A Unique Event: Charles de Boos and the Braidwood Chinese Gold Miners

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Introduction

This short article recounts an event that took place in Braidwood in 1881 and some of the background to it. In so doing, it seeks to add to the comprehensive accounts that have already been written about the Chinese gold miners in the Braidwood district of New South Wales during the nineteenth century. Particularly significant are the numerous contributions of Barry McGowan, as well as a number of others in relation to Braidwood and further afield.

A Unique Event

Charles de Boos was the Mining Warden and Police Magistrate at Braidwood from 1875 to 1880, when he was transferred to Copeland and then, after a few months, to Temora. In June 1881, he returned to Braidwood for two very special presentations. Firstly, on 24 June, St. John’s Day (a special day for Freemasons), he was presented with “a very handsome gold past-masters jewel from the members of the Lodge of Truth and other members of the Masonic order in the district”. Charles de Boos had been Worshipful Master of the Lodge for three years, 1878-80, and as in the case of previous recipients, the gift was “a token of esteem for his valuable services rendered to the Craft”; in response de Boos “returned thanks in an affectionate and feeling manner”. The local paper added that the award also recognised “the great services he had rendered … in this district during his residence here.

During the same visit to Braidwood (and possibly on the same occasion), Charles de Boos received an even more remarkable gift from the local Chinese community, as “a token of their esteem for the very fair and impartial manner in which he always settled their mining disputes while he was warden of the Braidwood district.

The medal is of virgin gold, procured in the locality, and is the work of a Chinese jewelers named Tommy Ah Chong. On one side it bears an inscription in Chinese characters, and on the other side is English. The latter was engraved by Mr. Hardy of Sydney. The medal is contained in a neat case made of colonial wood, and lined with velvet, the work of Mr. A. Macdonald, of Braidwood.

The medal was made from small pieces of gold contributed by each of the Chinese gold miners in the Braidwood district. It was organised by Mr Quong Tart, a leading member of the local Chinese community, as “a sign of the esteem in which they held the Mining Warden during his residence here.”

1 This article draws on research being undertaken by the author for a biography of Charles de Boos.
4 Sydney Morning Herald, 30 June 1881, p. 5 (sourced from the Braidwood Dispatch). There were two other lodges in the Braidwood district, “Lodge St John” at Araluen and “Lodge Peabody” at Major’s Creek.
6 Although there were many Chinese working on the goldfields, not one Chinese name has been found among the membership lists of the three Lodges”. E.A. Reynolds, “Lodges in the Braidwood District during the Gold Rush”, The NSW Freemason, 21 (5) (1989): 11-12.
7 Sydney Morning Herald, 22 March 1881, p. 5.
8 Sydney Morning Herald, 23 April 1881, p. 5.
of the Chinese community in the Braidwood district.\textsuperscript{9} The presentation was made by Mr. Forsythe of Bell’s Creek, as Quong Tart was visiting his family in China.\textsuperscript{10}

On one side of the medal, the English text reads:

\begin{quote}
PRESENTED
as a mark of esteem
TO
C. DEBOOS, J.P.
Gold Fields Warden
FROM CHINESE MINERS
in the district of
BRAIDWOOD
1881
\end{quote}

On the reverse is the Chinese inscription, reading from right to left, top to bottom:

First line: 清官民樂 Qing guan min le: [Since you are] such a “Qing guan” (honest and upright official) people are happy
Second line: 在布喇活 Zai Buliehuo: in Braidwood
Third line: 唐人敬送 Tangren jingsong: Presented to you by the Chinese with high respect.

The 50-mm diameter medal is now in the collections of the Mitchell Library in the State Library of New South Wales. It was donated to the Library in March 1928 by Mrs. Estelle Annie Iredale Holmes, the daughter of Charles Edward’s oldest child, Mary Ann Agnes. Illustrations of the two sides of the medal can be seen at the end of this article.

**Who was Charles de Boos?**

Charles de Boos came to Australia in 1839. His parents were of Huguenot origin and lived in London. His early years were spent in a number of jobs, mainly in Sydney but also in Maitland, in the Hunter Valley. Most likely, he worked mainly as a journalist (he was the first reporter in Australia with a knowledge of shorthand). In 1850, he moved to Melbourne, where he worked as a reporter for The Argus, as well as holding an appointment with the Victorian Legislative Council. Among his work for The Argus was reporting on the first of the gold rushes in Victoria, in what are now Ballarat, Castlemaine, and Bendigo, and later in the Ovens Valley. In 1856, he returned to Sydney, and for the next 16 years worked as a reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other Fairfax company newspapers. Apart from his reporting of debates in the New South Wales Parliament, much of his writing was about the colony’s goldfields. These also provided the settings for many of his fiction writings. At the time, few reporters had more knowledge of the Australian goldfields. Not

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\textsuperscript{10} In one obituary, it was stated that “Armed with this ‘passport’ it would have been possible for him to have travelled all over China without molestation”. *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate* (Parramatta), November 3, 1900, p.10. As yet, no corroboratation has been found for this statement, or of the likelihood of it being correct. Also, this report seems to confuse the two presentations, referring to “a Chinese Masonic medal”. Or, and this is speculation, was it from the “irregular” Chinese lodge at Jembaicumbene?
surprisingly, he gave extended evidence to the 1870 New South Wales Gold Fields Royal Commission.\footnote{11} His knowledge of gold mining and the goldfields provided the basis for his appointment in 1875 as a Mining Warden (along with Police Magistrate and various other government roles). He had appointments at Braidwood, Copeland, Forbes (temporary), Temora, Copeland (again), and Milparinka. In retirement, he devoted much time to the Freemasons, and he passed away in 1900.\footnote{12}

Why was he the recipient of such a remarkable gift?

As the following extracts from his newspaper columns illustrate, he demonstrated a much more sympathetic and even-handed attitude to the Chinese than many of his contemporaries, attitudes that may well have had their origins in his Huguenot ancestry.

In the Sydney Morning Herald, de Boos’s first mention of Chinese gold miners was in his first major series of articles, “The Goldfields of New South Wales.”\footnote{13} At Raggety Creek (on the Meroo, south of Mudgee), he observed that “These men work most assiduously in the face of all difficulties”.\footnote{14} A few days later, he had much more to say about them at Tambaroora (near Hill End, north of Bathurst). He commented that:

Mr. Commissioner Forster gives them a very high character for order, sobriety, steadiness, and perseverance. They keep to themselves, they are content to work on the old ground that the white digger has given up, and never trouble the Commissioner or the Police Court.

But there was one issue:

The licensed publicans complain that whilst they pay a license for selling liquors to the diggers, a very large proportion of these diggers – the Chinese – go and obtain their exhilaration or excitement in houses that pay no license. There are known to be some twenty opium tents on these diggings, the owners of which pay nothing to the State, whilst they rob the regular trader of his custom. I suggested that an opium smoking room should be attached to each public-house, and then the publicans would have an equal chance with the contraband dealer of being some fine day convicted of manslaughter should an enthusiastic smoker take a whiff or two too much. But seriously speaking, does not this quarrel over the right to poison say more than could be urged were a volume written on the subject of intemperance.\footnote{15}

Some years later, he was back in Tambaroora. In articles in his series “Random Notes by a Wandering Reporter”, he wrote again of the peaceful behaviour and industriousness of the Chinese miners and of the way they work in large groups of men.\footnote{16} In the following article, he wrote at some length about Tambaroora’s long-established Chinese community, “a kind of centre of Chinese communication”, with its “most famous joss houses”. He gave particular attention to their manner of dealing with sickness, especially contagious diseases such as leprosy, and death. He wrote of “this curious people” with compassion and appreciation, and was extremely praiseworthy of the Tambaroora people in their relations with them (in spite of some anti-Chinese riots in 1858). In recounting

\footnote{11} Gold Fields Royal Commission of Inquiry. Report of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the working of the present Gold Fields Act and Regulations of New South Wales, and into the best means of securing a permanent water supply for the Gold Fields of the Colony (Sydney: Government Printer, Sydney, 1871), pp. 151-154


\footnote{13} His writings in The Argus have yet to be positively identified, and so it is not possible at this stage to detail any comments he may have made about Chinese miners who were present during the Victorian gold rushes.

\footnote{14} Sydney Morning Herald, 9 July 1857, p. 8.

\footnote{15} Sydney Morning Herald, 15 July 1857, p. 2.

\footnote{16} Sydney Morning Herald, 28 September 1865, p. 2.
the care given to a sick Chinese miner, he wrote: “This is the way the men of Tambaroora act towards a man like themselves, though he chances to be born in China.” This was in marked contrast to the way the Chinese were treated at Lambing Flat (now Young), about which de Boos was scathing: “It is left to the ultra-liberals of Lambing Flat, the pure bred democrats and wordy demagogues of that blessed region to persecute and ill-treat these strangers”.17

On the Peel River, near Nundle, “The diggers here have always taken very kindly to the Chinese, and there are instances where Chinese have bought in shares in claims of Europeans and have worked with them on an equal footing and in the most amicable manner”.18 Little was known of just how much gold the Chinese miners found, as very little of it was sold. At Bowling Alley Point, in the same area, a small group of Chinese miners had netted some 1,840 ounces, set fire to their camp and disappeared quietly at night “before any inkling of their success had got abroad to tempt the greed of unscrupulous Europeans”.19 In a subsequent article on the Rocky River area near Uralla, he gave a fuller account of the manner in which the Chinese worked:

The Chinese, as usual, are working the river bed. John, as a general rule, don’t like the hard work of sinking deep shafts, and would rather work in a mob, stripping the shingle from a paddock in the river or treading the wearying wheel. But, besides this, I have long had a suspicion that John gets very much more gold from this kind of work than is generally imagined. This opinion I have mentioned to several gentlemen well acquainted with the gold-fields and with the habits of the Chinese, and they take the same view. It has been found utterly impossible to discover how much gold a party of Chinese is making. John is not only secretive but timorous, and, being fully aware of his own natural cowardice, endeavours to disarm attack by appearance and profession of poverty. They work steadily on, their numbers and the division of labour making that really light which to an onlooker would seem very heavy work. But they would not work so persistently, heaving out and stacking up stones, cutting and building races, and treading that everlasting wheel unless it paid them well; and I am thoroughly convinced that it does pay them well when they get a dry season. It is altogether a mistake to say that the Chinese will work for less than a European. They may do so when it is a question of European labour, but mob them together, put them in a large party, and I am quite sure that they will not work at gold-mining for wages that would satisfy very many Englishmen. I am astonished that strong parties of Europeans have not gone into these bed claims; but with whites there is always the same difficulty about combination. The “poor man” is determined to remain solitary and dignified, wraps himself in the mantle of his many wrongs, and remains the “poor man” ever; whilst John Chinaman chums in with his fellows, clears out a paddock whilst the “poor man” is telling his woes, and washes out a score or so ounces of gold whilst the other is camped by the fire smoking his pipe. Europeans have never worked the river in the same systematic manner that the Chinese have done, owing to the want of combination; and it is owing to this that whatever isolated attempts have been made have been failures. Anything short of regularly stripping a paddock in these river claims is utterly futile.20

On later trips in 1870 and 1871, de Boos found the Chinese miners still working alluvial areas in Tambaroora.21 With his appointment as a Mining Warden and Police Magistrate in 1875, he came into much more direct contact with the gold miners and in a different way to that of a newspaper reporter. To begin with, he was clearly ‘pro-miner’, as he observed when he received his presentation from the Braidwood Masonic Lodge:

As some of you know, when I was in this district I considered it my duty always to give the digger my advice as to the best way for him to proceed in any difficulty, and not to send him to a lawyer to spend his money without perhaps getting any satisfaction after

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17 Sydney Morning Herald, 30 September 1865, p. 4.
18 Sydney Morning Herald, 23 May 1866, p. 3.
19 Ibid.
20 Sydney Morning Herald, 28 May 1866, p. 2. This was one of the rare occasions on which he used the name “John” for a Chinese miner.
21 Sydney Morning Herald, 8 August 1870, p. 5, and 26 July 1871, p. 5.
all. I consider a warden, as the name implies, should be the guide and protector of the digger. Any digger coming to me with a complaint was just in the same position to me, as a warden, as any man who comes to me with any complaint. As a magistrate I want to hear what he has to say before granting him a warrant. I am well aware that by following such a course I have greatly displeased the legal fraternity; but I cannot help that. I conscientiously regard it as in strict accordance with my duty, and I shall ever continue in it while I hold my present position. 23

Further, he was very fair in his dealings with everyone. If there was any bias in his dealings, it was towards those who might be described as the ‘under-dogs’, non-Europeans, women, Aborigines, individual miners compared to mining companies, and the Chinese miners. With regard to the Chinese miners, this was particularly so in the Braidwood district, even though by the time de Boos was in the district, mining was in decline and the number of miners smaller than in previous years. 24

In his annual reports to the Department of Mines, he was writing as a government official and some comments were not always complimentary towards the Chinese. He had difficulty providing numbers of miners, because of the large areas involved and the scattered nature of workings. He noted that there were “many men at work who have no miners’ rights. This is more especially the case with the Chinese working here [along the Shoalhaven River] and elsewhere, as there is no scheme or trick that they will not resort to, if by so doing they can escape payment”. 25 He could provide no more than estimates of the numbers of Chinese on each of the fields. In two reports, he commented on the work of Quong Tart at Bell’s Creek Reefs and his “management and skill” in mining. 26 But the area had seen better times:

Amongst other discouraging signs of the present droughty times is the fact that the number of Chinese working on the several goldfields of the district has gradually dwindled down to a mere handful. As these hard-working, persevering men are satisfied with a very much smaller yield than would content a European, times must be very hard indeed when they are driven out. 27

Reports from his subsequent appointments at Temora, Copeland, and Milparinka contain no mention of Chinese miners.

Conclusion

Like all of the miners, the Chinese had seen better times in the Braidwood district since the first gold discoveries in 1858 and during the many years when it was among the most productive gold fields in the Colony. After working with numerous Mining Wardens and other government officials over more than twenty years, to have been presented with such a unique gift in recognition of his work, Charles de Boos was a very special person, certainly in the eyes of the Chinese. The two presentations provide a clear indication of the regard in which Charles de Boos was held in the Braidwood district.

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22 Sydney Morning Herald, 30 June 1881, p. 5. 23 Unfortunately, no copies of the main local newspaper, the Braidwood Dispatch, are available for the 1870s-early 1880s, the period during which de Boos was associated with Braidwood. 24 Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, for the year 1875, p. 45. 25 Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, for the year 1877, p. 95. Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, for the year 1879, p. 111. 26 Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, for the year 1878, p. 79.
• Megan Atkins (Librarian, Original Materials) and her colleagues at the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, for a personal viewing of the de Boos medal, December 15, 2013.