BUSH POLICEMAN
WITH THE SOUL OF AN ARTIST

Judy Cannon looks at the life of Constable John William Stokes through his 1930s diaries, and relates his adventures policing remote Australian settlements.

The basement of the Victorian Tax Office in the late 1930s must have truly dispirited John Stokes for, at the age of 26, he suddenly resigned and left city life in Melbourne to join the Northern Territory police.

He was fortunate to have a tall, commanding stature because he spent much of the next 20 years as a policeman in remote and lonely areas.

Constable John William Stokes, better known as 'Jack', kept a faithful record of his experiences, especially of his first posting to Elcho Island, regarded as the most isolated police base in Australia. His diaries are held at the National Library in the Manuscript Collection (MS8918).

He was clearly a kind and thoughtful man, although some of the modes of expression common to the 1930s could today give offence. After police training at Darwin, Jack was posted in October 1937 to Elcho Island, off Arnhem Land, and soon came to delight in an islander existence—so much so that, when the time came, he did not want to leave.

Provisions for his new life included two tents, one for sleeping and one for work, adequate stores and, eventually, a patrol boat. Although boss of 200 square miles (518 square kilometres) of territory, his sole companions were the islanders, for he only met up intermittently with the crews of visiting vessels. In time he acquired a police radio transmitter to keep contact with the outside world.
His main tasks—principally to protect Indigenous women from the roving eyes of Japanese lugger crews and to keep the local peace—gave him the chance to live a sort of Robinson Crusoe way of life: he built a kitchen chimney for cooking, planted a vegetable garden with a pagoda for watermelons and built a shed for his goats. He told his diary early in his posting, 'Ho hum—work never ceases. I think I must be made of the stuff of pioneers.'

The island provided geese, ducks, pelicans—'good tucker', according to his islander assistant, Banya—parrots, pheasants and wallabies. The sea was teeming with fish, as well as porpoise, turtles, shark and a few dugongs. Jack made bread, damper ('I'm an expert'), apple fritters and honey chocolate, and once prepared a three-course meal for visiting mariners.

Jack cultivated his garden devotedly, and by 25 November it had produced two small watermelon fruit and flowers, and sprouting coconuts. 'What a place I'd make if I had three years here,' he wrote.

He was fascinated by the habits of hornets and other life on the island, and he noted details of their behaviour: 'My friend the hornet was in great distress today as it discovered that ants had been interfering with its nest. It was so annoyed that it dragged one spider out, flew away about 20 yards and dropped him. Then it sealed the nest and during that occupation took a fierce joy in savaging any ant which happened along.'

The arrival of the wet brought the first rain for seven months: 'When it rains it doesn't mean that the sun hides itself. No, Sir, it's only hidden while the rain is coming down and once it stops, out comes the sun again which means that there is sunshine for about the whole 12 months. Ho hum, it's hard to take.' Rain made the air 'redolent with the scent of the flowers which are out everywhere, on the ground and on the trees. The perfume is wonderful and a walk of a few yards anywhere now is a delight. What ho, the tropics.' As you read the diary, you half expect him to burst into song.

Twelve months after leaving the Tax Office, he added, 'Not once have I regretted it... It was a happy release from a soul-killing, ambition-destroying slavery to a freedom such as I had never before experienced.'

On Christmas Day, Jack arranged a sports day and 28 men, 14 women and several children took part in running, wrestling and spear-throwing events, a tug of war (until the rope broke) and swimming. Then it was sunset:

The one here last night for sheer magnificence stood supreme. Useless to try to describe it except to say that its beauty left me gasping and I experienced a positive pain inside trying to assimilate it, to grasp it in my imagination so that I should never again be without it, but could always call it up from the deeps of my memory. It was all gold, a thing unique to me in sunset colours, and of beauty indescribable.
Island life was not without its drawbacks, however. Shooting crocodiles that endangered islanders was part of Jack’s job, as was sorting out local disputes. Other hazards came from mosquitoes and flies. Much of his time was spent administering medical treatment. Medical stores were more important than a police typewriter, gun, baton or handcuffs. In addition to giving injections, he frequently doled out cough mixture and examined people for venereal disease, leprosy and yaws (contagious tropical skin disease).

For instance, he recorded how, on 14 December, a man expected for work at 6 am arrived at 6 pm with the aid of a stick. He wrote that the man had ‘the most hideous hole in his ankle ... suspiciously like yaws ... I will treat it for a week with Lysol and Friars balsam and if it looks no better then I’ll give him some injections.’ Jack was deeply disturbed by leprosy cases and their terrible ulcers ‘full of pus and the stench from them is sickening. There’s nothing I can do ... except dress them.’
In the New Year, Banya brought his son to Jack for treatment. He had rolled into the fire and burnt his leg.

I put picric acid on the burn and bandaged it and sent him away. Not long afterwards there was a weeping and a wailing from Mumina (one of Banya’s wives) ... The kid was in a bad way, comatose and looked like dying. Banya reckoned it was the picric acid. I replied vehemently that it was not—must keep up the reputation—but still I took off the bandage and dusted the burn with some Johnson’s baby powder ... I didn’t know what on earth to do for the kid. I had no thermometer and no means of knowing what was wrong ... looked wise and told them to take the child, wrap him up in a blanket and keep it warm. I’d make a good doctor when it comes to bluff.

Jack, a religious man, did some earnest praying but heard nothing for some time. Still worrying, he went searching for the boy and found him wrapped in a blanket, sleeping naturally: ‘Some time later Banya came down to light the fire for lunch and he was whistling so I knew everything was OK.’

Later Banya asked for more flour and tobacco, suggesting Mumina, who ‘wears the trousers’, did not want to look for bush tucker every day.

Jack wrote, ‘God save me from a lazy domineering wife’, but other islanders soon informed him that Banya had left the ‘straight and narrow’ and taken on two more wives.

Over the months Jack had gone through periods of restlessness and inactivity, reading a great deal and watching daily for the boat bringing mail, but at least entertained by music, through his radio transmitter, from France, Spain, England, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Chile, Melbourne and Perth.

As the anniversary of his arrival on the island approached, so did other concerns, including Japanese luggers, which—in July 1938—could have been reconnoitring under the guise of fishing.

One night, aware that boats were about in the dark, Jack set out with a torch and a loaded revolver, planning to fire a couple of shots from a distance to inform clandestine visitors they had been seen. Eventually, Jack decided to kick over his launch engine. He watched as a lugger swiftly cleared out.

His island idyll ended in October 1938, although only in January he had written: ‘I’ll hate to leave this place.’ Posted to Darwin, he was soon back among the camaraderie of other single officers. In January 1940, he relinquished his bachelor status to marry Darwin girl, Edna Bowman.

Over the years, Jack served in several remote settlements, including Maranboy, south-east of Katherine. He also served at Tennant Creek, Alice Springs, Christmas Island, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and, finally, Canberra. Awarded the MBE, he lived until the age of 85, when a Darwin journalist described him as ‘the kindest policeman of them all’. A biography, The Long Arm: A Biography of a Northern Territory Policeman by Hugh V. Clarke, was published in 1974.

Jack saw ‘his’ Elcho Island with a romantic heart and the eye of an artist, wishing he had the skills to paint or to write like Byron. In February 1938—and here we should take our leave of him—he still marvelled, at the beauties of this place. In front of me were the blue sky and the sapphire sea. The air was full of the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze was blowing from the west. The trees were a shining mass of green as they were swayed by the wind while the golden sand of the beaches completed the picture. How little time there is in a bustling civilization for the contemplation of beauty.

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