Charles Carter

Hermit of the high country

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Klaus Hueneke, writer, photographer, publisher and book distributor, has written numerous articles and books about the Australian Alps. This article will appear in his book to be entitled People of the High Country *to be published in 1992.*

The steep, heavily dissected country between Barry Way, Grosses Plain, the Crackenback River and the Victorian border is full of tales of human drama, including lifelong feuds, cattle duffing and lonely death. It, rather than the more popular Jagungal wilderness, is the real outback of the mountains, and the further you get away from pubs, people and policemen the more fascinating the legends become. Charles Carter, the eccentric recluse and author who had a lifelong feud with the Freebody brothers, is such a legend.

He died in 1952, well before my time in this area, so could not be interviewed. There are, however, still many people around who have clear memories of him. What follows has been pieced together from interviews with Pat Freebody, Lindsay Willis, Hubert Golby, Ross Bolton, Dave Pendergast, Ernie Bale and others, together with information from Carter's self-published books and two or three newspaper articles. The information on the retrieval of the body came from Constable Bruce Lang who used be based at Jindabyne.

Carter was born in Gisborne, north-west of Melbourne, in 1871 and according to an obituary in the *Cooma-Monaro Express*[1] spent his early working life in a chair factory, a candle factory, a sawmill, on several country properties and as a rabbit trapper. He came to the mountains in 1898 and until his death in 1952 lived in simple huts on the Ingeegoodbee River, at Snowy Plains, on the Gungarlin River and at the Tin Mines. It is said that he never married.

Charlie mainly turned to prospecting and brumby trapping during his many decades in the mountains and, whenever possible, supplemented his diet with homegrown carrots and turnips and an occasional rabbit. His first hut on the Ingeegoodbee River is long gone but was probably a patchwork of corrugated iron, flattened tins, hand-split boards, round logs, a precious glass window and a simple wooden door.

Inside he would have had a collection of mining tools, some saddles, bridles and riding gear, a collection of books by Carlyle, Marx, Lenin and Aristotle, some blackened pots and billies and a bundle of personal belongings. The whole could have fitted in a small chest, for Carter was proud of his lack of possessions. His seating was probably an armchair improvised from sacking and packing cases.

In time he bought the fifty acre paddock around the hut and acquired the lease over an adjoining 150 acres. Once every couple of months he would saddle up and ride to Jindabyne for supplies. He probably bought flour, sugar, onions and bully beef. Sometimes he would also deliver an article on communism or cancer for despatch to the Cooma paper. He probably followed the stock route now known as the Barry Way.

The only other people in his largely unmapped domain were occasional stockmen, brumby runners and some cattle duffers. His only neighbours for miles around were surprisingly close. The Freebody brothers, Jack and Paddy, had a hut on the opposite side of the river, a little downstream.

Carter wrote home occasionally and according to a reply from his folks painted a rosy picture of his new life. Paddy Freebody found the letter tucked in the lining of the hut years later. It said that Carter must have done very well in the time that he was there to have so much property and so many stock. Pat Freebody, a son of Paddy, knowing that there were only about a dozen head of cattle and about twenty or thirty horses, was sceptical, 'Perhaps he might have left home and said, "I'll make my fortune" and he probably liked to tell them that he had.'

There was a severe depression in the 1890s and employment was hard to get. One source of income was snaring possums but for the Freebodys to get them they had to go further afield than Dalgety, where they were reared. According to Pat, the old hut they lived in was originally owned by Rawsons, the first settlers. The leases in the area were owned by the Mackay brothers from Delegate and the O'Rourkes from the Victorian side.

The dispute with Carter started about 1905-6 after four or five peaceful years. Pat reckoned they weren't on speaking terms — mostly over the treatment of horses.

> He was an eccentric man, he would do the most unusual things. He had an obsession for catching wild horses. He would sew their head in a bag, leave their nose out and their eyes covered up and leave them loose in the paddock. There was a hole around their mouth, they could feed that way, but they couldn't see. He would have as many as 15 or 20 like that. Of course they'd walk to the edge of the river, fall in, and that's where they would stay.
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> You see, he'd set trap yards, stock in that country get salt hungry, they'll go to salt. So he'd put salt, they'd follow the smell of the salt, get trapped in the yard and he'd catch up to 15 or 20 like that. Of course they'd walk down looking for water, fall in the river and couldn't get out. My father told me once there were seven drowned in the river.

So they [the Freebodys] complained that they didn't like polluted water.

Carter resented any intrusion like that, he had a self-centred way, that was the way he wanted it done, that's the way it would be done. He was an eccentric man, he would do the most unusual things. No one could forecast what he'd do next. A lot of people insisted that he was dangerous.

He had one cheek knocked in, that was a horses hoof. He blindfolded it with a chaff bag — you know you can see through it, if you hold it up to the sunlight. Uncle Jack told me he was inside the hut and didn't know where he was. He said he must have staggered away after getting kicked and lost all track of time. He said the horse must have been in the yard for three or four days, it was damn near dead with starvation. The doctors had a look at it [his cheek] and wanted to do this and that, he said he could treat it himself and away he went again. He recovered. But he was seeing double for several weeks after that, it must have been pretty severe concussion, I think.

Another time he went out over the Snowy River, on the Delegate side, he was going to chase horses over there. He was telling my father "Well, I didn't have much to eat, I only had three days tucker, so I set up camp." He went out chasing this mob of wild horses. The next thing he remembered he's on his back and the old mare is standing over him, twisted up in some sticks. He got up and got himself into the saddle and went back and he hadn't touched the tucker. He'd lost three days, he must have been three days unconscious. He couldn't work it out. "A good saving of tucker" he said.

He never really went short of beef they all said. There are all sorts of stories about how he got it. He'd see something on the run that he liked, yes. Different cattle had been found shot and part of the meat taken — who done it, of course, no one knew. He was a prime suspect.

Well, there was a fellow named Dave Spencer who was with my father and Jack. He was riding, looking after cattle for McGufficke's at Moonbah and Alf Bayle [or Bail?] was working with them — I think he was with O'Rourkes at the time. All these four fellows lived at the old hut on the Ingeegoodbee River. I think it was the summer of 1907-8.

They used to have their horses running in a little paddock there. Wild stallions used to jump the fence and come in and attack the horses. So every wild stallion was a prime target for a rifle because he was a menace to anyone with tame horses there. Well, one day Dave Spencer went and shot a horse which was really harassing their horses. Of course this is an indictable offence that could have landed you inside Goulburn for 6 or 12 months. Charlie Carter and a fellow named Bryant from Delegate rode up and found the horse. Carter said "he was a good sort of a horse that. I should go home, get a brand and put it on him and claim him for mine." Someone tipped them off that this was what he was likely to do so Spencer and the others burnt — put a fire over the horse.

The next time they had a troublesome stallion my uncle waited for him on the way out — he would always go out of the paddock about daylight — and shot him. So ready for all emergencies he skinned the horse and took the skin, no brand on it. So they hid the skin in the bush.

The next thing the police arrive and say "You shot Carter's horse. Right, you're charged with shooting him." So my uncle and father were charged with the shooting of this horse.

Freebodys' old hut on the Ingeegoodbee River, photographed in 1949. (Golby Collection)

The Freebodys were defended by a Cooma lawyer. After much argument, for and against, the court decided the horse was a wild one and not Carter's. They were acquitted.

The case rested on two critical pieces of evidence. The first concerned the possible planting of a bullet in the rifle used for the shooting and the second was about the colour of the skin. Carter asserted the horse was black but when the skin was produced it was yellow. The matter of the planted bullet is a little more complex and I leave it to Pat Freebody to explain.

> My father said they were out, about two mile from the hut when the police and Carter arrived. There was one cartridge left for that rifle on the morning when my uncle shot the horse, just one. So they went to the hut and as he looked up at the rifle, an old Winchester 32/20 with the hammer back, he said "there's something wrong here, someone has handled that rifle since I touched it, I would never leave it that way."
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> Well, the police said, "right there would be cartridges in it, you say you've got none". He goes over and he opens the breach and out flew a cartridge. He said "there you are, you've got cartridges". So what could you do, they'd been planted in the rifle. But they made one mistake. Dave Spencer picked up the cartridge and took a look at the end of it. It was a 25/20 instead of a 32/20. They put the wrong calibre in it. They'll go off all right, but they'll burst the case, they're seven thousand smaller. That was very strong evidence that someone had planted them there.

Carter apparently got the money for the court case from the sale of cattle and horses. It must have been quite expensive but didn't deter him from appealing. He spent all his money, incurred many debts, was declared bankrupt and went north to Queensland. His land was sold by the official receiver and bought by the Freebodys.

Carter was highly incensed about the whole business and for years afterwards attempted to correct what he saw as a miscarriage of justice. His virulent scorn is reflected in his writings about the administration of justice. He finally began proceedings to recover damages of $50,000, but by then the judge who tried the case, was dead. Deprived of his beloved hovel on the Ingeegoodbee, he went mining and roving up north. In Sydney's Macquarie Street he set up shop as a cancer specialist briefly.

The lure of gold in the mountains was too much and in 1933 he was back with a vengeance. Like Butch Cassidy he did it in style arriving in a T model Ford. He went to Grosses Plain, south of Moonbah, and lived with Charlie Finn. At some stage he got a job as a dingo trapper for the Dingo Board. This took him to different parts of the Monaro.

For a time he had a slab hut up Diggers Creek on Snowy Plain. According to Ross Bolton he dug holes everywhere looking for gold.

> He went right down the back gully nearly to the Back River digging holes. He was there for years, he reckoned that all that gold on Snowy Plain came from a diorite reef, it would be solid gold. He wasn't real . . . you know, he was only about ten Bob in the quid.

Charles Carter as a young man, taken from his book The Principle of Life, or The Reconciliation.

The hut collapsed some years ago but the remains are said to be still visible.

In his earlier life Carter had been an author. His first book, a novel of 176 pages, *The Island of Justice* by 'Karta', described on the cover as 'A sensational story', was published in an Australian edition by Gordon and Gotch in Melbourne in 1901. During and immediately after World War I, Carter published two pamphlets: *War Finance No Problem* (Sydney, 1917, 39pp.) and *The Judgement: or The Only Way* (Sydney, January 1919, 56pp.) followed in 1923 by his major work, *The Principle of Life, or The Reconciliation*, a cloth-bound book of 398 pages.[2]

Many documents have come my way over the years but this latter book, a present from Tom Taylor, was one of the rarest. A previous owner was John Morrisey the dog trapper. He gave his address as Corrungoo via Tumut, care E. J. Brasiall Esq., Manager. His name and address are written with a nib dipped in ink, so is the price at 12/6. In contrast to the books of today the date of publication, ISBN number, name of printer and publisher are all missing. There are strong indications that the book was self-published.

In his book Charlie chastises Karl Marx for being too verbose and theoretical, espouses the need for prices to be based on the costs of production and suggests that the Church should inculcate the merit of materialism in moderation. Throughout its now ragged pages he again and again lights on the need to think holistically. Our society is like a tree with the

trunk dependent on the roots and the leaves feeding nutrients via the branches. One without the other is impossible — 'the natural law of reciprocity must prevail'.

Clarence Dempster met the, in his words, 'tall, spare, sallow bachelor' on a ride through the area in 1953 and reviewed the book for the Melbourne *Age*. For Dempster, Carter 'emerged as a tolerant philosopher — a Socialist with a strong tinge of individualism [he was, after all, an extreme case], a materialist deploring aggressive hostility to religion . . .'.[3]

> His illustrations are drawn, as is natural, from the life of a bushman. In his former hut on Snowy Plain he would verify the conclusions of Professor Geikie's Origin of the Earth by the age-old uplift of the mountain masses, the ancient formation of Kosciusko's glacial lakes, and in the stratas exposed by shovel and pick.
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> Of an evening from his alpine sky-line he would find some proof of Einstein's theories in the deflection of light rays from the crystal clear stars. Darwin's "Evolution [Origin] of Species" evoked a thousand analogies from his observations of animals, birds and trees.
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> The vast multiplication of money in the first post-war inflation he saw as a trapper sees the teeming increase in the population of rabbits. When he writes of the place of women in society he leaps across the centuries from the theories of the Golden Age of Greece and Rome to the realities of a tribal camp on the Lachlan.
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> He tests the political teachings of the academic groves by his experiences in the camps of navvies and shearers.[4]

Sometimes Carter's judgment is harsh, especially when it concerns our system of justice, but generally it has an impartial, practical ring. In short it's a cocktail of the world's learning and the lore of the bush.

The book contains one advertisement and one only. It depicts a machine that administers 'Violet-Ray High-Frequency Electricity' to various parts of the body. Different shaped electrodes could be applied to the spine, scalp, neck and the joints to remove earache, insomnia, paralysis, constipation and numerous other aches and pains.

I have dim, and slightly fearful, memories of finding such a sinister looking instrument in the attic of my grandfather's house in Bremen but had no idea what it was for. At the time its strange, vibrating, purple light gave me quite a buzz. It is very likely that Carter owned one, although being without electricity he would have been able to use it rarely.

Pat Freebody reckoned that Charlie was a fanatical reader. 'My father said that he'd sit up reading half the night. He reckoned he'd spend hours, you know, reading with a kerosene lamp. He wasn't a fellow that was well educated, but most of his books were extracts of others, mostly it was copies from someone else.'

During Charlie's time away from the Ingeegoodbee a mining company set up camp in the top of the valley and began operations to extract tin on Big Tin Mine Creek. It was a pre-war effort designed to supply the nation's munition factories. The Mt Pilot Tin Syndicate built a neat row of seven small weatherboard huts to house the miners, a manager's cottage, a big barn-like workers' mess and several sheds. The syndicate folded in 1938, after spending $18,000, and the miners departed for richer lodes. Carter got wind of this and set up house in the mess hall.

He built a stockyard, caught a new herd of brumbies and set about finding deposits of tin and gold. Whether he was successful is hard to establish. Some say he used small nuggets to pay for his tucker at Mrs MacGregor's store in Jindabyne but there are no records at the Mines Department.

By then in his seventies he was no longer as fit and healthy as before and what were minor fixations about curing the body of disease had slowly metamorphosed into major eccentricities. One of these was his cure for cancer. His method was to take 'one ounce of pulverised bluestone, dampen with spirits of salt, then mix with an equal quantity of yellow petroleum jelly'. This was applied as a poultice to a sensitive part of the body, through which it was supposed to draw the poisonous cells. The poultice would be held in place with a Bushell's Blue Label tea packet which made Carter look like a veteran tennis star with a head band. No wonder some cattlemen called him 'The Doc'.

Ross Bolton reckoned that he could cure anything — 'TB, cancer, he nearly killed one of the Willis boys. Charlie was camped in our hut and this Willis boy had a cough and he reckoned he had consumption. He said "I'll mix up this dose for you." It was bluestone and a bit of strychnine, it bloody near killed him. I don't know whether it cured the consumption or not.'

Ernie Macintosh from around Corryong had a boil on his bottom and was persuaded to try one of Carter's poultices. Pat Freebody said he was out on the flat with his pants off at the time. 'Well, they reckon it was the fastest Stawell Gift [a foot race] ever run to the creek to try and wash it off. Don Benson used to tell that yarn, he reckoned it was one of the funniest things he ever seen.'

His mixtures were, according to his book, also good for 'rheumatism, arthritis, hair and kidneys, and excellent on horse blisters if used with judgment'. People who knew Charles reckoned he had numerous bare patches on his arms and head, the result of too much rubbing with bluestone.

Bushwalkers were few and far between in the 1940s and those who did venture down to the Tin Mines were usually invited in to have a cup of tea or to stay the night. They were also regaled with Carter's ideas on cancer, communism and finance. One group wrote up their experiences in the May 1951 edition of the *Sydney Bushwalker*. 'We could only wait to hear about the first topic, but left with

Charles Carter, Herb Hain and Dan Broadhead at the Tin Mines workshed in 1948. (Hain Collection)

his booklets covering all three subjects. We had one of them each night around the camp fire for the next three nights.'

Carter had the idea that rubbing your teeth together was bad for them, that it would grind them down. Pat again: 'He used to buy school rubbers and chew them. And then other times he'd get horseshoe nails and chew them. He doesn't sound like a fellow with a lot of intelligence to me.'

Dave Pendergast was out at Carter's one day eating some of his damper for lunch when in burst Charlie Finn and yelled: 'Don't touch that bloody stuff, it's got a bloody gall cure in it!' But Dave reckoned 'it never killed us, it must have been allright'. Carter also used to poison his vegetables so the birds wouldn't eat them. 'He'd get a knife and stick a bit of strychnine into the ground — he knew which ones he did, but we bloody well didnt!' This way the vegetables were safe from birds as well as straying stockmen.

Ernie Bale got to know Charlie pretty well in later years.

> He used to snare the brumbies or run them to a yard. He'd always have a yarn with you. Wherever he went in the bush, whether he was digging or whatever, he always carried a loaded rifle in case he ran into the Freebodys. One day he came right out of the scrub behind George Day, I could see him coming, but I couldn't warn George. Carter's lookir.g at me, he's got this massive big beard on him and carrying a rifle. "Hello what are you fellows doing here?" he says and George's hat went up about two inches when he looked around and seen the beard and the rifle.

Many of the stories about Carter have been garnished and modified in the retelling. Lindsay Willis told me that 'one day Carter had his rifle and one of the Freebodys rode up. He had him in the sights ready to pull the trigger but the other brother rode up and he thought, "now if I shoot one, it won't do", one would get away and he'd be in trouble again.'

The original version according to Pat Freebody came from Arthur Smart.

> Carter come one time — this is going way back to 1904 or 5 — and said "I've seen Jack Freebody riding down the Omeo track and I put the rifle on him but he rode around a bit of scrub. I wasn't sure of a shot from there." When he died they brought his stuff in — saddle and one thing and another — Straighty Pender picked up his rifle and said "this is the sight Carter had old Paddy lined up in but he let him off". By the time the story got to Straighty, Jack had been exchanged for Paddy. Perhaps Paddy was better known in the community or his name added more spice to the story.

The hermit's death in 1952 is surrounded by as much intrigue as his life. Lindsay again:

> he'd let his horses go out and then when he wanted them again he'd have some rock salt. He'd put it down and his horses would come to the hut to get a lick of the salt. Anyway he was short of tucker so he put out the salt but they didn't come. He kept on waiting and waiting, he got weaker and weaker, then he got his bridle to go out and find them. He arrived back at the hut with his halter and bridle on his arm and collapsed as he went in the door. The bridle was still hanging on

his arm when Jim Pendergast (of Penderlea) and Snowy Golby found him.

There was a general feeling in the community that Carter would die soon and some were afraid to go out there in case they were confronted with a dead body. Jim and Snowy must have overcome their fear. They found him on the 22 October. A calendar on the wall was marked off until the 14th which suggests that he died soon after.[5]

A post mortem showed that Carter died of a heart attack and not the result of various healing techniques, dysentery or starvation as postulated by some locals. Either way he died alone and unassisted among his favourite rocks, trees and animals. His last wish to be buried where he lived was denied because of the stipulation of the law. The journey to retrieve the body became another epic in high country adventure.

Constable Bruce Lang of Jindabyne called for volunteers and horses. With the exception of one man, Bert (Pinky) Harris, a friend of fifty years, neither men nor horses came forward. Horses were eventually made available by the Snowy Mountains Authority and trucked to Grosses Plain. The two men saddled up and, after encountering thick fog, heavy rain and swollen rivers, reached the Tin Mines by nightfall.

They couldn't decide in which hut to look for the body. According to Constable Lang, Pinky was tentative and afraid to go in the huts at night. Next morning they found Carter face down on the ground. Body gases oozed out of him when Bruce turned him over. He'd been dead for two weeks. They carried out the necessary official procedure, including the making of an inventory of Carter's personal possessions, wrapped the body in a sheet of canvas and tied him, bent at the hips, on to a pack horse.[6]

The slow and miserable journey commenced in heavy drifting rain. The rivers were still in flood and on one difficult crossing the canvas around the slippery dead body came undone allowing the body to float away. Constable Lang caught him just in time whilst Pinky shot off in the opposite direction. He couldn't stand it. For Lang, who had been called to numerous road and tunnel accidents on the Snowy Mountains scheme, this was all in a day's work. He'd seen at least twenty other dead bodies in his time.

At the Jacobs River they waited for a day to allow the fast and treacherous current to recede. Next day they reached Ingebyra, from where the body was transported to Cooma by hearse. Carter was buried like a pauper, with the barest of farewells and without a circle of relatives and friends. Or so I thought, and wrote, in an article for the *Canberra Times* in 1982.[7] It prompted this reply from Uriel Golby some years later.[8]

A hut occupied by Carter at the Tin Mines, originally built in the 1930s for the manager of the mine.

> Charlie had a Christian burial in the Church of England section of the new Lawn Cemetery. The Church of England Minister read the burial ceremony in the presence of Mr Craigie (editor *Cooma-Monaro Express*), Hubert (my late husband) and myself and children, Mr Allan the undertaker and also the grave digger. The expenses were paid from the sale of Charlie's personal property, brought in from the Tin Mines. These were auctioned by Arthur Harris in Jindabyne.
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> The proceeds, after the burial expenses, along with "his book" were forwarded to his sister, Mrs Ashdowne, of Melbourne. Sad to say, she only outlived Charlie by a few months and never really enjoyed her brother's parting gift. Her son notified Hubert of her death. Hubert's one regret was that he never kept some money for a headstone to mark Charlie's last resting place.

Carter's spiritual presence lives on, aided and abetted by his unusual solitary lifestyle, some original and rare views on how to cure the ills of the body and the world, and, not to forget, the legend-making feud with the Freebodys. Now that the story is recorded people may still read about Carter a hundred years from now. My earlier prognosis, that he had been unhonoured and unsung, was off the mark. His memory may outlive us all.

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1 *Cooma-Monaro Express*, 31 October 1952
2 Copies of Carter's books and pamphlets are held in the National Library
3 C.H.D. [Clarence Dempster], 'Hermit of the Snows. Bushman's Shelf of Classics', Melbourne *Age*, 7 July 1951
4 Published in the *Cooma-Monaro Express*, 31 October 1952, 'by courtesy of "The Age", Melbourne'. However these paragraphs did not appear in Dempster's *Age* report.
5 Bert Harris, 'The Late Charles Carter', *Cooma-Monaro Express*, 18 November 1952
6 Klaus Hueneke, 'Charles Carter — Last Hermit of the Snowy Mountains', *Canberra Times*, 2 October 1982
7 *Snowy Life Magazine*, August 1990
Other reference
Klause Hueneke, *Huts of the High Country*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1982