

Mutilation on the Mountain

The events of Sunday 31 May 1840 can be pieced together from the legal depositions, taken at the same scene one week after the event, of two convicts who were in the survey party. The group had spent the night in a bush camp about 30km southeast of Mount Lindesay, and in the morning Stapylton sent four convicts (Abel Sutton, Peter Finnegan, Patt Kelly and William Gough) to clear a passage over a nearby creek so that the party could cross with the dray and bullocks and camp on the other side the next night. Another convict named William Barberry prepared breakfast for Stapylton before joining the others at the creek. Stapylton remained at the camp along with several of the Aboriginal men and William Tuck, who was suffering with a sore leg and stayed in his tent. James Dunlop, who was in charge of the bullocks, also stayed back.

Tuck and Dunlop had not been in the colonies for long. Tuck had arrived in December 1838 aged forty-seven with another 240 convicts on board the *Portsea*, sailing from Portsmouth. He had been convicted at the Norfolk Quarter Sessions for a term of fourteen years. Twenty-two-year-old Dunlop had arrived on board the *Blenheim*, from Dublin, in May 1839. He had been convicted at County Cavan, Ireland, in March 1839 of producing counterfeit money, or ‘coining’, a serious crime for which he received a life sentence. Like Tuck, he had worked as a labourer back home.¹⁷

After a short time three of the Aboriginal men left before returning with another man, and they were now all armed with spears. Dunlop left to tend to the bullocks, but was followed up the hill by two of the men, one of whom he knew as ‘Caubon Bob’. When Dunlop looked back he saw two other men approach the tent of Stapylton, and another two go to that of Tuck. At that point someone threw a

spear at Dunlop, just missing him, before Caubon Bob struck him with a waddy on the back of the head, knocking him senseless.¹⁸

At noon the work party from the creek returned and found Tuck and Stapylton dead, Dunlop unconscious on the ground, and the camp looted. In a state of panic, they armed themselves with axes and fled the scene, heading back towards Brisbane.¹⁹ The abandoned Dunlop lay in a ‘state of stupor’ for over a day before he came to and struggled down to the tents, where he found the remains of Tuck and Stapylton. Exhausted, he lay on a tarpaulin for a while before:

...about 30 black men come to the place and began to break up and burn the boxes. They stripped Tuck’s body and put it on a fire, and Caubon Bob came up to me and began to strip me. I called Merry Dio, another of the blacks, that had been with us for 10 or 11 days before the murder took place, and told him that Caubon Bob was going to take the clothes off me. He stopped him, and asked me to go up to their fire and he would give me something to eat. I got up and went a couple of steps, when I fell. He then got a hold of me round the waist and tried to bring me, but I fell again and he left me lying on the tarpaulin. He then went and joined the other black men who were burning and taking away the things.

(James Dunlop, 7 June 1840)²⁰

The men left, and in the morning Dunlop managed to crawl away into the scrub, and that evening, on the verge of death from hunger, pain and exhaustion, he stumbled across a search party consisting of Lieutenant Gorman, Doctor Ballow and Constable Thompson from the Moreton Bay settlement. They had been alerted by the other five convicts, who had made it to Cowper’s Plains and raised the alarm. After tending to Dunlop they headed to Stapylton’s camp, and Lieutenant Gorman later described the scene in gruesome detail:

We there found a part of the skeleton of Mr. Stapylton’s body, the arms and the right foot from below the ankle were gone, the skull was a short distance from the remains and the body appeared to