

## WILLIAM RICHARDS (ALIAS "CHARCOAL WILL") A BLACK OR WHITE CASE?

The earliest verified reference to anyone residing in Illawarra is made by Lieutenant Parker of the 46<sup>th</sup> Regiment in a report dated 8 May 1816 when he remarks that he is camped at "the long point" (near Hill 60 at Port Kembla) and has "ordered a bullock belonging to Mr Cribb to be killed and served out to the men." This indicates that both stock and Stockmen and at least one possible Overseer, Mr Cribb, had been already sent in advance on the promise of impending grants in the area. [I have previously told George Cribb's story in the IHS Bulletin, Mar/April, 2004, pp. 11-18]]

Charles Throsby Smith in his 1863 Reminiscences, however, points out that "Mr Cribb located himself near where the Figtree bridge now stands, and the place was called Charcoal Creek, in honour of Cribb's stockman, an old soldier, who was better known by the name of Charcoal Will than by any other name" [IHS Bulletin June 1990, p.43]. This William Richards (alias "Charcoal Will") turns up for the first time in colonial records when he gives a sworn statement relating to a charge of mistreatment of Aborigines brought by Dr Charles Throsby on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1818.

Richards signs with a cross to both the name William Richards and the alias "Charcoal Will". A recent book by Michael Adams's entitled *Little Bulli: the pioneering of Stanwell Park and Northern Illawarra till the 1860s*, Cultural Exchange International, 2005, pp. 42-49) suggests that this William Richards (alias "Charcoal Will" ) is an Aborigine who also went by the name of "Arwilla".

Charles Throsby Smith, however, is quite precise about this matter. He suggests that Charcoal Will is an "old soldier".

The only "old soldier" I can find who fits the bill is:

RICHARDS, William, Private, 73rd Regiment of Foot, 1st Battalion, 1812 Pay List, PRO Reel/Source: 3869

The Royal Highlanders (The 1st Battalion of the 73rd Regiment) landed in Sydney on 1 January 1810 and took over duties from the New South Wales Corps (102nd Regiment). It was thus the first of many British line regiments garrisoned in New South Wales for the next sixty years. When the 1st Battalion serving in New South Wales completed its tour of duty in 1814 it was ordered to Ceylon, where it remained until 1821.

Examining the ridiculous stovepipe hats of the uniform of the 73rd regiment, I'd be extremely pleased to get into some cattle minding near the Figtree Bridge if the alternative was the above hat.

So if Charles Throsby Smith is right then William Richards (alias Charcoal Will) stayed on after the 73<sup>rd</sup> regiment completed its tour of duty and was here to appear as a witness to the tragic events relating to aborigines which occurred in 1818. The fact that he could give sworn evidence to the trial also suggests that the "Charcoal Will" was actually a white settler rather than an Aborigine – for aborigines were rarely viewed as capable of "swearing" evidence in white courts.

The question, of course, is can we trust Throsby Smith's reminiscence? Because he only arrived in NSW in April 1816, the 8<sup>th</sup> day of May is a bit early to expect Charles Throsby Smith to have travelled to Illawarra to meet the William Richards (alias Charcoal Will) whom he claims was George Cribb's stockman. Charles Throsby Smith also appears to make a number of mistakes when he suggests that "Mr George Cribb, the father of Mr Cribb, late a member of the Parliament of New South Wales" had "brought cattle down" to Illawarra prior to Robert Jenkins' selection and subsequent grant. Neither of the Cribb brothers - Robert and Benjamin - who became politicians were related to the George Cribb who held cattle at Illawarra in 1816.

Charles Throsby Smith himself also makes the claim that he "piloted" Robert Jenkins "down the mountain and he selected near the present site of Mr Jenkins' [William Warren Jenkins] hospitable mansion" at Berkeley. But Throsby Smith seems to get the date wrong (he is writing some 40 years after the event) and says "this was the year 1817" when Meehan had actually surveyed Jenkins Berkeley grant on 7 December 1815. Charles Throsby Smith had not even arrived in NSW in December 1815, so it appears that he attempted to big-note himself by suggesting he "piloted" one of the five first pioneer land grantees down the mountain into Illawarra.

Cont'd on page 16.

But Charles Throsby Smith *was* in Illawarra in October 1818 to attend the inquiry into Weston and O'Brien's molestation of Aborigines, which would have been the big story of that year, - so it is presumed that he did actually meet "Charcoal Will" and would be capable of distinguishing whether or not he was a white "old soldier" or an Aborigine.

Where the confusion over "Charcoal Will" seems to have arisen is that in the Berry papers in the Mitchell Library there is a diary of an expedition to Shoalhaven in June and July 1822 in which there is mention of a Sydney aborigine called "Charcoal Will" who has a bung leg and a very distinctive walk as a consequence.

This individual is NOT referred to by Berry as "William Richards" - simply as "Charcoal Will". The fact that Berry also makes a single mention of a man called "O'Brien" in this same diary has perhaps compounded the confusion. The man referred to does NOT appear to be Illawarra's Cornelius O'Brien. It is not an uncommon name in the 1820s.

There is also another Aboriginal "Charcoal Will" referred to in the blanket returns of 1819, 1820s and 1830s and on one occasion he is termed "Chief of Bulli". He may or may not be a different person to the lame Aborigine from Sydney referred to by Berry in 1822. An investigation of the blanket returns for the 1820 and 1830s also reveals that a number of Aborigines on the south coast bore the name "Charcoal".

There seems little doubt therefore that "William Richards (alias Charcoal Will of Illawarra referred to by both Charles Throsby Smith and the Court Case of 1818 was NOT an Aborigine but the white "old soldier" who once served in NSW with the 73rd regiment.