

FORMER CUSTOMS DETECTIVE

Master of D

First-class passengers on the Sydney to Melbourne express one day in 1894 paid little attention to the distinguished-looking Anglican clergyman who boarded the train at Albury and buried his head in a church newspaper.

KEITH DARROW continues...*

As the train reached the border checkpoint at Wodonga, Victorian Customs officers boarded looking for people trying to smuggle dutiable goods into the state from Sydney's free port.

A well-dressed young woman, hearing the Customs officers approach, removed some packages from her bag and concealed them behind her. She told the officers she had nothing dutiable and, as they were about to move on, the clergyman stood up and identified himself as 'Detective Christie of the Customs'.

"I would like to know about those parcels that you have pushed behind you," he said, indicating that he had been using a mirror to observe her movements.

The embarrassed woman confessed to smuggling, the goods were seized, and charges were laid against her.

She was one of thousands of law-breakers caught by the legendary Detective John Christie whose long career included service in the Victorian Colonial police and Customs services, and the first Commonwealth Department of Trade and Customs.

Renowned as a master of disguises, Detective Christie used a variety of wigs, false beards, moustaches and clothing to comb the countryside, sometimes as a swagman or tinker, searching for illicit stills and smuggled goods.

In Melbourne, dressed as a sailor or a Salvation Army officer, he would check hotel bars to see if illicit spirits were being sold. In suburban streets he posed as a street cleaner or milkman while keeping suspicious



Detective Inspector JM Christie.

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premises under observation. On one occasion he intercepted a hearse being used to transport a coffin which contained illicit liquor. He also caught a woman delivering flagons of spirit concealed in a baby's pram.

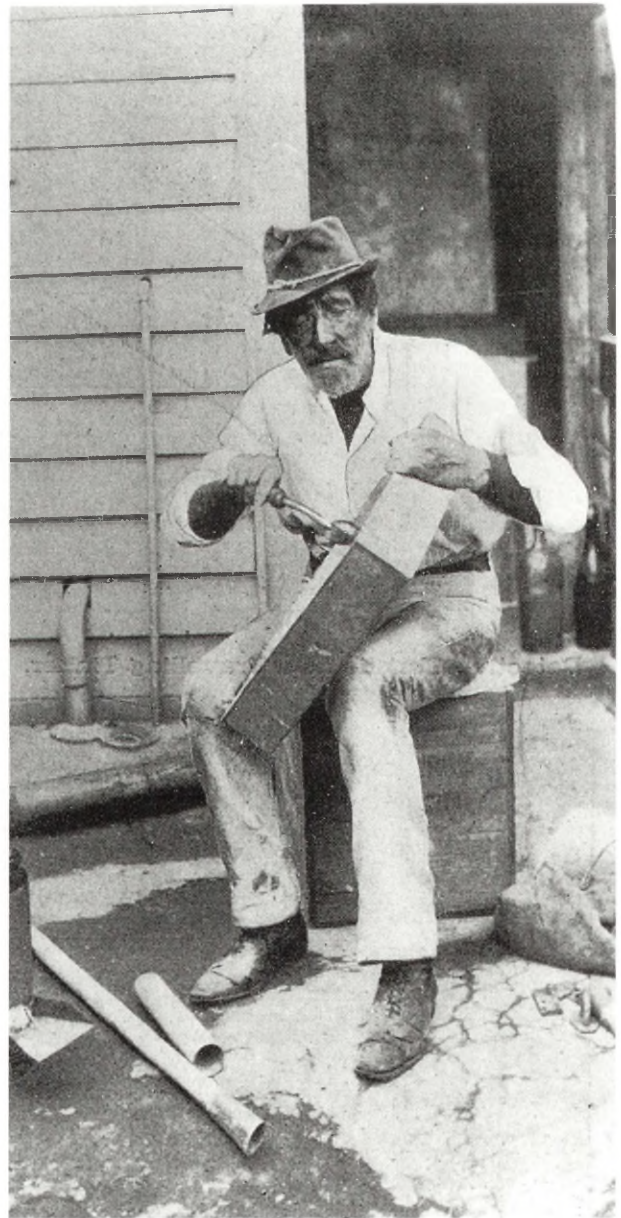
The loss to colonial revenue through the sale of illicit spirits was considerable. Unscrupulous publicans could buy spirits for five shillings a gallon, whereas the duty-paid product cost at least 16 shillings. And there were the social consequences.

A biography of Christie*, published after he retired in 1910, states: "Another evil was the prevalence of drunkenness in the illicit still districts. The drinking bouts which often took place in the small townships in the bush were frequently the cause of scenes of debauchery of the most shocking kind, and were a scandal to the community."

John Mitchell Christie was born in Scotland in 1845. As a schoolboy in England he was bullied because of his Scottish accent. His father arranged for a famous pugilist, Nat Langham, to teach him boxing – a skill which served him well in later life.

Christie's family originally planned a military career for him, following his brother into the 42nd Highlanders, the famous Black Watch. But a letter from an uncle, who had migrated to Australia and settled at Sale, Victoria, as a squatter and gold miner, changed the course of his life. He sailed for Australia to work for his uncle, learning prospecting, bushcraft and how to ride a horse. He also built a reputation as a boxer, knocking out a noted prize-fighter known as 'The Bruiser' in nine rounds.

Continued over page



Christie 'the swagman'.

* *The Reminiscences of Detective Inspector Christie*, related by J.B. Castieau, published by George Robertson & Company.



Christie 'the Salvation Army officer'.

Soon after this fight his uncle drowned in a boating accident. His will, which left his property to his nephew, had not been witnessed and was declared invalid. Christie found himself fending for himself. A prominent businessman, Mr Richard Gibson, gave him a letter of recommendation to Superintendent Nicholson who was in charge of the Detective Office of the Victorian Police. It described him as "good with his head and his hands". On this basis he was sworn in and started his career as a detective.

In 1869, when Prince Alfred, the then Duke of Edinburgh, arrived in Australia for an official visit, Christie was seconded to his staff as a personal bodyguard. He later served in a similar role when the Governor-General, the Earl of Hopetoun, appointed him in April 1901 as security adviser to the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York during their Australian tour.

Christie's love of sporting activities led him to hand in his detective's badge and revolver in the mid-1870s to pursue a short career as a professional boxer, rower and runner. He won the heavyweight championship of Victoria, but one of his most famous fights was on 17 October 1876 when he was matched against Abe Hicken, the Australian champion.

This prize fight was held at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne, with Christie the under-dog. Against steep odds, Christie traded blows with Hicken for an hour and 23 minutes over 34 rounds. With Christie appearing to gain the upper hand, police conferred with the referee and stopped the fight to prevent the crowd getting out of control. Though Hicken was removed from the ring in bad shape and with two broken ribs, the referee declared a draw. It was later discovered that the referee and his friends had heavily backed Hicken. However, Christie made a large amount of money by backing himself at long odds to last more than one hour with Hicken.

His reputation was such that when the celebrated world champion prize fighter, Jem Mace, toured Australia, Christie was engaged to accompany Mace and box four exhibition rounds with him each night. He also shared the billing with Mace, fighting any local hopefuls who wished to chance their luck. For this he was paid 75 pounds a week. Mace pocketed 150 pounds and had all his expenses met.

Christie was also an accomplished oarsman, having been taught to row by his uncle on the lakes of Gippsland. He was the champion sculler of Victoria for three years from 1876-78 before being beaten for the title by Charlie Messenger, son of an English sculling champion.

At the end of his brief period as a professional sportsman, Christie accepted an offer to join the Victorian Customs Department as a detective. Though his career as a prize fighter was over, he continued to enjoy rowing.

One day, while training on the Yarra River, he was hit in the back by a sharp, heavy stone thrown by a well-known criminal, John Sharp, whom Christie had once arrested for burglary. Despite bleeding profusely from his wound, Christie rowed to the riverbank and caught Sharp before he could escape.

Christie said: "Well, Sharp, if you'd hit me on the head instead of the back, you'd have finished me. But if you'll stand and face me for four rounds, I'll call quits."

A crowd of onlookers formed a circle around the two men. Knowing that the alternative was a return to gaol, Sharp agreed to the bargain and was subsequently severely punished.

The life of a Customs detective in the Victorian Colony was a busy one. Before Federation smuggling was rife between New South Wales, a free trade state, and Victoria, where heavy duties were levied on most imports. At Albury-Wodonga, every bridge over the Murray River had gates and a Customs House. It was common for people to circumvent the law by walking over to Albury in tattered old clothes, only to return some time later resplendent in the latest fashions.

With Federation, Christie transferred to the new Commonwealth Department of Trade and Customs. In 1910, the year of his retirement, he was knifed and severely wounded while chasing opium smugglers.

Left bleeding and unconscious in the street he was found in time and rushed to hospital where his life was saved by a team of leading doctors. While he lay ill, daily enquiries as to his progress were received from Government House, Parliament House, other official circles and members of the public.

When he recovered and retired, he received the following letter from the Acting Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes:

“Dear Mr Christie,

I feel that after a lifetime spent in the Service of the State your retirement, rendered necessary through injuries received while carrying out the responsible duties of your office, calls for some brief references from the Government of the day to your many and great services to this country.

And will you let me say too for myself how very much I admire those qualities of courage, tact, tenacity of purpose, unswerving devotion to duty, and unimpeachable integrity which have characterised you throughout the whole of your career.

I hope you will be long spared, and that the effects of the recent cowardly attack upon you may not prove permanent.

The loss to the Department through your retirement will be felt keenly.

Wishing you the happiest of New Years, I am, dear Inspector Christie,

Yours truly

(Signed) W.M. Hughes”

Christie was undoubtedly a remarkable and successful detective. But were all his accounts strictly true? Writing in the *Australian Customs History Journal* (September 1991), John M. Petersen reported that Customs had assisted the State Library of Victoria to buy some manuscripts in which Christie described some of his better known cases. Petersen, until recently a Customs officer in Victoria, said the “very theatricality” of the disguises had delighted Victorians and newspapers were keen to feed stories about his cases to an eager public.

Petersen points out that Christie did not always use disguises, relying on natural aptitude and skill in more mundane casework. “Nevertheless, it is the larger than life version of the detective which has survived,” he said.

“Reading the newspaper clippings pasted in Christie’s scrapbook and his case notes, one gains an impression of an ordinary man relishing his fame. These manuscripts are the stuff of detective fiction – an intrepid and sometimes disguised Customs inspector on the trail of deceptive and wicked criminals. In reality, as most public servants would understand, Christie would have spent a fair share of his working life doing routine paperwork, and it must have surely been a more humble version of our hero who rode his bicycle to and from the Customs House on Flinders Street each day.”

Petersen held that Christie had been “adding colour to his tales of derring-do”. He wrote: “The Customs inspector was almost certainly aware of the fictional Sherlock Holmes model of the detective and may have cast himself in this role when writing his notes”.



Christie (standing centre) with Victorian Police after raids on illicit distillers.