Charles Retallack in Queensland (1868-1964)

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Charles Retallack was the son of an itinerant Cornish carrier in South Australia, but hauled farm equipment all the way to Mitchell in Queensland, where he took an 80-acre selection in 1894. In Mitchell he met and married Margaret Dobbin by 1896, fathering 8 children until 1912. Margaret's Irish merchant family migrated to Mitchell in 1891, a decade after Irish bushranger Ned Kelly of their home region in the Goulburn Valley of Victoria was hanged in Melbourne. The Irish Kenniff brothers, last of the bushrangers, were captured not far from Charles' selection in Mitchell in 1902. Patrick Kenniff was hanged in 1903 and Jimmy Kenniff jailed until 1914. Discrimination against Irish by English settlers left many Irish Australians more sympathetic to "battlers" than to the establishment, and Mitchell is still known as "Kenniff Country". Charles served in the 1914 campaign to claim the German colony of Rabaul on the Papuan Island of New Britain for the British Empire. Drought and prickly pear invasion made farming difficult, and he mainly worked as a carrier and carpenter in Mitchell and Brisbane.

Charles Retallack (Fig. 1) was born in Steinau, South Australia on May 25, 1868, the eighth child of John and Caroline Retallack¹. His father John was born in Luxulyan, Cornwall, to parents with the Bible Christian Church of Cornwall. This fundamentalist church believed that everything in the bible was absolute truth², and John to emigrated to Adelaide, South Australia with missionaries¹. Charles' mother Caroline Rashleigh was born in St Keverne Cornwall to yeoman farmers, and emigrated with her Bible Christian stepfather to Mitcham near Adelaide³, where she met and married John. Missionary work did not suit John Retallack, who was illiterate, and he worked as a carrier in various parts of the colony: Mitcham until 1856, then

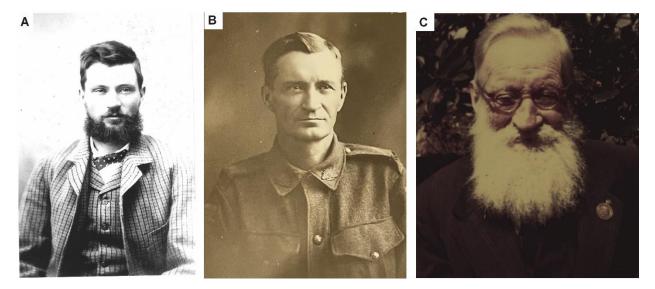


Figure 1 Charles Retallack in Mitchell 1896 (A), in uniform 1914 (B), in Brisbane in 1962 (C).

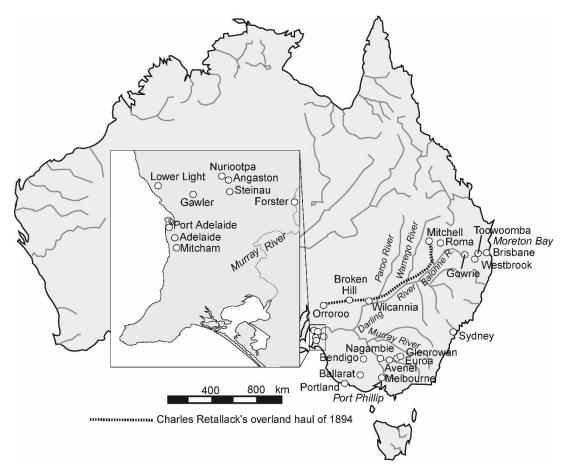


Figure 2 Charles Retallack's overland droving route in 1894 from Ororoo to Mitchell ("Kenniff Country"), together with other South Australian homes of his father, and childhood homes of Margaret Dobbin in the Goulburn Valley region ("Kelly Country") of Victoria.

Angaston until 1864, Nurioopta until 1865, then Steinau where Charles was born, Gawler in 1869, and Lower Light in 1873¹. In 1894, bankruptcy provoked 26-year-old Charles to haul foreclosed farm implements from Ororoo in South Australia to Mitchell, Queensland⁴ (Fig.2). He may have been inspired by the Bowen Downs cattle duffers Harry Readford, George Doudney and William Rooke, who drove stolen cattle from Longreach to market in 1870 in Maree, South Australia⁵, through country where the Burke and Wills expedition had perished in 1861⁶⁻⁷. Readford was the model for Captain Starlight of Rolf Boldrewood's (1888) popular novel "Robbery under Arms"⁸, and was acquitted of proven cattle duffing by a Roma court because the jury was so impressed by this feat of droving⁹. Charles was evidently proud of his achievement and stood for a studio picture in Broken Hills on the way, with his brother James and two mates (Fig. 2). In about 1920, Blanche Cummings (third daughter of his brother William Retallack) encouraged him to submit an account⁴ to the newspaper (Table 1), but it was not accepted for publication.



Figure 2 Charles Retallack's overland party of 1894 in Broken Hill: left-right, unknown, unknown, Charles Retallack, James Retallack.

Table 1. Charles Retallack's account of his overland haul to Mitchell in 1894

To the editor

Dear sir,

I the undersigned would be pleased to hear from anyone who has had a similar experience since 1894 travelling across country with Bullock teams from Orroroo South Australia to Mitchell in Queensland loaded with farm implements about 1200 mls. Crossing S A Border at Cockburn border of N.S.W. Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Paroo, Warrogo & Cuttaburra Rivers. Crossed Barrongun border into Queensland through stations across to Fernlee, via Bolland & up the Maranoa River to Mitchell. Landed to see an eight years drought. During that time I saw the greatest cyclone ever witnessed in Mitchell wrecking the whole town. An accident worth recording on the Journey on Fernlee Station was our saddle Horses including young ones, rushed out of the dam excepting one with bell on which never came out. I rushed down to see what was wrong & all I could see was one leg above the water & then disappeared. I called the brother down but no horse appeared. We went back to the waggons and had dinner & then went back to pull him away, but he had never came to the top, so there was nothing for us to do, but to leave him where he was and go on our way. He came to the top later as a carrier was sent to pull him out in the scrub. The previous Diary of the above has been lost. C. Retallack



Figure 3. Mitchell Queensland in 2022, A, Charles Retallack's 80 acre selection 6 km southeast of Mitchell; B, Maranoa River frontage of Charles Retallack's selection; C, prickly pear (Opuntia stricta) and Mitchell grass (Astrebla lappacea) and buffel grass (Cenchrus ciliaris), 11 km west of Mitchell; D, Foodworks, 82 Cambridge Street, which was Dobbin's Family Store ("Dobbos") until 2015; E, Western Hotel, Cambridge Street with Queensland bottle tree (Brachychiton rupestris).

In Mitchell, Charles took out an 80 acre selection, portion 10 of the Parish of Balmoral East, 6 km south of Mitchell, flanking the Maranoa River¹⁰ (Fig. 3A-B). It is easily reached now

from the old east-west droving route to the river, now called Piggery Road, to Maranoa Stud, in portion 9 immediately north¹¹. Charles' brother James took out portion 11, immediately south and also portion 31 to the southwest¹⁰. Both brothers are listed as farmers and residents in the quarterly electoral list of 1896¹⁰, but found it difficult succeed as farmers. In addition to the drought of the past eight years and the cyclone that nearly wrecked the town (Table 1), the land was infested with noxious weeds, prickly pear (Opuntia stricta, Fig. 3), goathead burr (Tribulus *terrestris*), and jumping cholla (*Cylindropuntia prolifera*)¹¹. Prickly pear and other succulents were introduced to Sydney from Brazil on the First Fleet in 1788 as a substrate for the cochineal scale insect (*Dactylopius coccus*) valued for its dye of British military uniform red¹². Prickly pear invasion was especially devastating in Queensland, and it was not controlled until introduction of cactus moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*) from Argentina in 1925¹³. Rare prickly pear persist even now (Fig. 3C). Meagre graze from native bunch grasses (Astrebla lappacea)¹⁴, was thickened by introduced African buffel grass (Cenchrus ciliaris), introduced accidently by Afghan cameleers in the 1870s¹⁵. There never was a homestead on Retallack portions¹¹. Presumably the brothers lived in town and found work as carriers to supplement meagre agricultural earnings, but James left for Western Australia after only a few years.

Charles did however meet his future wife Margaret Dobbin. Her father Thomas Dobbin was born in County Donegal, Ireland, 12 December 1842¹⁶, and emigrated at age 16 with his family to Melbourne in 1857¹⁷, then settled in Euroa, Victoria¹⁸. Her mother Jessie McInnes was born in Balgowan on the Isle of Skye in 1851¹⁹, and emigrated to Australia barely a year old with her family through the Highland and Island Emigration Society to escape the potato blight famines²⁰. The McInnes family worked with sheep graziers in the Euroa, Nagambie and Violet Town region of the Goulburn Valley, Victoria¹⁸. Thomas married Jessie in 1867 when she was 16 and he was 25²². They had their first child John in Avenel in 1869, followed by William in Tabilk (between Nagambie and Avenel) in 1870, and other children in Nagambie (Fig.4B): Margaret in 1873, Jessie in 1874, Catherine in 1876, and Edward Forbes in 1882¹⁸. Thomas established himself as a Stock and Station Agent in Nagambie, representing Goldsborough & Co²¹.



Figure 4. "Kelly Country" in the Goulburn River Valley, Victoria, childhood home of Margaret Dobbin: A, armoured Ned Kelly sculpture in Glenrowan, (B) post office in Nagambie, in 2022

| Date | Events |
|--------------------|---|
| December 1854 | Ned Kelly born at Beveridge to John and Ellen Kelly (nee Quinn) |
| 1859 | Ned attends Beveridge Catholic School |
| 1860 | Ned moves to dairy farm in Avenel and attends Avenel Common School |
| 1866 | Ned rescues 7 year old Richard Sheldon from drowning and Ned's father dies |
| 1867 | Kelly family move to Greta and take up 88 acre selection at Eleven Mile Creek |
| 28 October 1869 | Ned is acquitted of assaulting and robbing Chines hawker Ah Fook |
| 23 June 1870 | Ned is acquitted of "robbery under arms' while apprentice to Harry Powers |
| 10 November 1870 | Ned sentenced to 3 months at Beechworth for violent assault and indecency |
| May 1971 | Ned sentenced to three years for horse stealing at Beechworth and Pentridge |
| 8 August 1874 | Ned wins 20-round bare-knuckle fight at Beechworth |
| 1875 | Ned works as foreman of a sawmill for Beechworth railway sleepers |
| September 1877 | Ned fined for drunk and fight with Constables Fitzpatrick and Lonigan |
| March 1878 | Warrant posted for Ned's arrest for horse stealing |
| 28 October 1878 | Kennedy, Lonigan and Scanlan shot dead by Kelly Gang, Stringybark Creek |
| 9-10 December 1878 | Kelly gang bails up Faithfull's Creek Station, robs National Bank at Euroa |
| 8-10 February 1879 | Kelly Gang bails up town of Jerilderie and robs bank of New South Wales |
| 27-28 June 1880 | Seige of Glenrowan, death of Joe Burne and Steve Hart, capture of Ned |
| 28-29 October 1880 | Ned's trial at Supreme Court, Melbourne, and death sentence |
| 11 November 1880 | Ned is executed by hanging in Melbourne Gaol |

Table 2. Summary chronology of bushranger Ned Kelly in the Goulburn Valley of Victoria.

These were the years of Australia's most famous bushranger Ned Kelly²² (Fig. 4A) in the same Goulburn River region (Table 2). A police list of the time lists Alexander and Duncan McInnes as Kelly Gang sympathizers²², and local flour miller Mr McInnes is mentioned by Ned in his letter pleading clemency to Parliamentarian Donald Cameron²³. Both McInnes and Dobbin families may have known the Kellys from Avenel Common School. When Ned Kelly was sentenced to death in 1880²⁵, there was strong sympathy for him among Irish and Scots Catholics, who felt discrimination from the Church of England establishment²⁴. This and competition from the larger Stock and Station Agent in Euroa, J.H. Teague and Co.²⁵, may have stimulated Thomas Dobbin to move to Mitchell.

Thomas Dobbin established himself in Mitchell in 1891 as an auctioneer and stock and station agent representing Dalgety & Co and Massey-Harris Co.²⁶⁻²⁷. A newspaper reported his speech on a visit of the Governor General to Mitchell Agricultural Show in 1914^{27} . "*Mr. Thomas Dobbin proposed "Prosperity on the Maranoa," and in doing traced the growth of Mitchell during the past 23 years. Then it consisted of an old shanty and two old-fashioned hotels, no farming, no wheat, no wool, and very few fat sheep. In those days sheep sold at Is a head, fat bullocks sold for £2 2s, and fine lovely shorthorn heifers for 2ls. He did not think the beef trust had anything to do with the increased prices now ruling. The Queensland Government had put on an export duty on produce, and built up a very big trade. Now the world knew they had lovely beef and mutton, and was anxious to have it, and that demand had had a lot to do with the prosperity of the Maranoa. It was hard to develop the country with cattle selling at 54s, and sheep at Is head. The present prosperity was due to the advance in stock. Twenty-three years ago wool was sold at 4p per lb. He knew, a man who was offered 6p per lb for wool in Australia, and lost money by sending it to London. The same wool they could now see going as high as l3³/4p*

per lb for comeback wool grown by Mr. Deshon. Other wool brought I4p. They were getting £9 and £10 a head for good bullocks, and £7 to £8 for cows. No wonder the district was prosperous. It had a very fine representative in Parliament in Mr. Hunter, who was always looking out for the welfare of the Maranoa. When Mr. Hunter becomes Minister for Lands—and he might some day—he had said he would give farms away free if the people would only clear the pear. He thought the present government would be very wise to adopt that suggestion. Queensland would be a very prosperous place if it were not for the prickly pear, and if they did not deal with it, that it would deal with them." Many Dobbins remain in Mitchell. Wayne Dobbin, grandson of Thomas, opened Dobbin's General Store ("Dobbo's"), at 82 Cambridge Street, with his wife Denise in the 1980s. It has been a Foodworks managed by Wayne and Sandy Clifton since 2015¹¹ (Fig. 3D)

Charles Retallack married Margaret Dobbin 19 March 1896 in Mitchell²⁸, and they generated a large Catholic family of 8 children from 1897 to 1912³⁰ (Figs. 5-6). The children's formative years were shaped by tales of Irish bushrangers (Fig.7). The Irish Kenniff brothers of Mitchell, Queensland, were the last of the Australian bushrangers³¹, eventually convicted for murder like Ned Kelly (Table 3). The drama of their final capture played out across Charles'



Figure 5. Charles and Margaret Retallack (center) in 1907 with children (left to right standing), Eric Thomas Charles and Leslie John, (left to right sitting), Olive Maud, Cyril Rashleigh, Sylvia May, Roy Mitchell, and Ruby Caroline. Maurice Francis was born six years later.



Figure 6. Genealogy of our branch of the Retallacks in Australia featuring Charles and Margaret Retallack (center) and authors Gregory and Michael Retallack (bottom).

selection 6 km south of Mitchell where Patrick and Jimmy Kenniff (Fig. 7A-B) camped 21 June 1902 after a month of hiding^{11,31}. They stole a bag of wheat from a local shed to feed their horses, and after report of the theft, police dispatched black tracker Samuel Johnson on their trail (Fig. 7C). At first light 23 June 1902 four police surprised the Kenniff brothers and fired on them. Patrick was quickly captured, but Jimmy escaped, only to be captured later along the road to Mitchell. They were both brought to town and tried in the Mitchell courthouse (Fig.7D), which recommended trial in Brisbane. Both brothers were sentenced to death by hanging for murder, but on appeal Jimmy's sentence was commuted to life in prison, and he was released in 1914. The site of their camp is locally known as Paddy's Knob and has a monument to police deaths (Fig. 7E). But there is also a more recent monument to the Kenniff brothers eerily reminiscent of the armoured helmet of Ned Kelly (Fig. 7F). The Kenniffs were also Irish Catholics, and their parties using ill-gotten gains won them many friends around Mitchell. Even now the conserved courthouse is the "Kenniff Courthouse", and the region referred to as "Kenniff Country", just as the Goulbourn River Valley in Victoria is billed as "Kelly Country".

Both Charles Retallack, then 46 years old, and later his son Eric, when 16, enlisted in World War 1. Eric served briefly at Gallipoli and then Pozieres in the Somme Valley, France³², but Charles served in the third wave of the 1914 assault on Rabaul, then a German colony on the Papuan Island of New Britain³³. An initial party of 25 under Lieutenant Bowen was ambushed by Germans near Kabakaul, but managed to recover and take German prisoners³⁴. A second party of 50 landed at Herbertshöhe under Lieutenants Elwell and Hill, and relieved Bowen's force in overtaking the German trenches on the Bitapaka Road, and accepting German surrender from



Figure 7. Kenniff Country bushrangers and black tracker in 1902 (A-C) and memorials in 2022 (D-F); A, Patrick Kenniff.; B, James (Jimmy) Kenniff; C, Samuel Johnson; D, Kenniff Courthouse and Dulbydilla windmill in Cambridge Street Mitchell; E, memorial to the Kenniff Brothers on "Paddys Knob", 7 km south of Mitchell; F, memorial to slain police constables George Doyle and Albert Dahlke nearby.

| Date | Events |
|-----------------|---|
| 1887 | Patrick Kenniff and his uncles arrested and imprisoned for cattle duffing in Casino |
| 1888 | "Old Kenniff" (James) and sone Jimmy overland to Mitchell from Casino NSW |
| 1891 | Old Kenniff's son Patrick joins him and Jimmy in Mitchell |
| 1893 | Kenniffs take up Borer Block near Augathella, then Ralph Block Carnarvon Range |
| November 1894 | Kenniffs arrested for horse stealing, but escape on way to Tambo |
| February 1895 | Pat and Jimmy stole racehorse, were captured and tried in Roma, 3 and 2 years |
| 1897 | Jimmy Kenniff gets lease to Ralph Block in Carnarvon Range |
| 1898 | Pat and Jimmy wanted for stolen horse and store cheque |
| 1898 | Jimmy Kenniff arrested by Sergeant Nixon, tried, but found not guilty |
| 1898 | Patrick Kenniff surrenders, is tried in Roma and gets 3 years in St Helena gaol |
| November 1901 | Patrick Kenniff joins brother Jimmy to steal horses from Lethbridge Pocket |
| Early 1902 | Patrick arrested and tried in Mitchell, but only fined |
| 1902 | Attempted arrest for horse stealing at Lethbridge Pocket, but Kenniffs escape |
| 1902 | Discovery of cremated remains of George Doyle and Albert Dahlke |
| May 1902 | Patrick and Jimmy on the run, raid Westgrove Station and town of Morven |
| 21 June 1902 | Patrick and Jimmy steal wheat from shed 6 km south of Mitchell |
| 23 June 1902 | Police and aboriginal black tracker surprise Kenniff camp and capture brothers |
| 24 June 1902 | Patrick and Jimmy Kenniff tried in Mitchell for murder of Doyle and Dahlke |
| November 1902 | After trial in Brisbane both Jimmy and Patrick sentenced to death by hanging |
| December 1902 | After appeal Patrick got death sentence and Jimmy life imprisonment |
| 12 January 1903 | Patrick Kenniff hanged in Boggo Road Gaol, Brisbane |
| 1914 | Jimmy Kenniff released from goal |
| 1940 | Jimmy Kenniff died in Charters Towers |
| | |

 Table 3. Summary chronology of bushrangers Kenniff brothers of Mitchell, Queensland.

 Date
 Events



Figure 8. Retallack house in Toowong, Brisbane, built by Leslie John Retallack.

there to Bitapaka Wireless Station. These actions resulted in deaths of 2 Australian officers and 4 men. On the German side, one non-commissioned officer and 30 native soldiers were killed. Charles was part of a third landing of four companies of infantry (600 men) under Lieutenant-Colonel Watson. This main force marched to Rabaul for raising of the Union Jack, singing of the national anthem ("God Save the King"), and three cheers for the king. The Germans found that their native soldiers were unreliable, and were intimidated by potential bombardment from the Australian fleet of 2 submarines, 2 battle cruisers, 3 destroyers, and 2 light cruisers. Together with a hospital ship, also in the fleet, this was almost the entire Australian navy at the time³⁵. New Britain and Papua then became an Australian protectorate through mandate from the League of Nations³⁶.

Charles was still in Mitchell in 1909³⁷, but was in Brisbane for Margaret's funeral March 10, 1930³⁸. He was still in Brisbane by the 1937 second marriage of his son Leslie. Charles is listed on that marriage certificate as a carpenter, and Leslie as a printer³⁹. They built a fine house in Toowong, a suburb of Brisbane (Fig. 8). During a family visit to Brisbane in 1962 we were able to get a formal portrait of four generations of Retallack men (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Four generations of Retallack men in Brisbane in 1962 (left to right), Kenneth John, Leslie John, Charles, and Gregory John.

Acknowledgments

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