

CRONULLA RIOT

Sporadic outbreaks of violence directed at those perceived as 'outsiders' had occasionally occurred in Cronulla.

However, the riot that erupted at North Cronulla on 11 December 2005 was unprecedented. News of this event – followed by two nights of revenge attacks on Cronulla and other suburbs by young Lebanese Australian men – made headlines around the world.

Riot in Cronulla

Sporadic outbreaks of violence directed at those perceived as 'outsiders' had occasionally occurred in Cronulla. However, the riot that erupted at North Cronulla on 11 December 2005 was unprecedented. News of this event – followed by two nights of revenge attacks on Cronulla and other suburbs by young Lebanese Australian men – made headlines around the world.

While the issue of sharing the beaches with visitors has had a long history in Australia, the immediate trigger for the Cronulla riot was an incident at North Cronulla on 4 December. A fracas developed between young off duty lifesavers and visitors described as of 'Middle Eastern appearance'. Fury was whipped up during the following week by talkback radio hosts. Subsequently a rally to 'reclaim the beach' was planned for 11 December.

That morning a crowd of about 5000 – including members of the right-wing Australia First Party – gathered in Dunningham Park at North Cronulla. Alcohol began to flow, and semi-articulate orators urged the crowd to defend the beach, their women and Australia. As the mantra 'Go home Lebs' reverberated around the park, retired lifeguard Dick Evans, watched the gathering storm from his apartment:

A whole surge of people chased two guys down Prince Street and followed them to North Cronulla surf club. The crowd gathered around. It was touch and go whether they invaded the surf club.

He gazed in horror as an ambulance, evacuating the men who had taken refuge in the surf club, was pelted with bottles as it crawled up Mitchell Road followed by mounted police. Dick recoiled as, 'the mob just pelted the police and the mounted police. Hit the horses.' In his 30 years as a lifeguard on North Cronulla Beach he had seen nothing like it. To this old surfer the conduct he witnessed was 'just one little episode in a whole day of infamy in Cronulla.'

During the afternoon the crowd headed to the railway station to meet a train rumoured to be bringing 'Lebs' to the suburb. News footage of a lone policeman on the station desperately hitting out at rioters with his truncheon will never be forgotten.

Retaliation was swift and terrible. For two nights carloads of young men descended on Cronulla, Caringbah, Brighton-le-Sands and Maroubra destroying cars, breaking shop windows and assaulting anyone who got in their way. The stabbing of a young man near Woollooware Golf Club was just one of many violent incidents.

Police closed Cronulla down and an eerie peace descended during the following week. A huge police presence was maintained until after Australia Day. Many businesses kept their doors closed but when they did reopen, trade was far from brisk.

It has not been quite the same in Cronulla since December 2005. The large 'ethnic' family groups that used to picnic in Gunnamatta Park are scarcely seen and boisterous groups of young Lebanese men rarely come to the beach. Commentators identified this day as

marking the end of a consensus which had generally prevailed since the 1970s that Australia was a multi-cultural society.

The Lebanese visitors may have been scapegoats for some of the spruikers in the park that day. Over the years creeping affluence had gradually led to the demise of the unpretentious red brick 'walk up' flats and dilapidated houses surfers had once rented overlooking North Cronulla Beach. Bitter and displaced from an increasingly affluent suburb where they no longer could afford to live, they struck out in anger.

References:

- *The Bulletin*
- *Sydney Morning Herald*
- *St George & Sutherland Shire Leader*
- Dick Evans, interview 7 February 2006, held in Local Studies Collection Sutherland Library