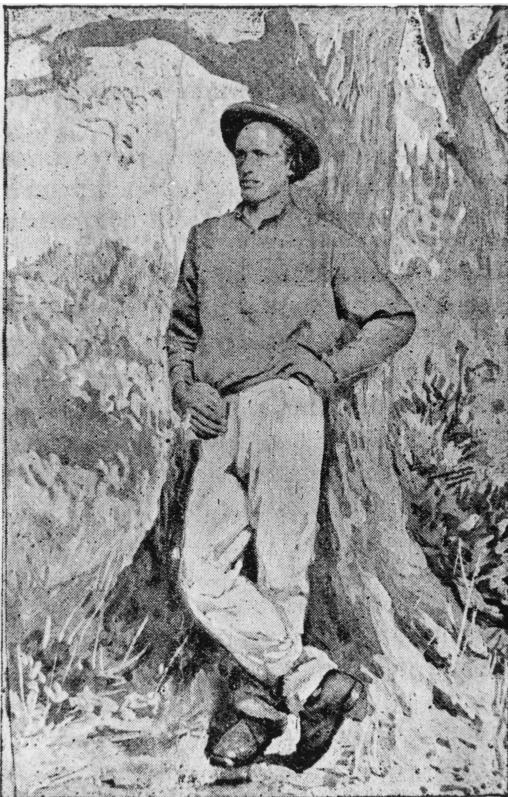


# The St Helena Island Community - connecting today's community to a prison island of the past

*St Helena Penal Establishment – Misdemeanors and Punishments*

12 April 1870: **Attempted escape.** **Punishment:** James McPherson, Ross and Dyball were given 1 month's solitary confinement while Howard, Gray and Devitt were given 25 lashes.<sup>8 3</sup>

It seemed that [James McPherson and his fellow escapees](#) were to be punished in a way that would send a strong message to all other would-be escapees. Attempt an escape at your peril.



THE “WILD SCOTCHMAN.” 1866.

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

This was not the only punishment meted out to bushranger and prisoner James McPherson while he was incarcerated on St Helena Island.

30 July 1870 Signed a petition asking for vegetables as he had only rice for 10 months.<sup>9</sup>

3 October 1870 Assaulting a fellow prisoner **Punishment:** Admonished Supt.<sup>9</sup>

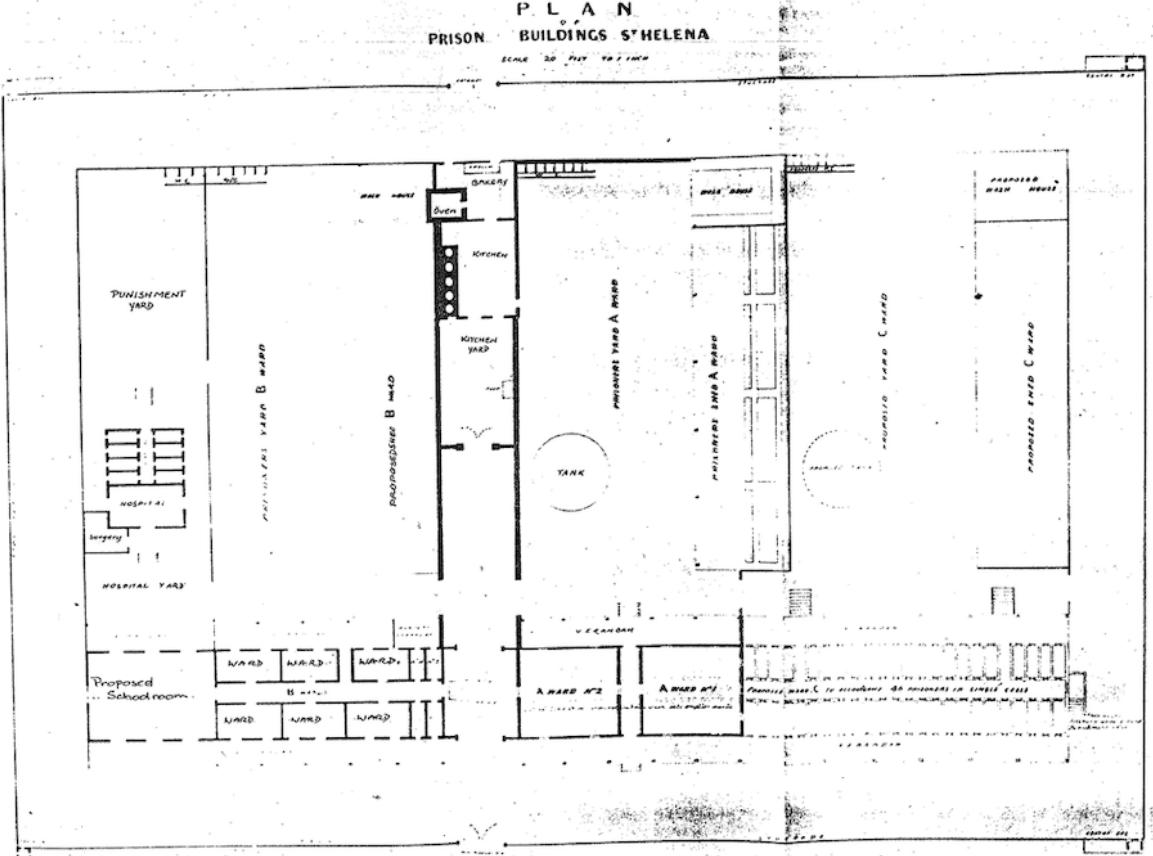
10 January 1871 Refusing to work. **Punishment:** 3 days' solitary confinement<sup>11</sup>

23 January 1871 Fighting. **Punishment:** Seven days' solitary confinement.<sup>11</sup>

27 February 1871 Making a noise in cell. **Punishment:** To Be placed in a cell by himself at night. VJ<sup>10</sup>

1 May 1871 Disobedience of orders. **Punishment:** Admonished VJ<sup>10</sup>

15 May 1871 Making frivolous complaints. **Punishment:** Indulgences stopped till further orders. VJ and JP Hobb.<sup>10</sup>



Prison Stockade plan of 1869. James McPherson's escape attempt meant rushing from the large yard out the main gate at the centre of the fence on the bottom, opposite the kitchen.

Life inside the prison it seems was not something that James found easy to adjust to or to accept. An adventurous, spirited man, James felt keenly the close walls of the prison:

### St Helena

*"How wretched are they who are shut up in prison;  
lying unhappy in the dark night and reflecting on the past life?  
This is life; alas, unhappy me!  
What the future has in store, I do not know.  
But this time to me is an eternity.  
I would rather be tortured than live such a life for twenty years."*

This poem was written by James McPherson at St Helena Island. Poetry and foreign languages had always been something that James had excelled in and had loved, being an educated man. It was reported that on arrival from Scotland in 1855, James and his brother worked at Cressbrook station,<sup>1</sup> where 12 year old James and his brother were sent to a hut by themselves as shepherds. In this hut he learnt to speak German by a native German man at the hut.<sup>2</sup> This was not the only language, as it is said that while in prison, James learnt to speak more languages including Spanish, Italian, Hebrew and Latin.

He also wrote 19 poems on St Helena Island. His most epic ode paid homage to the vast hoardes of mosquitoes that mercilessly preyed upon the prisoners. Hear the full poem spoken by Ranger Daley Donnelly. You're in for a treat!

2 sentences of 25 years gaol, served concurrently, for Mail Robbery must have felt impossible for James to conceive. But he was lucky as he knew the right people in the right places, as evidenced by a petition for his release signed by certain members of both houses of Parliament, Clergy, Justices of the Peace and others.<sup>11</sup>

James was discharged 22 Dec 1874 after serving 8 years and 3.5 months. Mr W Brown, Visiting Justice stated: "During the time on the island, his conduct with one exception has been remarkably good when in jail. I believe the prisoner to be thoroughly reformed..."<sup>11</sup> Certainly great leniency was shown towards James, for serving such a short sentence.



James McPherson at a later date, State Library of Queensland

But the gesture it was not ill placed, as on his release, James never went back to bushranging. In 1878, he eloped with 17 year old Elizabeth and had 7 children while working as a stockman, a drover, and a stonemason. James died on the 23rd July 1895 after falling from a horse at Burketown, where he is buried.<sup>1</sup> fondly remembered for his generosity, fearlessness, and endurance.

The town of Gin Gin continues to remember James McPherson's presence in the area, with 'The Wild Scotchman' markets, statue and a large festival annually in March.

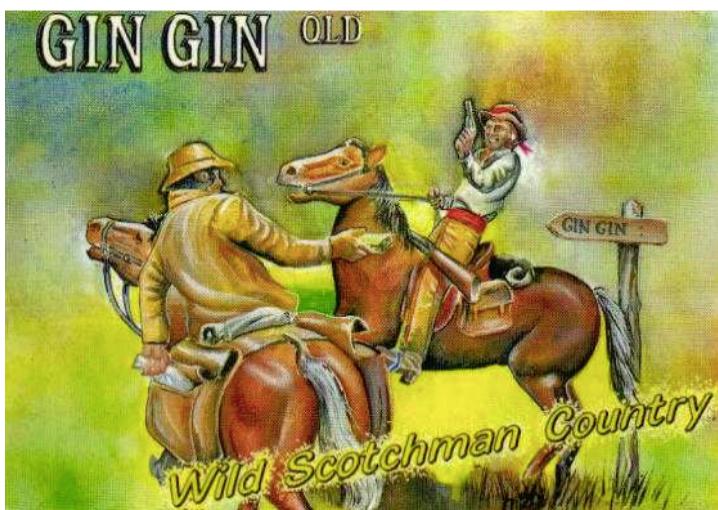


Image from the Gin Gin and District Historical Society website