

THE WILD SCOTCHMAN FESTIVAL



QUEENSLAND'S ONLY BUSHRANGER

Annually, around the end of March, the Kolan Shire celebrates a piece of their history with the Wild Scotchman Festival. 'Queensland's only bushranger'¹, James McPherson (aka the Wild Scotchman), was captured on Monduran Station, outside Gin Gin, on 30 March 1866.

'SCOTCHMAN' OR 'SCOTSMAN'

While many have said that 'Scotchman' is incorrect, this spelling is used by festival organisers because it is how James McPherson signed his own name in a letter he wrote to the Burnett Argus in 1865.

FESTIVAL BEGINNINGS

The Festival was developed to promote the Kolan Shire by the Gin Gin and District Historical Society and the Gin Gin Business and Tourism Council. The first Wild Scotchman Festival was held in 1990. It was held in April that year to coincide with Queensland Heritage Week. However, the following year it was moved to the end of March to coincide with the anniversary of the bushranger's capture.

to participate in the festival. In 1991, 42 descendants took part in a 'reunion' barbecue at the Gin Gin Historical Museum.

Mrs Edna McPherson Sabato of Maryborough, the Wild Scotchman's great-great niece, regularly attends the festival. In 2000 she suggested that Scottish McPherson clan chief, Sir William Alan McPherson, combine a trip to Australia with the festival. He and his wife Lady



The Festival has been held as both a weekend and week-long celebration. In its inaugural year, it was the Wild Scotchman Week, and events included a golf carnival, Gin Gin Pony Club display, SES display, flea market, fun run, and a re-enactment of the Wild Scotchman's capture. Through the years events have variously been held in Gin Gin, at Monduran Station (where there is a plaque commemorating the capture), and at Gin Gin Station.

DESCENDANTS

While it is not believed that any descendants of James McPherson currently reside in Gin Gin, many descendants have travelled to Gin Gin over the years

McPherson attended the festival and were very impressed with the activities and the people they met – many of them McPherson clan members.

RECENT FESTIVALS

In more recent years the traditions have continued with a weekend of activities which the whole family can enjoy. The Festival has expanded to include as many community groups as possible, and displays and activities over the last few years have included highland dancing, cloggers, horse sports, art competitions, the Gympie Lighthouse, and a Scottish band. And, has become one of the main highlights, the capture of the Wild Scotchman is



Above: James McPherson

re-enacted, much to the crowd's delight.

THE WILD SCOTCHMAN

James McPherson was born on 27 August 1841 in Scotland. The McPherson family emigrated to Australia, landing in Brisbane in

January 1855. They initially settled on Cressbrook Station and it was here James began to learn horsemanship and gunmanship.

Well-educated and very literate, the 18 year old James was apprenticed to the builder John Petrie, who in 1859 became Brisbane's first Mayor. McPherson was also active in the local Debating Society and was a member of the Municipal Library.

Apparently unhappy in his apprenticeship, he suddenly left this employment to take up shearing in North Queensland with two mates. After being refused payment, they left the Station and held up a hotel near Bowen in March 1864. The Publican was accidentally shot in the face by McPherson.

MCPHERSON'S WIT

He was eventually captured in New South Wales and extradited to Queensland but escaped by jumping ship in Mackay. After his escape he made his way through Queensland and began robbing the mail. McPherson was polite and conversant during these incidents and was renowned for not being violent.

On 27 November 1865 McPherson held up the Gayndah-Maryborough mail twice. Gayndah police caught up with him the next day but the Wild Scotchman laughed and continued on his way.

After reading an account of his exploits in the Burnett Argus, McPherson wrote to the paper to put forth his own views. He said, rather wittily, of Policeman Bligh: *"...the chance which he had of my capture arose from a sudden fit of generosity on my part, as from the shaking, oscillating tendency of his knees and the pallor of his countenance, I thought he had been suddenly attacked with the fever and ague."*²

McPherson didn't confine his literary expression to letters to the editor. He was also a poet. During his time in prison and up until the time of his death McPherson wrote poetry. Many of his poems were printed in the Charters Towers newspaper The Eagle under the name "Poor Jim". McPherson was also apparently set to pen his life story for The Eagle but passed away before this was completed. Some of his poems may be found on the Wild Scotchman web site (see reference at the end of this article).

CAPTURE AT MONDURAN STATION

The Wild Scotchman was around Gin Gin Station on 30 March 1866. He was looking for fresh horses (which he didn't find) and an opportunity to rob the mail. Somewhat audaciously, he went up to the homestead to ask when the mail would be passing through and how far it was to Kolonga (west of Monduran).

McPherson then headed towards Monduran. As those at Gin Gin had recognised him, one of the Station's stockmen escorted the mail to Monduran in order to warn others. The Monduran Superintendent gathered a party to pursue the bushranger. They caught up with him and McPherson tried to outrun them, but his horse was too fatigued. Overnight he was chained to a tree outside the homestead. The next morning McPherson was taken to Gin Gin Station to await the arrival of police from Maryborough.

At his trial he was found guilty of two counts of robbery under arms. The sentence imposed was 25 years in prison which he was to serve on St Helena Island, Moreton Bay. McPherson once attempted escape, but it was unsuccessful, and it wasn't until a petition was sent to the Governor that he was released from prison on 22 December 1874 after serving 8 years.

POST BUSHRANGING YEARS

Upon his release McPherson worked as a stockman. He met his wife Elizabeth Ann Hoszfeldt and they married on 21 December 1878. They moved to Hughenden and then Burketown and had seven children (one of whom died in

infancy). He was well-regarded despite the locals knowing of his past.

Soon after attending the funeral of a friend on 20 July 1895, McPherson fell from his horse which then landed on top of him. He suffered a fractured skull and internal injuries and never regained consciousness. James McPherson, the Wild Scotchman, died on 23 July 1895, and was buried in an unmarked grave in Burketown cemetery.

Peta Browne

- Bundaberg Library

Many thanks to Monika Longbottom and Barry Johnson for sharing information and photos for this article.

Keep an eye on local media for the dates of future festivals.

References:

¹*Bundaberg News Mail*, 21 Apr 1990.

² <http://www.sabatech.net/Scotchman/ArgusLet.html>

<http://www.sabatech.net/Scotchman/ws-wspoem.html>

McCarthy, P. H. 1975. *The Wild Scotsman*. *Bundaberg News Mail*, various issues, 1990-2006.

