was not the only reason the district mounted police force was begun in 1826¹⁵. The other was something noted in that and other historical records as “outrages committed by the blacks”. I dread to read and write on, worrying about the hand Charles Higgs may have had in displacing Wiradjuri people from their lands¹⁶, but here I am and go there I must.

Accounts written in the 19th century often blame Aboriginal people for the violence occurring¹⁷. The usual pattern around first encounters of our very different cultures was curiosity and tolerance followed by insensitive violation of boundaries, anger, reaction and savage revenge attacks by colonisers¹⁸, who tended to construe any opposition to their enterprise as outrageously unfair. The established facts are that explorers relied on Aboriginal people and their established tracks to get across the Blue Mountains to the Central West, and that subsequent settlers relentlessly pressured the Governor to ‘open up’ the area south of Bathurst, reserved since 1815 for use as a government cattle station¹⁹. Cancelling the cattle reserve in 1829 enabled settlements in Wellington, Molong and Blayney, and more land grants for pastoral squatters along the Lachlan river. Settlement stayed close to the rivers until the gold rush and the 1861 change in law that allowed small-scale farmers to move in. Many fights for land occurred, given that the best sites for homesteads and villages were exactly wherever there was a perfect site for camping or large ceremonial gatherings²⁰. Indigenous people of the Central West who failed to go away quietly, and weren’t killed by the smallpox, influenza and pneumonia, or the disruption to their traditional food supply, were all too often murdered - “shooting and poisoning were widespread”²¹.

In 1860, Senior-Sergeant Higgs married a young Mary Ann Fox and settled down on Icely St²², where they seem to have led a happy and fertile life, before being moved over to the cemetery at St James. He was still serving the force in the mid 1860s²³, and my mission is to find out exactly when he quit and why. He became the district bailiff in 1870²⁴. As I continue to pursue more certain knowledge of whether he had little or much to do with the outrageous displacement, I have at least found meanwhile that even a small snapshot of a life story from the past gives me an up-close and personal sense of both the family and the nation I come from. A little detective work on just one life has shifted my abstract kind of knowing about the process of colonisation to a clearer view of realities on the ground that shape the whole cultural heritage. Telling family tales, one by one, is connecting me to the larger narrative, and giving me a reason to tour the Central West, Hawkesbury and Hunter regions where many of my ancestors bided their time, and to take real steps towards a reconciled future.

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