

Movement at the station

In just his second year after graduation, Constable Lukas Ferdinand Schulz applied for a posting to a place so dangerous and hard to get to that he was the only applicant. Hence, they overlooked his youth and slight stature and gave him the job. They may have hesitated at his name but it was well before the war and industrious German settlers had pretty much kept the *systematically planned* but nonetheless faltering colony going in the early years.

Before he left Hahndorf, his parents commissioned a photographic portrait. In the South Australian Police Museum today it portrays him as a stripling, but a very proud looking one in a black uniform, the beginnings of a police issue moustache on his baby face, the tip of his Cavalry Trooper sword well grounded.

With St Vincent's and Spencer's gulfs cleaving the interior and a dearth of roads, Lukas was conducted on the first part of his journey by sailing ship from Adelaide to Port Lincoln at the tip of Eyre's Peninsula (as it was titled in the possessive in those days – indicative of how European explorers and settlers saw this land). There he was issued with two police horses - a wiry impatient filly he named Flame because of a russet mane and tail, and a farting stocky piebald he called Gustav, after a similarly flatulent Onkel.

The sergeant in charge at Port Lincoln informed Schulz that the previous officer posted to Ellen had committed suicide with his revolver, a strictly forbidden use of a police firearm. The young constable was urged to note this regulation should he find himself in moments of lonely or alcoholic melancholy. The sergeant's tone suggested such a state of mind was not unlikely.

After dutifully imbibing unfamiliar rum with the local police, that night Lukas slept inadequately on a straw mattress that felt not so much straw as lumps of peninsula limestone. In the morning he dressed carefully in his uniform, ensuring no wayward creases or bits of straw marred its magnificence. Later he rode west away from the fine blue of Boston Harbour, glad to be alone with his sour head and his already beloved horses. When he struck beach dunes some hours later he angled north through intense squat scrub. He navigated by the sun and the coast which varied from exquisite scimitar beaches to surf booming on blue-black rocks. On his landward side unseen creatures shuddered and bounced through olive green. After midday, sap stained sugar gums and stirrup high grass

replaced the scratching scrub. When the horses inclined to dawdle, he stopped to let them graze and rest. He felt an urge to linger in this divine wild, his heart singing with both freedom and duty despite the headache of civilization that also lingered. There was no superior waiting at Ellen to log his time of arrival. He made a fire and apportioned himself considerable time over a cup of tea and a few slices of Hahndorf mettwurst.

In the late afternoon the trio ambled through stony grey dirt mallee country, melaleucas and she-oaks of sandy coastal lowlands, salty malodorous swamps that thwacked at hooves, stands of twisted pale trees with bark like torn paper. Past Coffin Bay he rode into beautiful indents and out again to blinding beaches that pulled his soul into their mesmerising distance. Apart from two mad looking fishers he saw no humans, though he had a definite sense that people who knew this land were watching him. He would have been astounded to read the letters of the early planners who sight unseen had declared this country *waste land*.

On the inland side of a line of grassy dunes he made camp and went to bed naked in his itchy grey police blanket, looking at blazing stars and listening to the hiss of the immense ocean. To the east, somewhere in the peninsula's heart, a dingo howled like a butcher's blade on steel. There were no replies. He thought of his mother and the other women under the same stars making the midnight walk through the eucalypt forests of the ranges, down from Hahndorf to Adelaide with their baskets of fresh vegetables, on the return journey up through the steep hills each basket carrying bricks for their new Lutheran church. That, he thought, would make a good sermon for stern Pastor Kloeden – along the lines of building something solidly good taking time and belief and a lot of dogged mountain climbing.

The following day he was dawn ready, his head blessedly clear of police rum. In the optimistic morning light he rode along cliff tops, straight backed as if on parade. Though he practised a stern expression, his heart was smiling and the smooth planes of his right face were lit in sunrise gold.

On his left so breathtaking were the gnawed cliffs that he shivered at their magnetic pull, imagining himself plummeting through mist to the shattering surf below. For quite a while he studied a white blur on the horizon but could not discern if it was a sailing ship or a cloud.

The next sapphire afternoon his reverent journey was shattered when he smelt wood smoke and saw unnatural shapes on a ridge far ahead. The tiny settlement's presence

was announced by the word *Ellen* in white stones on the ground. Low buildings were slung haphazardly above an elongated bay. The entire place was incongruously ugly – a contradiction to his recent immersion in beauty. At the sea mouth of the bay he noted the dark line of a submerged rock bar and a regular swell foaming over it.

The two roomed wattle and daub police hut with its pounded dirt floor and musty odours dented his pride in his new posting only momentarily. Behind this building was a tiny stone structure with a low door of iron bars, and iron rings and chains mortared into the walls. It smelt eye wateringly of piss and shit. The jail cell. The other main building in the settlement was a short way along the ridge, its title proclaimed in a wooden sign lettered with white paint as if by a child - *The Sportsman's Arms*. Lukas had not seen what he would call a sportsman since he left Adelaide, and the big fellow who waved at him from the pub door didn't appear to fit the bill.

As he was unloading the horses the publican wandered up.

"G'day mate," the man said, adjusting his trousers around his fat waist as if surprised at the tightness of their fit and touching his forehead. Receiving no return salute he shoved out a hand and Lukas shook it.

"Good day, Sir. Constable Lukas Schulz."

"Bryson Tennant, publican. Schulz? German that is isn't it?" He sucked through a gap in his brown teeth. "Anyrate, welcome. Anythink you need I might be able to help. Come over for a drink won't you?"

Gustav shook his head and farted wetly. Flame snorted and ambled away.

"Not just now, thank you. I'd like to get my gear inside and settled in."

"Alright. Well maybe tomorrow evening? Probly even be a boat in. A bit of company."

"Thank you."

"Hope you have more backbone than the poor bugger you're replacing. The blacks around here need a firm hand. This country will prosper once we make it safe by showing the bastards who owns the land."

"I will uphold the law, if that's what you mean."

"Of course lad. That's what I meant."

Lukas carried water from the communal well, washed carefully and dressed in his one set of civilian clothes. He brushed and cleaned his uniform meticulously and hung it in

the flimsy wardrobe. He was keen for the dawn so he could put it on again and continue the dour sense of work and duty imbued in him by Silesian peasant parents and the free colony that had welcomed them.

In the morning he was eating breakfast inside when his door was emphatically pounded on by a shock faced white haired sheep farmer. The man explained that something had happened to one of his shepherds. He directed the constable to a well-worn horse trail heading inland. Lukas gleaned the details, threw a saddle on Flame, and trotted her into the scrub. Bryson Tennant and the sheep man followed.

Lukas came upon the shepherd's hut backed into an elbow of a little creek. It was a hovel of roughly cut native pine logs, the gaps between plugged with flaking mud that still bore the builder's finger dents, its roof a jigsaw of tree bark. The miserable room contained a small wooden table, a single knocked over chair, and an iron cooking stove. There was a shelf along one wall holding nothing but dust. No food, no cooking implements or homely accoutrements. The place looked fairly well cleaned out. Frayed jute rope knotted and tangled around a knobby wall post reminded Lukas of the iron chains in the police cell.

The headless shepherd was lying on his belly next to the stove, arms underneath as if keeping them warm. The man had very short legs so that without his head he was almost as wide as long. Lukas lifted his hat and wiped sweat from where its rim had dented his forehead. Mumbled grunts and hissed threats of murder and being murdered reached him and he turned to see Tennant standing at his shoulder. The sheep man had retreated outside. Something, police instinct probably, drew Lukas to the iron stove.

The severed head inside so stunned him that he slammed the oven door shut and stepped back, stumbling as a boot heel caught an imperfection in the dirt floor. He swallowed and closed his eyes, reminded himself of his sworn duty.

When he opened his eyes the stove grinned at him as if enquiring whether he had the balls to open the oven door again. He leaned forward, arching his body like he wanted to stay as far from what was inside as possible. The steel handle turned and screeched and he stepped back, letting the heavy door fall open and clang off its hinges.

The head looked out at him, open eyed, brown bearded, startled.

"God save us all," said Tennant.

"You may go back now Sir. I'll oblige you to keep this to yourself until I respectfully deal with the body and I've informed Adelaide."

“What about the fecking savages? Just because he...”

“He what Mr Tennant?”

The sheep man stood at the door wringing his hat in big hands. “He stole one of the native girls. Had her tied up here. I heard about it and came out to give him the boot and take her back to her people. I know them. The Naou. But I was too late...”

Tennant put his hands on his hips. “I’ll get some blokes and horses together and we’ll teach those bastards.”

“You will do no such thing Mr Tennant. I’ll put in a report, the police will investigate and send a patrol to catch the perpetrators. Then they’ll get a fair trial.”

The sheep man shook his head again. “I told him not to interfere with their women...bloody idiot.”

Tennant was red in the face. “A fair trial? This isn’t Adelaide or feckin Berlin mate. We won’t get new settlers here if they get away with this.”

Lukas thought he might point out the South Australian Letters Patent Act guaranteeing the rights of native peoples to lands *now actually occupied or enjoyed* but correctly deduced he would be wasting good breath. “Please depart Mr Tennant, or help me carry the body back to Ellen. Which do you prefer Sir?”

“Alright Constable, we’ll go. But we’ve a right to protect our lives and property from murdering heathens.”

“I’m sorry lad,” said the sheep man, worrying his hat back on his woolly head. “I have to get back to my family.”

It was a long way to carry the corpse to Ellen on the back of Flame, and the constable wondered how you manage a body and a detached head on a flighty horse anyway. He found a small grassy meadow in a paperbark copse nearby. He undressed to underwear and boots. The soil was sandy and using a tough slab of bark from the hovel’s roof he eventually scraped a trench mid-thigh deep. He struck sheet limestone and could go no further, not without explosives. It was getting late and he did not want to be within cooe of this place at night.

The head unstuck reluctantly when he reached into the oven. He held it out in front of him thinking of drips on his boots and walked quickly back to the grave, placing it at one end of his trench. He dragged the body out and flopped it in. A little gut churning rearranging and in the failing light the body looked acceptably whole. When done he

washed his hands in the creek, cleaned himself up with a meticulousness his mother would commend and put on his uniform. Back at the grave he held his hat to his chest, bowed his head and said the Lord's Prayer aloud, hoping God would forgive him for hurrying the trespass and trespassing bit feeling all the time that he was indeed doing just that.

Flame was as keen to get out of there as he and commenced a furious gallop the moment his backside hit the saddle.

The following morning gloomed under a sky at the edge of weeping. A whaler sat at anchor inside the bar as if welded onto a rigid sheet of blue metal. Along the coast to the north a cloud rope of smoke connected earth to sky.

Men clumped up the coastal path to the pub, grunted and cursed through plans of retributive adventure, while eyes cast wary glances towards the police station and the northern smoke. The flame maned chestnut and the piebald snoozed standing up in the horse paddock. The feeble buildings of the station and its boyish strutting constable were laughable to these men of axes and blade ploughs, rolling decks and whales the size of a ship that take a long time to die.

It wouldn't be long and the young bloke would have to ride the news to Port Lincoln; no-one else would do it. All could now claim a need to protect their family and property.

Lukas spent the day writing a very neat and detailed report and afterwards going about and entreating the near homesteads and the whalers hanging around the pub but none would be his messenger of police.

That night the watchers saw no movement at the station, but there was plenty going on inside the constable's young head. A head short on experience but long on belief in duty and laws both written and heartfelt. Just before dawn he saddled Flame and headed south towards Port Lincoln. The lookout noted that he was travelling light and fast on that undersized racehorse. The beat of hooves on the rough and broken ground had not long faded when a caustic organism quilled with gun barrels began to form at *The Sportsman's Arms*.

The district was sparsely populated, even if they counted the Naou, which they most certainly did not. That perfectly adapted sovereign first nation and its many millenia of history were not considered by those who cordoned, levelled forests, fouled clan waterholes and alienated all others from tracts of land the size of European provinces with their papers of ownership.

With locals and whalers the *Sportsman's* gang grew to eight men, a veritable horde in these parts. Nearly all the cracks had gathered to the fray. There was Tennant of course. Clayton from Mount Wedge came down to lend a hand, bringing his most ruthless shepherd with him. Neither was averse to using whip and rifle, or handouts of strychnine-laced flour. In fact they were proud of it. Much better than wasting good land on them like the colonial government did over at Poonindie on the peninsula's east coast.

They made plans, washing down the details with ample rum. The Naou smoke they could see was coming from a patch of scrub at the edge of the beetling cliffs to the north. That was handy. The cliffs and the pounding sea would clean up the job nicely. No skeletons would ever tell the story of their ride.

The riders neared the Naou camp around midday. They were electrified by adrenalin, alcohol, the self-righteousness of conquest, and sure triumph. The Naou at that time were depleted by poison and European diseases, murder and dispossession. The numbskull primitives didn't have guns so all you had to do was stay out of spear range, laughed Clayton, the expert in this kind of venture. Ride and whoop and shoot a few bucks and the rest will start running – then you must wheel them, wheel them for the cliffs boys.

The bush fairly rang as Clayton led their brave gallop into the clearing. But there they all took a pull, hooves sending the lime stones flying.

In the middle of the spear grass meadow was a mounded fire, thick smoke generated by deliberate green branches ravelling upward in the fat still air. Next to the fire stood the snow haired sheep man trying to aim a repeating rifle. Its barrel mouth pointed alternately at the horses' hooves and the clouds. A few feet from him on a red maned horse a straight backed crisply uniformed stripling glared along the sights of his police issue Martini Henry carbine, his aim steadfast on Clayton's chest. The Naou were not visible but they were watching in the ringing scrub, hardwood spears honed and fire tempered to rib piercing keenness. They had been convinced to hold back, to trust. But if the hairy lip police boy and the good trembling sheep hair stuffed this up they were ready.