

The Brisbane Riot of September 1866

by

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Part 1

On 18 August 1866, Governor Bowen, probably heaving a sigh of gubernatorial relief, wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

I trust that I may be so fortunate as to have deserved the approval and support of Her Majesty's Government by my attitude and proceedings throughout the recent crisis — now happily at an end — but which, at one moment — threatened to cause rather grave complications.¹

If Bowen did indeed heave a sigh of relief it was premature. Within a few weeks of writing this despatch Brisbane was to spend an uncomfortable and tense four days which culminated in the first serious civil disturbance in the experience of the new colony. On the night of 11 September 1866 a riot occurred in Brisbane from causes directly stemming from the "depression of trade and scarcity of employment in Brisbane" of which Bowen wrote in his despatch.

The "recent crisis" to which the Governor referred was, of course, the economic and political crisis of July-August 1866. It is not the purpose of this article to explore the causes and progress of the events in this crisis. It is sufficient to say that by mid-August the most immediate shortage of Government funds had been overcome but that extensive unemployment resulting from the crisis still existed and that trade and business activity in general were still, in late August, at a very low ebb. Pastoral conditions were adverse, with the southern half of the colony in the grip of a drought which had begun during the previous year. In the towns of Brisbane, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Warwick and Maryborough, many men were out of work. Government funds for the construction of public works had dried up and payments to the railway contractors, Peto, Brassey & Betts, had been stopped. This company, represented by Samuel Wilcox, was constructing the Ipswich to Toowoomba section of the Southern & Western Line. Work had proceeded beyond Helidon when the slump began, but now all the railway labourers, or "navvies", were camped along the line, unpaid and unemployed. A vigorous immigration program, begun in 1863, had been supplying Queensland with hundreds of new workers and after the depression began, there was no way of halting the flow of ships which continued to arrive in Queensland pouring more and more workers into the pool of those already without work. On 17 August, the *Maryborough* had arrived in Moreton Bay with 210 working men. At anchor in the bay lay the *Rockhampton*, with 455 immigrants (174 working men), which had been in quarantine since 31 May. The *Beausite*, carrying 373 German immigrants, and the *Young Australia*, with 311 British, were due any day². So far the Government had made no move to prevent further ships from sailing from Europe. So as well as the older residents who had been thrown out of work by the sudden arrival of the depression, there were the railway workers, many of whom had families, and a growing number of new arrivals, some of whom had been unemployed since they landed and who had no prospect of getting work until economic conditions improved.

As might be expected public indignation had run high in July when the full implications of the colony's financial crisis became apparent. There were a number of public meetings to protest to the Government, with little effect. The political situation from mid-July to mid-August was extremely fluid. The Macalister Administration resigned on 18 July, over the

difference of opinion with Governor Bowen concerning the legality of the proposed issue of Government Notes as currency, and an interim Administration headed by R. G. W. Herbert took over. This arrangement lasted only eighteen days and was succeeded by a new Macalister Government, in which Arthur Macalister was Colonial Secretary, J. D. McLean was Colonial Treasurer, and J. P. Bell was Secretary for Public Lands. During the political crisis, in late July, Herbert and his political colleague, George Raff, had been jostled by a Brisbane crowd. There had been some wild talk of direct action against the Governor for what was seen as his unconstitutional behaviour over the Government Notes issue. However, no serious disturbances had occurred and the only incident worthy of mention occurred in Ipswich in mid-August. Representatives of the Southern & Western navvies travelled down to Ipswich with the intention of protesting to the Government in Brisbane over their continued unemployment. They were intercepted in Ipswich by Bell, who was head of the Administration during the absence of Macalister and McLean in Sydney, and given a hearing. Bell promised to do what he could to ensure an early resumption of work on the railway but could go no further than that. He shouted all the men to a dinner at his expense and secured their promise to return up the line and await developments. Parliament was not due to reassemble until 18 September when it was expected that some decisions would be made as to what could be done to ameliorate the unemployment situation. However, unemployment was getting worse, there was no sign of an easing of the depression, and many were beginning to wonder what Parliament could do when it did reassemble. After years of comparative security, high employment rates and constant economic expansion, many people were dazed, uncertain and frightened of the future.

The next indication of trouble came from the Southern & Western navvies. News reached Brisbane on Thursday 6 September that a band of navvies had defied the police at Laidley and had broken into the railway stores in search of food³. The report went on to say that many navvies were about to leave the camps and come to Brisbane to confront the Government in an attempt to secure a resumption of work on the line. Two groups converged on Ipswich on the Thursday afternoon — one small group from Laidley, and another larger one from Helidon. About 150 men from Helidon and the camps beyond climbed aboard a train of empty goods wagons returning to Ipswich and arrived at the terminus late in the afternoon of that day. Forewarned by telegraph, the Ipswich police stopped the train outside the station and arrested some of the men for non-possession of tickets. Most of the navvies, however, simply jumped off the train and made their way into the town. There were now in Ipswich a total of about 250 navvies. The local shopkeepers, possibly fearing a disturbance, volunteered to supply free food for the men during their stay which the shopkeepers probably hoped would be brief. The police made available an empty house for shelter but most of the men camped in the open around their fires. The following morning there were some moments of tension when the men arrested the day before were charged and fined in the Police Court. But order was maintained and the majority of the navvies resolved to continue their march to Brisbane. There was at this stage no rail link between Ipswich and Brisbane, and the navvies continued on foot.

The Government was fully aware of the possibility of trouble

in Brisbane and the regular police had been supplemented by the Volunteer Artillery and by the swearing in of Special Constables, mostly recruited from the ranks of Government employees. The following letter was written, probably on 2 September, by the Police Magistrate, H. M. Massie, to the Under-Secretary for Public Works:

I have the honour to request that you will be good enough that you will apprise the officers of your Department who have been sworn in as Special Constables that the signal for the mustering will be two discharges (with a short interval between each) from the Observatory gun and a red flag in the day time.

The Rendezvous for those belonging to *your* Department will be the Commissioner's Office in *George Street*.⁴

With the news of impending trouble arriving from Ipswich, Bell must have been somewhat relieved to see Macalister and McLean arrive back aboard the *Telegraph* on the morning of Friday 7 September. Although he had been made into something of a mob hero in his disagreement with the Governor in July, Macalister had no sympathy with the extreme elements which had advocated direct measures in that crisis. He was an astute and flexible politician but he had made it clear in August that he had no time for mob action or radical political solutions to the problems besetting the colony.

Saturday morning found the citizens of Brisbane in a high state of apprehension and expectation. Rumours as to the size and intent of the band of navvies which was approaching along the Ipswich Road flew to and fro. Anxious glances were directed at the Victoria bridge for the first signs of the invading army. Many people probably feared not only the navvies, but the possible combination of navvies and the unruly elements of the resident and newly arrived unemployed already in Brisbane. Some days before, the *Queensland Daily Guardian* had remarked in an editorial:

There are amongst those who call themselves "the unemployed", idlers and scamps, or, as they are styled in colonial slang phrase, "loafers" — men who do not want to work, and who are never so much in their element as in times of riot and disturbance . . .⁵

Eventually the cry went up, "Here come the navvies!" and all eyes turned toward the bridge. There was an immediate flurry of activity on the streets, as the Volunteer Fire Brigade, armed with batons, turned out in Queen Street. The Special Constables, armed with nothing more lethal than badges on their coats, were paraded in William Street, to the amusement of sundry, irreverent small boys. A considerable crowd had gathered at the city end of the bridge by the time the navvies, allowed across toll-free by the tollkeeper, marched in good order into Queen Street. The correspondent of *The Queenslander* estimated their number at about 135, so the road had taken some toll of the number who had set out from Ipswich. Some of the navvies carried shovels on which appeared appeals for work and bread but the march was orderly and fairly silent.

As the navvies moved off the bridge there was the first sign of the combination between navvies and Brisbane unemployed which some had feared. A procession of Brisbane men, led by one William Eaves, joined the navy ranks as the procession swung into George Street on its way to the camping site at the Green Hills⁶. However, all remained quiet and orderly.

Sunday was a day of rest except for some activity connected with the organizing of a public meeting of the unemployed to be held the following morning in the Brisbane Town Hall at 11 a.m. During Sunday, news of the arrival in Moreton Bay of the *Young Australia* with her 172 potential job seekers, reached the town. It was already known that the *Beausite* was at anchor in the bay but was under quarantine. These two ships alone represented another 684 mouths to feed in the near future.

On Monday morning real tension in Brisbane began to mount. At the public meeting, which was supervised by the police, the pattern of the various factions and opinions involved in the gathering of unemployed began to develop. On the whole the

meeting was orderly but four main bodies of opinion became clear. There was a division of opinion in both the ranks of the navvies and what one must call the Brisbane unemployed which consisted of old residents and new arrivals. The majority of the speakers were content to stress the seriousness of the situation and the need for Government action to provide either employment or some form of relief. There was no general move for any violent action or other direct measure to force the Government to act. A witness said later that "The men from Helidon seemed in all their speeches to merely want to get work and that by peaceable means"⁷. However, some of the navvies attacked their representatives at the August meeting with Bell, saying that these men had failed to present their case convincingly and, in particular, accusing one of their leaders, Cochrane, with defection to the Government's point of view that nothing could be done until the general financial situation improved. Cochrane defended himself to the satisfaction of most of his supporters and reaffirmed that he believed that violent action would accomplish nothing. Speeches of a different kind were made by Eaves and his adherents of the Brisbane unemployed. One witness present later reported that Eaves insisted that the Brisbane storekeepers must support the unemployed. "If they do not do so we must compel them to close their stores and come with us to the Government . . . we must compel the Government to give us what we want or else we will subvert the Government — and get rid of them."⁸ Sergeant James Manton, one of the police on duty, recalled later that Eaves had said that the unemployed must "... stop the coaches and communication of the town until there is something done for us . . . we will cut down the telegraph wires, they are too fast for us"⁹. These speeches represented the most extreme sentiments of the meeting. *The Brisbane Courier* reporter was convinced that they were sentiments not shared by the majority at the meeting. The following morning *The Brisbane Courier* said:

It may suit the purpose of some of the would-be leaders of the unemployed to revile His Excellency and to charge the Ministry with heartlessness, but language of this character, we are glad to say, was, so far as we could learn, received with disapprobation and incredulity.¹⁰

So there appears to have been a moderate majority in both the Southern & Western navvies and the Brisbane unemployed, and a minority navy group bent on more positive action, possibly to the extent of violence, and a minority of the Brisbane men, represented by Eaves, who purported to believe that direct and possibly violent action was necessary¹¹. Despite these apparent differences the meeting finally passed a resolution which elected a deputation to meet the Colonial Secretary to press for work or Government relief. The deputation consisted of Cochrane, Quigley, Foley and Richardson, of whom Cochrane and Quigley were definitely navvies and the other two of unidentified allegiance. Another meeting was arranged for 4 p.m. at the Green Hills to hear the result of the deputation's meeting with Macalister.

Probably alarmed by the report of the police observers at the proceedings of the Town Hall meeting the Government apparently decided on precautions. The assembly signal gun was fired at 2.15 p.m. As the Fire Brigade, the Volunteers, the regular Police and the Specials all moved to their posts, people gathered in the streets anxiously asking one another what had happened. At 3 p.m. the Volunteer Artillery was marched down George Street to take up positions for the defence of Government House. They maintained this duty until 8 p.m. that night but the Police, Firemen and Specials were dismissed at 3.30 p.m.

Meanwhile, the deputation had seen the Colonial Secretary and at 4 p.m. the meeting at the Green Hills was addressed by Cochrane who related the results. The Government had gone quite a way towards meeting the demands of the unemployed. Macalister had offered the deputation free passages to Rockhampton, or another nominated northern port,

together with seven days' rations, for thirty families and 250 single men. If the full quota of families was not available more single men would be taken north. As well, work would be made available immediately on the Southern & Western, by means of an advance to the contractors, but wages would be limited to a scale of 15/- per week for six days' work with no rations. The meeting received this offer with some approval but Quigley, in particular, attacked the non-payment of full wages on the railway. Other speakers made it plain that they did not relish the idea of departing for the unknown northern reaches of the colony and that work must be created in Brisbane. The meeting decided on an appeal to the Governor and appointed the same deputation to attempt an interview. Other speakers then addressed the meeting calling for patience and forbearance, adherence to law and order, and acceptance of the Government offer. Chief among them was Bishop Quinn, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Brisbane, who also made the generous offer of a free meal to any man who wanted one. There were quite a few volunteers and an orderly system of meal tickets for various Brisbane eating houses was organized and distributed by the leaders of the unemployed. The Bishop and the other speakers received a quiet and fair hearing and the meeting terminated with no incidents.

On the morning of Tuesday 11 September, the members of the deputation attempted to put their case before the Governor. Bowen apparently refused to receive any representation other than a formal petition and the best they could achieve was an interview with John Watts, the Secretary for Public Works. Watts reaffirmed the terms of Macalister's offer of the previous day, specifying that the Government was making available to Wilcox the sum of £3,000 for the resumption of work on the railway. For the navvies, the offer had been modified to the extent that any man who could not be employed on the line would be given rations if he returned to his normal camp. As well, Watts probably advised the deputation of the Government's decision to set up relief camps in the Brisbane area for men prepared to work on the roads at the relief rate of 15/- per week¹².

In the afternoon, at 4 p.m., another meeting assembled at the Green Hills to hear the results of the deputation's appeals. There is a difference of opinion amongst witnesses of the meeting as to some of the details of the proceedings but most sources agree that the vast majority of both navvies and the Brisbane men were prepared to accept the Government offer as it then stood. The report of the deputation leaders drew the main meeting to a close; at that point Eaves, together with Parker



Elizabeth Street, 1863.

(By courtesy of Oxley Memorial Library.)

and Murray, two of his supporters, convened an impromptu meeting of their own. Eaves climbed up on a tray and attracted a crowd of about fifty. Eaves charged the navy leaders with ignoring his request to be included in the morning deputation and that the navvies, having got what they wanted, were prepared to dump the Brisbane men and leave them to their own resources. Eaves spoke bitterly of the failure of the navvies to co-operate with the Brisbane unemployed after "the awaiting of the Brisbane unemployed to co-operate with the Navvies to get work and rations from the Government."¹³ Parker then spoke in general support of Eaves and one witness claimed it was Parker who suggested a night meeting in the city to press the demands of the unemployed. Be that as it may Eaves spoke again, agreeing with the move for a night meeting, saying "... the police could not spot out any particular man". Eaves said they "... had had enough of daylight meetings", and suggested the Treasury hotel as a good venue for a night meeting, as "there were plenty of stones". "We want bread", said Eaves, "and bread we must have.". Some were for Petrie Bight as the site but Eaves stuck to the Treasury and affirmed that he would "lead". In the words of one witness Eaves went on to say:

Some people have told me that there are no stones in Brisbane but I have seen an old wall down by the River — there are plenty there ... There will be bloodshed over this yet.

Warming to his theme Eaves went on to say that they would "drive the police and fire brigade through the town with a stone in a stocking.". Fights then began to break out between the extremists and the moderates and a plain clothes policeman was recognized and attacked by some of the crowd, only to be rescued by others from the meeting.

Eaves and his two chief supporters went down into the town and had dinner in an upper room of the Treasury hotel. Eaves seems to have relished the mood of melodrama, as he swept into the hotel in a long coat with his face almost covered by a muffler and his hat pulled well down. During the meal Eaves warned John McAlister, the licensee, that there would be trouble in the streets that night and to lock his doors. Word of the proposed meeting must have spread far and fast because by 8 p.m. there was a crowd estimated at 500 waiting outside the Treasury. How many were bent on disturbing Queen Victoria's peace and how many were there as observers of the expected fun is not easy to say. As the meeting got under way speeches of much the same vein were made as had been aired at the afternoon meeting. After all his brave words Eaves was nowhere to be seen and Parker and Murray were the chief self-appointed leaders. As the crowd became more restive Parker concluded his address with the following passage:

We did not come here to be paupers, nor to accept of charity, but to work and work we cannot get, and bread we cannot do without — and bread we will have — if we don't get bread we will have blood. And bread or blood we will have tonight — let us do it now!¹⁴

By comparison with the previous day's show of force the authorities on the Tuesday night seem to have been caught a little off balance. However, the Police Magistrate and the Commissioner of Police, D. T. Seymour, were soon on the scene after a labourer named Frances Guerin had run to the police barracks to give the alarm. As soon as Parker had completed his speech he jumped from his platform and in the van of the crowd led a rush down George Street into William Street by way of Elizabeth Street. The obvious destination was the Government Stores¹⁵, although what the mob hoped to find there and what was actually contained in the Stores remain uncertain. No doubt food was uppermost in the minds of many but one suspects that the Stores were as good a Government target as any. The rush halted in William Street and stones began to rain down on the roof of the Stores. Some of the crowd ran down the bank and began attempts to break in the door. At about the same time the police regulars, under the

orders of the Commissioner, formed ranks and began to push the crowd back along William Street. Stones then began to descend on the police. Superimposed on the sound of breaking timber, as the outer door of the Stores gave way, came the sound of the firing of the alarm gun at the Observatory. As stones continued to fly Father Larkin, a Roman Catholic priest, appealed to the crowd to disperse, but to no avail. At this point, Massie, the Police Magistrate, ordered one of his deputies to read the Riot Act. As this was being done Murray found himself face to face with the Police Commissioner. In the ensuing argument between the two men Murray was injudicious enough to call Seymour "a damned scoundrel", whereupon Seymour arrested him. Seeing this the crowd called on Massie to release Murray and one or two others who had received similar treatment. If these men were released, some said, they would disperse. Massie was also called upon to make promises for the relief of the unemployed. With considerable courage in what must have been anything but a comfortable situation Massie gave his answer that "... he could make no promises to a riotous mob and that was the only answer they would get.". He later related:

There was a great deal of noise by the boys in the crowd. I could distinguish the shrill voices of the boys above the rest of the crowd ... I have no reason to believe it was the boys who threw the stones ...

The crowd showed no signs of heeding the reading of the Riot Act, so the police were ordered to charge and succeeded in pushing the mob back along William Street into Elizabeth Street. However, at the corner of George and Elizabeth, the crowd turned on the police and an even thicker shower of stones rained down on their ranks. In the light of the window of the Dunmore Arms hotel the Police Magistrate ordered the Riot Act to be read for the second time. As this was being done, Massie, standing beside his deputy, was struck on the forehead above the left eye by a stone and blood flowed down his face. The crowd had its "blood", but parts of it expressed disapproval as cries of "Shame! Shame!" mingled with the general din. At this point, in the words of one witness, "... things began to assume too serious an aspect.". The second reading of the Act had no more effect than the first and the officials' patience had run out. The police were ordered to load with live ammunition. This order caused a momentary hush and the crowd fell back a little. Seizing the initiative the police charged and pushed the crowd back towards Queen Street. At the corner of George and Queen the crowd regained its courage and stood fast again and even looked as if they would push back the police. The police reformed ranks after the last charge and were ordered to fix bayonets and then to charge. At this, the crowd fell back again down Queen Street and was driven towards Albert Street where the momentum of the charge split it into sections, which in turn began to disperse. The critical point of the riot had passed. As the police once more formed ranks, a few stones and jeers fell on them but the worst was over. After standing fast for a period the police marched back to their barracks and were dismissed. A few more stones and some noise floated into the barracks yard but soon desisted when the police did not react. By 11.30 p.m. all was quiet and normal patrols had the situation under control. The official casualties were Massie and a few other police with slight stone wounds whilst the rioters had lost Murray, and two men called Allen and Fitzpatrick, all of whom had been arrested in William Street.

During the following day all remained quiet. Eaves and Parker were placed under arrest and charged. The Government offer was taken up by a number of the unemployed, ninety people (including women and children), who left in the *Platypus* for Rockhampton. In addition, the *Kate* sailed upriver with 103 of the navvies, bound for the resumption of work on the Southern & Western. There was some talk of a demonstration at the wharf in an attempt to stop these sailings and a heavy police guard was mounted. Nothing eventuated.

On Thursday morning the *Settler* left for Ipswich with another



Dunmore Arms hotel, 1886, corner of George and Elizabeth Streets.

(By courtesy of Oxley Memorial Library.)

thirty-eight men for the railway. The same morning all the arrested men appeared in the Police Court before Magistrates, Western Wood, Buttanshaw and Powell. Eaves, Parker and Murray were committed to the November sittings of the Criminal Court. Allen was fined £5, with the option of a month's gaol, for assault, and Fitzpatrick was remanded on a charge of riotous behaviour, and apparently discharged later.

Eaves, Murray and Parker came up for trial before Justice Lutwyche on 21 November 1866. The formal charge read, in part:

... on 11 September 1866, together with other evil disposed persons to the number of 500 and more, to Her Majesty's Attorney General unknown ... unlawfully did assemble and gather together to disturb the peace of our Lady the Queen. The evidence presented by the Crown was indeed damning. Neil McKay, a commercial traveller, testified that he had heard Parker use the words "bread or blood" at the Treasury meeting. Alfred Linel, a cabinet-maker, confirmed that he had heard Eaves say "there will be bloodshed over this yet" at the afternoon meeting. The Government storeman confirmed that the outer door of the Stores had been broken in. The Police Magistrate recalled that the favourite expression of the crowd seemed to be "that they would have blood or bread". On the second day of the trial Eaves addressed the court. He made quite a long speech in which he emphasized the distress he had seen since he came to the colony. He claimed that he and his

contemporaries "had been brought like cattle to Queensland, deluded by the specious arguments of Mr. Jordan". He said to Lutwyche:

It was hard to see a starving child and a weeping mother when one would come home ... The squatters had done this; they got them out to the colony in order to obtain cheap labour ...

Parker, in his own defence, denied that he had ever used the words "bread or blood". He also "... desired to bear testimony to the temperate conduct of the police". Murray declined to address the court. Lutwyche, in his address, said that the jury must consider whether the disturbances in which the defendants were involved were of a nature "calculated to inspire fear in the minds of ordinary constituted men" and whether or not the defendants' behaviour was riotous. The jury, after a retirement of two hours, found the three defendants guilty on the twin counts of riot and unlawful assembly. Lutwyche sentenced Eaves, as the ringleader of the group, to twelve months imprisonment with hard labour. Parker, as Chairman of the night meeting, received six months, and Murray, three months, both with hard labour.

Some accounts of the events of 1866 have given the impression that there was a prolonged period of rioting by navvies in Brisbane in July and August of 1866. This impression is erroneous in two respects. There was only one riot and that was the riot of 11 September. It is possible that some navvies

from the Southern & Western railway were involved in the disturbances but it seems more likely that the main trouble-makers were men who may have called themselves "navvies" in order to get a free berth to Queensland. There is no doubt that the great majority of working navvies from Laidley and Helidon neither approved of violence nor took part in the riot which erupted from the particular circumstances pertaining to Brisbane at the time. No large body of railway navvies was present in Brisbane until Saturday 8 September and most of these men left to return to the workings four or five days later. The active participants of the riot were themselves only a very small proportion of the great number of unemployed present in Brisbane at the time. Most of the crowd of 500 were present as spectators rather than participants and probably a hard core of about fifty to 100 were involved in the stone throwing and breaking of the Government Stores. This hard core was motivated by the small group centred around Eaves. The point must be emphasized that the September riot was a disturbance led by an extreme group, and a splinter group at that, of the unemployed. Eaves's group had obviously lost support at the Green Hills meeting on the Tuesday afternoon and the wild speech of Eaves may have been an attempt to arrest this loss of support. Eaves and his men did not represent the majority of opinion of the Brisbane unemployed, however much they may have felt that they did. There was no firm alliance at any stage between the navvies and the unemployed, only a consensus of opinion that some sort of Government action was necessary to correct an intolerable and worsening situation. The navvies especially seem to have been in the main against any suggestion of violent measures. In the statement presented presumably during Tuesday, the day of the riot, the two navy leaders Quigley and Cochrane wrote the following: "We as representatives of the unemployed assure the government that we have not on our part the least intention of committing any Breach of the Law."¹⁶

Probably the majority of the Brisbane unemployed shared that view. *The Queenslander* felt that the majority of the people affected by the slump did not agree with violent measures and said that "It would be a great mistake to suppose that the working men sympathise with such noisy and aimless demonstrations." The newspaper put much of the blame for the riot on the loafing section of the community, especially on some of the new arrivals. It commented: "A considerable number of them are men who never did like work, and change of air has not removed their extreme repugnance to it."¹⁷

Part 2

While the situation in George Street in the latter stages of the riot was potentially extremely dangerous, the cool handling of the crowd by the police, together with second thoughts on the part of most of the crowd after Massie had been hit by the stone, permitted control to be maintained. Had one policeman panicked and fired a shot or impaled a rioter with his bayonet, the disturbance could have been magnified considerably, drawing in against the forces of law and order many hitherto anti-violent elements. In this forbearance the police deserved the thanks of the Government, which were conveyed to them by the Colonial Secretary a few days later. In retrospect, the riot, despite its ugly potential, receded into the pattern of happenings during that eventful year. In the Annual Report of the Police Commissioner for the year 1866, it did not even rate a mention¹⁸. Neither did Sir George Bowen see fit to mention it in his despatches to London. Possibly after his optimistic statements of 18 August, he did not feel inclined to admit that his judgement that all the troubles were over had been a trifle premature. A correspondent of *The Queenslander*, calling himself "Meeanchin" wrote under the heading "What of the Times?",

The reading of the Riot Act and the dispersion of a mob in the streets of Brisbane, are mere collateral circumstances, arising out of the financial difficulties of the colony . . .¹⁹

The *Guardian* comment even bordered on the flippant. It condemned the Government for over-reaction to the riot and queried the necessity for the reading of the Riot Act. One is led to wonder if the Editor of the *Guardian* had been present amid the flying stones or whether he was safe at home behind locked doors. The editorial went on to say that;

The firing of guns at an untimely hour of the evening is apt to disturb the rest of women with families, and perhaps causes them to imagine that a Sabine descent is intended.²⁰

The dangers of an urban accumulation of immigrants unable to find work had been apparent for quite some time before September. To this potential danger had been added increasing concern at the drop in the quality of the immigrants Queensland was receiving. The operations of the Queensland Emigration Agent in the United Kingdom had become so wide-ranging that it was patently impossible for him to supervise personally the selection and despatch of all immigrants to Queensland. The Government in previous years had put increasing pressure on the Agent, Jordan, to keep up the numbers of workers and to concentrate on finding men skilled in railway construction work. Jordan had had to delegate many of his selection and despatch duties to his staff and his agents in the various ports, so that he could concentrate on publicity. The program was in full swing by mid-1866, and its inertia kept despite the sudden economic collapse. In May, *The Queenslander* was moved to comment on the quality and false expectations of the migrants arriving in Queensland from the United Kingdom:

The immigrants who were landed on Tuesday from the *Flying Cloud* are in no ways wiser than the generality of 'new chums' who reach these shores. They seem impressed with the idea that in leaving the ship, they leave the last remnant of poverty behind them also; and that they only have to touch the favoured shores of Queensland, to realize their golden expectations immediately. So the first night they land they get rid of any little cash they may be possessed of in drinking success to their expected good fortune; and speedily discover that 'all is not gold that glitters'; they become fitting candidates for the relief of any benevolent society that may be in existence. Of the immigrants who were landed yesterday, several were accommodated with a night's lodging in the lock up and many others were parading the streets until a late hour, under the enlivening influence of the sundry nobblers of which they had partaken.²¹

Thomas Harlin, newly arrived in Brisbane to take up a post at the Ipswich Grammar School, added his comments in June:

It so happens that I have been accustomed to the charge of railway works in England; and it was quite unnecessary for me to look twice at the men, two hundred and fifty or thereabouts in number, consigned to Queensland as 'railway artizans', in order to feel satisfied that a considerable proportion of them had been drawn from the loafing, and not from the working, population of Great Britain.²²

These statements caused the editor of *The Queenslander* to remark:

Since the commencement of our railway works, a large number of navvies have been imported at the expense of the colony; and the practice of sending out "railway artizans" is still continued. Mr. SIMPSON, who is employed by Mr. JORDAN to select these people, has extremely loose notions of what constitutes a "railway artizan". He appears to be satisfied with any single male who will count one in reckoning up the numbers for which the shipowners are to be paid.²³

Assuming that there was some carelessness in selecting immigrants, it is not hard to imagine that some of these men would prefer to remain within the comparatively comfortable confines of Brisbane rather than swing a pick under a hot sun in the Lockyer Valley and the foothills of the Main Range, providing a pool of potential troublemakers.

At the same time, one wonders just how much harm was in fact done by over enthusiastic propaganda on behalf of Queensland and just what sort of a picture of Queensland was given by Jordan and his staff. It is not hard to imagine that some disenchantment with the climate and conditions of what was still an undeveloped area would set in after arrival, not to mention the added difficulties of an inability to find work after the onset of the 1866 depression. This resentment against what people would see as a lying government and an exploiting residential class could have been an important cause in the smouldering disaffection of even the less radical of the Brisbane unemployed. Proof that not only simple and uneducated working men were led to believe that conditions were near utopian in Queensland, is given by a letter written to the Secretary for Lands and Works by James Williams on 30 July 1866. Williams was a well qualified builder and had been Clerk of Works to the Royal Engineers on the construction of fortifications at Portsmouth and Belfast before going into business on his own. He had arrived in Maryborough in the *Golden South* in June and had been unable either to set up his own business or to get a job. In applying for a position in the Works Department he wrote:

My motive for immigrating to this colony was owing to the extreme competition which existed at home, for although there was an abundance of employment, no profitable remuneration could be attained, and as such tempting inducements were held out by the Press and the Immigration Agents in the North of Ireland, I at once determined on coming here, in order to better my condition, and hope through the assistance of the Queensland Government, it may yet be realised . . .

It is the more harrassing to me just now, particularly, as in addition to my own family of a wife and three children I have also brought with me at my own expense another family consisting of my Brother-in-Law with a wife and four children and between my own and their Outfits, as well as other necessary expenses incurred to the present time, my resources have been very much reduced, which with the darkened prospect before me, just now, has compelled me to make this appeal to you for employment of some kind under the Government.²⁴

It is not hard to detect the quiet desperation in such a letter and neither is it hard to imagine even a temperate man being tempted to violent action under the circumstances.

Between the economic crisis of July and the September riot, 1547 more immigrants had arrived in Brisbane alone, with more ships still on the way. It seems particularly significant that on the very day of the riot, the Government Health Officer released the 396 German immigrants from the *Beausite* which ship had been in quarantine since 20 August. The news of this addition to the number of potential jobseekers may well have figured in the increasing tension in the city on that day. If the riot did nothing else, it seems to have finally shocked the Government into halting the migration program. Jordan was ordered by cable to cease recruiting operations immediately and the following notice appeared shortly after the riot:

It is hereby notified for general information, that instructions have been forwarded to the Agent-General for Emigration, in London, to discontinue all operations in connection with Emigration . . .²⁵

The riot did do something else however. It compelled the Government to carry through the program outlined by the Colonial Secretary to the deputation on Monday afternoon. As a result, many men left with their families for the north, and most of the navvies who had journeyed to Brisbane returned to the construction of the line. Doubtless the Government's aim was to get as many surplus workers out of Brisbane as possible, but nevertheless it was something of a novel social aid program for the time. In addition, relief camps for unemployed who were prepared to work on the roads were expanded in Brisbane and were established at Ipswich and Maryborough. Between 7 September and 27 December 1866, the Department of Works

made available to its Southern Area Engineer a total of £8909/11/4 for relief work at the rate of 15/- per six day week. On 13 December, there were still 520 men receiving this benefit²⁶.

It should not be forgotten that the grave unemployment situation was restricted to southern Queensland. Whether or not men were prepared to go to the dangerous and remote parts of the pastoral districts is a moot point, but the fact is that employment existed there for those who would take it. Very soon after the riot, the following notice appeared in the press and in the *Government Gazette*:

Department of Public Works.

Recent events render it necessary that the Government should be put in possession of the facts as to the quantity of labor that can be absorbed in the various districts of the Colony, for which purposes Employers from all parts are requested to communicate with the Works Department, when such steps as are necessary will be taken to find labor and secure work for those now so much in need of it.

J. Watts

Secretary for Public Works.²⁷

Response was prompt and eager. J. H. Yaldwyn of Planet Downs advised that 500 men could be placed in the Springsure District²⁸. L. V. Chauvel of Oxford Downs remarked in his reply that "While men are said to be in absolute want in the Southern part of Queensland, we are still paying twentyfive and sometimes thirty shillings a week for any man we can get hold of, and often can not get enough even at that"²⁹. Even before the riot, the Rockhampton *Morning Bulletin* advised that 200 navvies were needed on the Northern Railway (Rockhampton to Westwood), upon which work had been resumed in mid-August, after a suspension in July³⁰.

There is no doubt that extreme distress was present amongst working people in the winter and spring of 1866 in Brisbane and the south of the colony. As well as the example of the Williams letter quoted above, there are plenty of examples of extreme hardship occasioned by the depression. A Mr Miller wrote to the Engineer of Roads on 5 September:

I beg to bring under your notice the cases of a few men who are married and have families living in South Brisbane these men are destitute of food and all willing to work and I wish you to be kind enough to bring these cases under the notice of the government these men are all accustomed to hard work and are Extreme cases.

Thomas Smith

Joseph White

feilding

and one or two more whose names I do not know.

Hugh Miller³¹

The Secretary for Works advised the Engineer that no more men were to be employed until after Parliament reassembled on 18 September and had discussed the matter. The Government changed its mind after the riot. On 13 September it received from three prominent Ipswich citizens, Dr Henry Challinor, Benjamin Cribb and G. M. Reed, a petition from the Ipswich unemployed. The covering letter read in part:

We have no hesitation in saying the cases brought under your notice in this document are far more deserving of Government interposition than very many of those that have been obtruding themselves more forcibly on public attention . . . extreme distress existing among the labouring population of Ipswich the majority of whom are married and have families, and we are sorry to add many of them are at present feeling the pangs of hunger.³²

Given the existence of serious unemployment and the disappointed hopes and concomitant resentment of many of the new settlers, it is not difficult to see how a few agitators could stir up some degree of popular action. What is more difficult is to ascertain the motives of these men. From the way Eaves spoke at his trial, it seems that he had not long arrived from

the United Kingdom. However, there is no mention of his name in the available shipping registers of the period³³. Neither does Henry Parker's name appear in the arrivals for 1866. There is a John Murray mentioned in the passenger list for the *Star of England* which arrived in Brisbane on 11 June 1866, but this is not sufficient to prove that this Murray and the Murray involved in the riot were one and the same. By his actions, Eaves revealed himself as something of a demagogue, but his apparent absence from the actual riot could indicate that he hesitated when the full implications of his words of incitement became apparent. Parker either really believed that violence would gain the desired ends or was carried away by his own oratory and the cheers of his supporters. Murray obviously lost his temper in the riot when stopped by the Police Commissioner and left that officer no choice but to arrest him.

Taking all aspects of the situation in Brisbane in early September 1866 into account, it is perhaps not so much a source of wonder that there was a riot as that it was not continued into a serious civil disturbance of a far greater magnitude. As it was, the threat of potential violence and the small amount of disturbance which did occur, were soon past. It is in a way a tribute to the fortitude and persistence of the vast majority of the citizens who were grievously affected by the depression of 1866 that not only did they abhor the violent measures suggested by a small radical group for correction of the economic troubles but that they carried on as best they could until Queensland's fortunes began to improve after the end of 1866. The September riot could have developed into something much more serious. A study of it provides a valuable insight into the structure and function of the new colony in one of its most critical periods of stress.

REFERENCES

1. Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 18 Aug 1866 [Q.S.A. GOV/24, Despatch no. 50].
- *2. *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly*, 1866. p. 1367; Return of Immigrant Ships.
3. *Queensland Daily Guardian*, 7 Sep 1866.
4. Police Magistrate to Under Secretary for Public Works, 2 Sep 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 1, letter no. 70 of 1866].
5. *Queensland Daily Guardian*, 31 Aug 1866. In the July crisis, the *Guardian* had been responsible for some of the popular agitation against the Governor, but by late August had swung to a fairly conservative stance.
6. The general area of present-day Countess Street and the Roma Street railway yards.
The Queenslander, 15 Sep 1866.
7. Case No. 2 of November 1866, Criminal Sittings, Supreme Court [Q.S.A. SCT/CC 17] and *The Queenslander*, 24 Nov 1866; evidence of J. M. La Barte.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *The Brisbane Courier*, 11 Sep 1866.
11. There were men who had migrated as navvies in the Brisbane unemployed, as distinct from the men who had actually been employed on the Southern & Western for some time.
12. Engineer of Roads, Southern District to Under Secretary for Public Works 7 Sep to 27 Dec 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/B 1 and WOR/C 1].
13. *The Queenslander*, 24 Nov 1866; evidence of G. Prentice.
14. *Ibid.*; evidence of N. McKay.
15. Now the Law Reform Commission Building next to the Public Library, partly of convict construction. Until February 1866, it had been the Immigration Depot for some years.
16. Deputation of Unemployed to Colonial Secretary, 12 Sep 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 1, letter no. 82 of 1866].
17. *The Queenslander*, 15 Sep 1866.
18. Third Annual Report, 1866, Commissioner of Police to Colonial Secretary, 10 Jan 1867 [Q.S.A. COL/A 88, in-letter no. 328 of 1867].
19. *The Queenslander*, 15 Sep 1866.
20. *Queensland Daily Guardian*, 12 Sep 1866.
21. *The Queenslander*, 5 May 1866.
22. *Ibid.*, 9 June 1866.
23. *Ibid.*
24. J. Williams to Secretary for Lands and Works, 30 Jul 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 1, letter no. 10 of 1866].
25. *Queensland Government Gazette*, 22 Sep 1866. p. 904; Notice dated 19 Sep.
26. Engineer of Roads Southern Division to Secretary for Public Works, 13 Dec 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 2, letter no. 464 of 1866].
27. *Queensland Government Gazette*, 15 Sep 1866. p. 888; Notice dated 14 Sep.
28. J. H. Yaldwyn to Under Secretary for Public Works, 20 Oct 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 2, letter no. 334 of 1866].
29. L. V. Chauvel to Under Secretary for Public Works, 13 Oct 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 2, letter no. 334 of 1866].
30. *The Queenslander*, 15 Sep 1866 quoted from *Morning Bulletin* of 11 Sep.
31. H. Miller to Engineer of Roads, 5 Sep 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 1, letter no. 60 of 1866].
32. Ipswich residents to Secretary for Public Works, 10 Sep 1866 [Q.S.A. WOR/A 1, letter no. 83 of 1866].
33. Q.S.A. IMM/112.