

## FLASHES IN THE PAN

I have never been interested in ancestry; those sepia strangers from foreign, distant places. There was a smidgeon of curiosity about my grandparents but beyond that, nothing. Anyone who has played the six degrees of separation game would know how distant connections quickly become.

Recently, advertisements have appeared on television, with characters artfully posing in colonial costumes, entreating us to 'come and find' them. They could stay lost for all I cared. I did not even know the species of my own family tree.

To my dismay, the Editor packed me off to the small one mule town of Winora, an ex-mining outpost, to conjure up a story about a local historical character named Snowy Rivers. He had been about during the gold rush era of the 1850's and established himself as a balladeer and raconteur, chronicling those years of notoriety. A parish version of Banjo Paterson. He had a convict past and was reputedly 'a bit of a lad' with an ear for music and a good yarn. One of his songs has achieved a sort of cult status in the district.

It was the sesquicentenary of Snowy's something or other and there was apparently, much debate about what sort of big edifice should be erected in his honour, and an equivalent amount of conjecture about where it should be placed. Hard, datable evidence of his activities was scarce though, as he led an anonymous existence tumbling along amid the sluice of other itinerants trying their luck on the goldfields.

My brief was to separate the shiny bits from the sediments, draw some conclusions about this ghostly essence of a man and how he appeared to the locals and possibly salt a few pieces of ore to spice things up if necessary. It seemed a bleak prospect.

I had to show due diligence. There were dignitaries to meet.

My initial tawny port of call was the irascible boss of the local chip wrapper; the infamous Mr Roger Dodgerson, a contemporary of mine. He had been kicked out of a city newspaper some years earlier, after repeated indiscretions; the nature of which was never made clear to any of us lesser scriveners. One of his dubious and powerful friends must have found him a bucolic refuge. He was a rumpled Bob Ellis figure, with a notable polished ingot incisor and an odour of cigarettes, fortified wine and

BO with the attendant stains and blotches. I learnt that he did not care for anything local, except young waitresses and a drop of the neighbourhood red nectar.

“Couldn’t give an antechinuses arsehole for any of that folksy shit”, he belched.

He dismissed me summarily and thrust a piece of paper in my hand.

That’s my wife’s number. She’ll give you a ride if you need one.”

He winked and bellowed a laugh equal parts halitosis and debauchery that had me back out on the footpath gasping for air and a soothing ale.

I found my digs at the aptly named Digs Motel. Gold mining, though now seemingly lifeless outdoors, prospered in the village businesses in a titular sense.

Down in the Phoenix Bar, Von Van Dyke, a stocky firkin of a woman, dressed in khaki, corralled me, virtual cattle prod in hand. She introduced herself as a councillor and seemed to expect some kind of ongoing deference. Her manner was stern, a military face scowling fixedly underneath a G.I. crew cut. She was unnervingly direct and as I mentioned the names of my prospective interviewees she proceeded to eye roll and emit small, explosive spit/laughs of contempt. She outlined her theory that Snowy was probably gay but during our conversation it became apparent that that was a common theme for her. After two schooners she called my own sexuality into question and left during the third, asking to contact her if I needed the ‘good oil’ on anyone.

A pickled rake known as Spud, superglued to the end bar stool, warned that Von’s world was full of people in closets and that anything I said to her would be taken down in evidence and used out of context.

Next morning my serenity was compromised by a middle aged woman with a brassy ambience and a smoker’s phlegmy cough, hovering inches from my Miner’s Brekky.

She was crammed inside a shopful of cougar-black spandex and draped in a loose leopard print top. A thick bottle-white plait lolled down her back like an anchor rope. The bling on her fingers would have left little change from the Welcome Stranger.

“Hey lovey, I’m Mona.”

The drive to the goldfields was diverting. I spent the trip avoiding double entendres and fending off wandering hands. I asked her what type of memorial would be fitting for Snowy and she made several ‘big erection’ jokes. I left her at the Tavern to join my guide Bruce Brewster.

I had to meet him at the poppet head but was not game to ask Mona what and where that might be. Fortunately, Bruce was waiting out the front. He was an eager, quietly spoken fellow, with a gentle, rangy, stoop, which caused him to lean forward in a conspiratorial manner. He dressed in shorts, long socks and sandals and habitually ran his fingers through an outrageous comb-over that crossed his head in a flimsy Trump-like hair-bridge.

"Hello Ian. D' you know that was Snowy's real name."

He slung a pick over his shoulder and thrust a metal pan into my hand and headed off like a Sunday School camper down a goat track to Piffing creek. My wary ankles followed. He paused at a sandy corner, squatted and mattocked away, then began to swirl some dirt and water, occasionally grinning up at me and offering a gem of 'days gone by' trivia, which I dutifully jotted down. As I watched I became transfixed by his excited industry and peered expectantly into the dervishing dish. After thirty minutes he drew me down onto my haunches with a giggle. He pointed out unmistakable coruscating specks that shone like tiny suns in the wet sand and I felt a frisson of what he called 'Ay You Fever'. It was an unexpected and tantalising moment.

On the trip home I feigned illness and lay on the back seat of Mona's wagon, out of harm's way. In the afternoon I met with a series of local movers and shakers: the pinwheel of the Edifice Steering Committee, the over-inflated Stock and Station agent, an underwhelmed state member. Everyone in the municipality it seems, had an opinion about who and what Snowy Rivers was and how he should be remembered but there was no consensus and I did not see a way to draw the strands together.

After scratching around the local shopping fraternity the following morning, door stopping shoppers for more Snowy River's sentiments, my jenny began to lose the small head of steam I had mustered. All I had after countless interviews was a ragbag of hearsay, poorly informed opinions and a muddied washing cradle full of speculation. The only moment I had felt anything palpable was out at the old diggings sight with Bruce. On a hunch, an experienced journalist's gut feeling, I returned there to see if I could unearth what Dennis Denuto had called 'the vibe of the thing'.

I feared for my virtue, running the Queens Gambit of Mona's 4x4 again, so I hired a postie bike and edged it down a side street near the mine site.

I stood in a bemused akimbo at the boundary fence, overlooking a raw, dispiriting landscape, especially without a dose of Bruce's viral enthusiasm. It was just an uneven nakedness of rocky old excavations. Any artefacts, I realised, were long gone. What was once a crawling termite's nest of tents and shanties was now just a sprawling mess of vacated pits and mounds. After fifteen minutes criss-crossing, the heat began to bare down and my thoughts turned to shelter but the site was open and treeless. As I made for the lee side of mulga bush something in my peripheral vision gave off a metallic flicker. I lost it immediately but by backtracking and moving my head in a chook-like movements located the source and hoped no one was watching my strange and suspicious behaviour.

The semaphore light emanated from a small rocky ledge toward the top of the highest hill, a fair walk away. Nothing else beckoned so out of desperation I decided to investigate. I clambered up into the bush and followed a ridge until I found the spot. Up close the sandstone sill seemed higher, almost inaccessible. To my disappointment at the base I found the cache of beer cans responsible for an iron pyrites style signal. I spent ten minutes of muscle twitching exertion making the ledge. The effort was worth it though, with an extensive view back over the diggings and the area nearby. It was cloistered and undisturbed, with a shaded recess disappearing back into the bed rock. Not a bad damn spot, if one was chasing solitude.

I sat on the cool shelf, and relaxed; trying to think what Snowy might have done to win his own similar moments away from the shoulder rubbing hubbub of his subsistence. Little came, no great inspiration. I lay back and as my eyes waited in Donald Bradman's oft quoted 'two minutes' to adjust to the light, faint ochre hand prints tiptoed into view. My head buzzed as I studied the unexpected and special find.

I followed their course back into the darkest corner and noticed an unnatural squarish shape in a cleft. It was up high and I needed a long stick to retrieve it.

After many stabs an old tobacco tin clattered down. It bore the rusty head of a sailor and what looked like the year 1892. It was reasonably preserved by the mummifying niche and opened readily to reveal two plain yellow gold bands nestling Tolkien-like in a yellowed kerchief. They bore inscriptions inside: *IR* and *AD*.

I slid the tin into my pocket with mounting excitement. *IR* could be Ian Rivers. I realised that was a tenuous long shot but I had hit pay dirt of some kind.



I kicked the beacon cans into a shallow grave and slipped back to my vehicle, taking pains not to be noticed.

I called in on Bruce to ask whether anyone knew if Snowy had particular friends. He had no idea and added that the most trackable regular acquaintances would have been in the public houses, the hardware store and other regular businesses.

"I have nothing to cross reference him on a personal level. There is a dreadful woman in town, called Joan Rivers. She claims to be a relative, though she actually changed her name by deed poll. Be careful she is fanatical."

Unlike her namesake Joan was entirely humourless. She was a leprechaun sized woman with a pixie haircut and a penchant for blue clothing. She rode her hobby horse with the vigour of Damien Oliver and the breathless delivery of Greg Miles. After a short while I could sense the oxygen levels in her sitting room rapidly dropping. She had documents, which I thumbed through obediently whilst she hammered on. On several Draper's Hardware receipts from 1858 I was gobsmacked to spot an exact replica of the script etched on the AD ring. After another fifteen desperate minutes I patted my stomach, pulled out my old 'I feel a bit crook' ruse again and asked to be excused.

Perhaps the journalism gods were smiling upon me.

The next morning I hit the library. The aptly named book usherette Ms S.H. Schuster was most accommodating, to the point of nosiness, so I kept my remarks and enquiries vague and general. Over the course of hours I collected a disappointing array of scraps. The Drapers were a successful family with children somewhere near Snowy's age. There were two married daughters, Ann and Chloe and a bachelor son Albert. Snowy moved to Sydney in 1878 and died there in 1893. I was able to confirm the tobacco tin's date as the early 1890's. It was going to take a little more than some cool jazz and a CSI team to wrangle these few facts into a story line.

In the afternoon I bid Winora a perfunctory Chinese farewell and read through my reams of notes on the plane. There was not much that was tangible, except for the enigmatic rings. I extracted the bands from their tin safe and toyed with them, willing the IR to be Snowy, when two intriguing details became apparent. Both fitted on my finger and the IR ring was significantly more worn than the AD. As I pondered this, a narrative appeared out of the passing cumulus and with it, a firming belief. I had pencilled Ann Draper in as a possible 'AD' but realised that might not be the case.

At home I found a genealogy site that revealed Albert Draper died in 1877, the year before Snowy left the district. It was suddenly becoming circumstantially intriguing.

My theory still needed substance. Then I followed another hunch and typed in Snowy's famous ballad. There was, of course, a version on YouTube. I had expected a rollicking colonial ditty but was surprised by a richer vein of reflective melancholy. The last line 'as part of me lies buried in that dry and dusty soil' seemed particularly touching and relevant to my assertions. Snowy could have taken Albert's ring with him and returned to Winora years later and hid them together.

But was I just making the details fit?

The story had legs, albeit wobbly, and was potentially exclusive, provocative and original. I reworked the timelines and convinced myself of the probabilities, swept along by the opportunity the discovery presented and the bullion it may release. As I considered the likelihood of a liaison between Ian and Albert I realised the dreadful difficulties that would have arisen. My guess was that they wore a ring with their own initials to avoid detection or suspicion. Their relationship, if it existed, would have been a secret, separated from the ethos of the time and place. I had become the custodian of that. By the next sunrise my perspective had altered. I still had the wonderful story but no longer knew what to do with it. I cursed my evolving conscience. I felt a growing connection with this bloke, perhaps because we shared a name and sense of loss and were at a similar stage of life. In the end it seemed like a betrayal and I came to wish I had not found the damn things.

I worried that my conjectures might be false but was even more fearful that they were not. Either way I could not publish.

I submitted a different piece on Winora, concentrating on the quandary the community faced about how to best honour the picaresque character they had chosen to personify their struggles and growth. It was a light-hearted, yet respectful commentary on country town politics and I tried to make it a showpiece for the people I had met. I argued three main cases (plectrum, hat and pan) and peppered my account with colourful quotes but fell short of drawing a conclusion. They in turn, were possibly disappointed that I sat on the Snowy fence.

Following the articles publication I returned to the goldfields, with the tobacco caddy, as I suspected my namesake had done 120 years earlier. After the last visitor had hopped on the tour bus, I took a secretive meander along the spine of the ridge's

bony trail. Ian (or whoever it may have been) and I walked in parallel, separated but united with our deep sense of a shared purpose.

Scaling the ledge again was like a homecoming. The longer I lingered there in the para-silences the more I knew I had done the right thing. For a long time I sat in a reverential stillness, with the tin at my side, before snigging it even further back into the Dreamtime crevice where only an occasional skink might encounter it. Then I waited, unready to leave, allowing all the feelings to pass. I wondered if the rings had returned in another sense. It was likely that they were made from gold found at the diggings and so, after a brief (in geological terms) exposure to the sunlit filaments of two intertwined lives, were then reburied, as if a purpose had been satisfied.

I hoped that one day I would have a similar special person in my life again. Someone that we can all trust enough to bring to that unique place and share what I suspected and believed. I think Snowy and Albert would be all right with that.

I returned home to an alarming status quo. My work had suddenly become a drudgery. I wish I could say that Snowy was the struck flint that ignited an interest in my own heritage. But no. The kindling that spat and flickered was entirely for more knowledge of one Ian Rivers. I felt a communion with him and a teetering obsession. Perhaps I was turning into a Bruce, a Joan, or a Von. I hoped to write a book if I could gather enough stout, bind-able material. I wanted to flesh out his character. Give him life. I planned a sabbatical to.... Well I'll let the man himself tell you. He says it better. I found this nugget, attributed to Snowy, buried in a musty old tome at the back of the reference library (my second home these days). It reads...

*'As time drifts downstream on night rafts, I keenly wait and yearn,  
Till tents are pitched and a fire lit, on a slow, sandy turn.  
Then we dip and whirl our pans boys, from early until late,  
Chasing the grains that beguile us, those flickerings of fate.'*