

The St Helena Island Community - connecting today's community to a prison island of the past

James McPherson was an apprentice stonemason to the renowned Petrie family in Brisbane and a horsebreaker in Queensland in the 1860's¹, but quickly realized the career of a bushranger would lead to a far more adventurous and colourful life. Having not been paid for his work, and James took revenge by stealing two horses and headed to New South Wales, joining bushranger Gardener's gang at the age of around 21. After too many brushes with the police he returned to Queensland² and set about earning an individual reputation as 'The Wild Scotchman.'

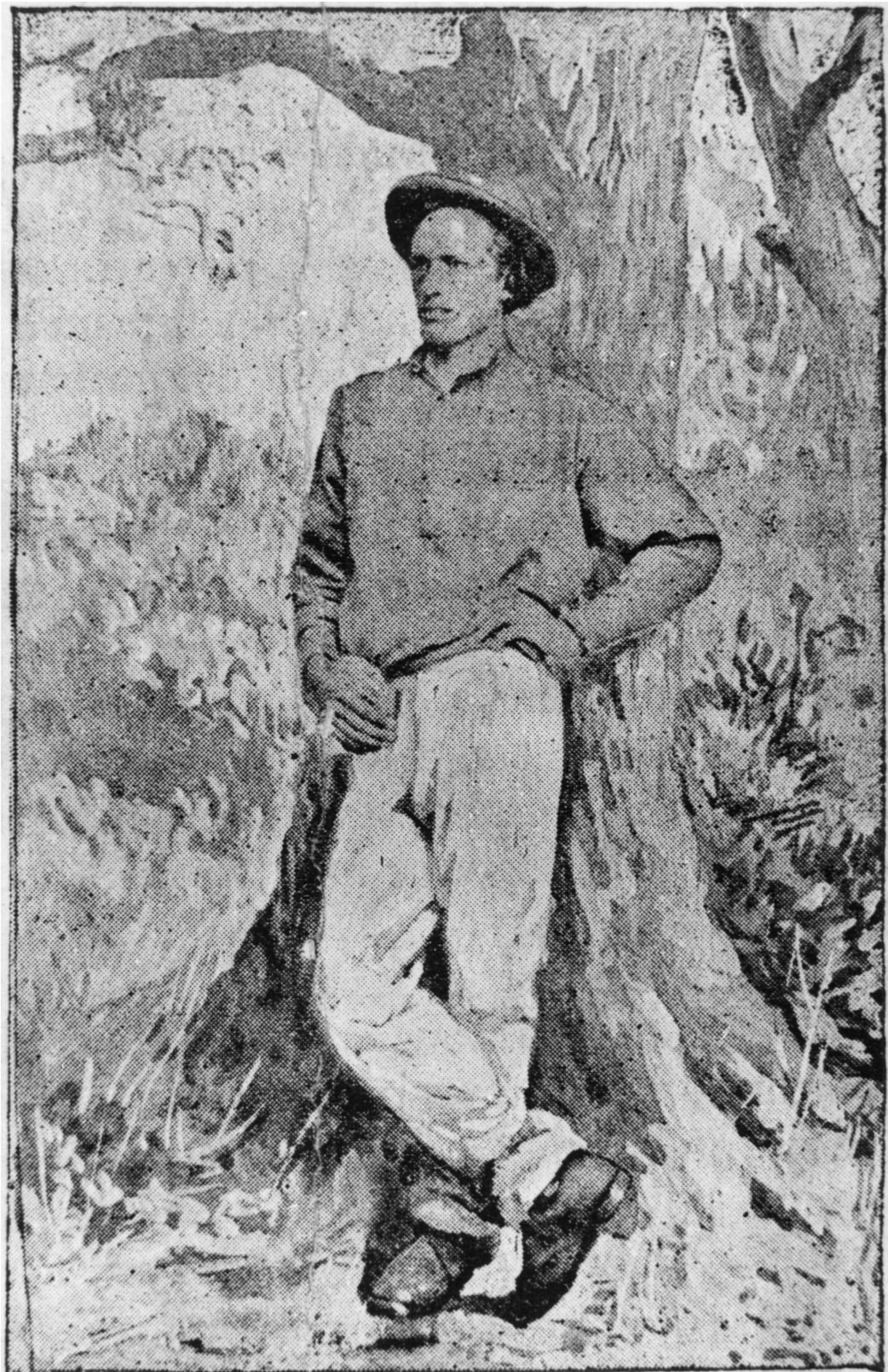
He quickly became a well-known identity, assuming many aliases including James Bruce, Kerr and Alpin McPherson,⁴ allowing him easier movement around the state. His bush ranging career began with the shooting of Mr Willis at a hotel in Houghton River in March 1864, where he stole a horse, three cabbage tree hats, two pairs of riding pants, one pair of boots, one gun, one crimean shirt, one bottle of whisky, and fourteen pounds of flour.⁵



Portrait of James McPherson. State Library of Queensland.

He fled to New South Wales to fight a duel with Sir Frederick Potinger, a prominent Police Inspector dedicated to the extermination of bushrangers.¹ Shots were exchanged near Wheogo on the 17th August where he was wounded on his left arm and fled. On the 27th October, he held up a mailman 16 miles from Scone. He was finally captured near Billabong Creek on the 11th February 1865.

He was sent to Sydney to face trial for the attempted murder of Sir Frederick, but upon Sir Frederick's death was extradited to Bowen, Qld on the 8th April 1865 to face the charge of shooting Mr Willis.¹ Placed on the boat 'Diamantina' for his upcoming trial at Rockhampton, he escaped from the boat on the 9th June 1865 as his hands were too small for the handcuffs he was restrained in. Constable Maher of the Bowen Police was suspended for culpable carelessness.⁶



THE "WILD SCOTCHMAN." 1866.

Unidentified (1866). *Bushranger James MacPherson, 1866*. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

By August he was charged on warrant for stealing horses and cattle and in October he robbed the Condamine Mail and Taroom Mail. A reward for £50 was placed on his head, later increased to £250. His spree of highway robberies continued. He headed towards Gayndah in November 1865 went on a spree, stealing a gun and clothing and robbing 6 mail coaches and 4 individuals in

around Gayndah and Nanango. He was finally captured on the 30th March 1866.

¹

At the Nanago robbery, McPherson was said to give the driver McCullum:

“a letter duly stamped and closed, addressed to ‘His Excellency Sir George Ferguson Bowen, Brisbane, Queensland,’ and with it a package that was to be given to Mr. Bligh. The bushranger obtained McCullum’s promise to post the first, and deliver the second of these, and informed the mailman the package contained the useless cheques taken out of the Maryborough and Gayndah mails... The letter to his Excellency was duly posted, and we learn, by our telegraphic news, that his Excellency received it, and found that it contained cheques and bills amounting to £1700.”⁶

To one of the mailmen he said ‘would not have stuck it up only he had told the Maryborough mailman he would do so,⁵ and though only a poor devil of a bushranger, he always kept his word’ and ‘he had stuck up the mail to show them his defiance.’ While sitting on the ground opening letters during one robbery, he considerably folded up those that contained no money and returned them to their envelopes.⁶ During these bushranging years, many people fed or offered him a bed. He would eat quietly, read the papers and leave a coin behind. He was renowned for his manners and intelligence, cool daring and clever tactics.

Captured at Monduran Station on the 30th March 1866 in an attempted hold up, he was acquitted for the shooting in Bowen, but a trial in Maryborough saw him charged with Bushranging on the 13th September 1866 and found guilty.

Sentence:

2 counts of Mail Robbery under arms

Sentence: 25 years for each crime – to be served concurrently

Sentence date: September 1866

James was held in Brisbane Gaol from September till February 1870³ when he was transferred to St Helena Penal Establishment. Arriving only 3 years after the prison had officially opened, his Administration number upon arrival at St Helena was 160, meaning he was the 160th prisoner admitted into the prison.

Within 2 months of his arrival, James decided on some drastic action. Watch the video below to find out more.

Superintendent John McDonald’s Report – escape attempt.

Superintendent, St Helena

Penal Establishment

St Helena 12 April 1870

Report attempt at escape and recapture of six prisoners at St Helena.

I have the honour to report for your information that one Sunday the 10th instant at 4 p.m, 6 prisoners rushed the warder at the stockade gate and made

for the south end of the island. The alarm was given and all the warders and police gave chase, within 20 minutes 5 of the runaways were apprehended, the sixth, was apprehended by myself at 8 pm. They were all safely locked up in single cells in the new prison. The prisoners names were:

James McPherson, 25 years

Patrick Gary 15 years

Henry Ross 15 years

James Howard 10 years

John Dyball 7 years.

Henry Ross was slightly wounded on the right hand with a rifle shot.

I have the honour to be, sir,

Your most obedient servant,

John McDonald

Superintendent 8

1094
13 Apr 70

Superintendent S. J. Kilcoursy
St Helena Island
Small Establishment

St Helena 13th April 1870

Report. Although an escape of and

An党 of 6. persons at St. Helena

I have the honor to report for
your information that on Sunday the 11th
at 4 P.M. Six prisoners rushed the walls
on the staircase leading down to the
South end of the Island; the alarm was
given and all the warders & police gave
chase; - within twenty minutes five
of the runaways were apprehended, the
sixth was apprehended by himself at
8 P.M. They were all safely locked up
again in single cells in the new prison.
The prisoners however, James McPherson
25 years, Patrick Gray 15 years, Henry Ness
15 years, James Moreton 10 years, John Diball
7 years; - Henry Ness was slightly wounded
on the right hand with a rifle shot.

The hon. Mr. [unclear]
Ch. Secretary)

I have the honor to be
Yours most O.B.T. Servt
John McDonald
Superintendent

Letter from Superintendent John McDonald reporting the escape attempt of John McPherson and other bushrangers in 1870 (8)

Find out more about James' punishment and life within the walls of St Helena Penal Establishment next week!

1. 'The "Wild Scotchman:" Queensland Bushranger James Macpherson,' State Library of Queensland <http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/jol/2016/05/25/the-wild-scotchman-queensland-bushranger-james-macpherson/>
2. Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser (Qld. : 1860 – 1947), Saturday 27 January 1866, page 2
3. St Helena Island Moreton Bay, An historical account (2010), Lauren Penny
4. Rockhampton Bulletin and Central Queensland Advertiser (Qld. : 1861 – 1871), Saturday 1 July 1865, page 2
5. Brisbane Courier (Qld. : 1864 – 1933), Tuesday 21 August 1866, page 2
6. Rockhampton Bulletin and Central Queensland Advertiser (Qld. : 1861 – 1871), Thursday 21 December 1865, page 2
7. 'Bulletin' (details unknown), 'The original manuscript has been typed and

made available for publication by the Bulletin by Mrs Moreen Trethewey.'

8. Colonial Secretary's correspondence (1870) COL/A140/70/1094, Qld State Archives
9. Colonial Secretary's correspondence, (1870) COL/A150/70/3013, Qld State Archives
10. Colonial Secretary's correspondence (1871) Qld State Archives
11. Colonial Secretary's correspondence (1875) Col/A216/75/3351, Qld State Archives