

Mary Ann Bugg – “Captain Thunderbolt’s Lady.”

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from an article written in 1998 by Andrew Stackpool

There were two “female bushrangers” in Australia, Mary Ann, wife, & chief lieutenant of Fred Ward and “Black Mary”, companion of Michael Howe, notorious bushranger in Tasmania in the early 1800’s. While much is made of and written about the partners of the other bushrangers, little is recorded on the life of our female bushrangers. In the case of Mary Ann, she is responsible for Fred Ward being at large for so long. Her distinct femininity and her Aboriginal heritage were probably the reason for Fred’s dislike of using firearms. She certainly taught him to read and write, and her skills developed, as part of her aboriginality, served them both well in their life in the bush. The blending of Aboriginal and European features in Mary Ann created a remarkable beauty, which was commented on many times during her career.



Mary Anne Bugg's niece (nee Bugg)

Mary Ann Bugg was born near Gloucester/Stroud in New South Wales. Her father was a shepherd named James Brigg (who subsequently changed his name to Bugg). He was born in Essex in England in 1801 and on 18 July 1825 was transported for life for stealing meat. He arrived in Sydney on the ship “SESOSTRIS” on 26 March 1826 and on 15 January 1828 was assigned to the Australian Agricultural Company as Overseer of Shepherds. He was successful in his duties and in 1834 was granted a Ticket of Leave. This meant he was technically a free man who could own property but could not leave the Colony. He took up with an Aboriginal woman called Elizabeth and from this union was born Mary Ann and a brother named John. The children were baptised in the Church of England religion in 1839 & later they were sent to a boarding school in Sydney when Mary Ann was only 4 1/2 years old. Mary Ann learnt to read and write, sew, cook and other domestic skills. She had probably also been taught bushcraft and other Aboriginal skills by her mother during her early days in Stroud. James subsequently took up with another woman, Charlotte Derby, with whom he had a further 6 children. He married Charlotte in 1848 after their fifth child was born. Mary Ann returned to the property in 1845 and was employed in domestic chores. On 1st June 1846, at the age of 14 (and in common with many girls of the period), she married a shepherd named Edmund Baker and the couple moved to Mudgee. The couple were employed by a woman named Mrs. Sarah Ann Shepperd (nee Ward) the sister of Frederick Ward and his brother William.

The property, “Cooyal Station”, was known as the Garbutt property, being the name of her first husband. Mary would have met Ward at the property and possibly, some attraction was formed between them over the next few years. How far such attraction may have developed is not known, for in 1856 Ward and Garbutt were sentenced to Cockatoo Island prison for ten years for receiving stolen horses. They served only four years and were released on Tickets of Leave, returning to the Cooyal Station in July 1860. While Ward had been in jail Baker had died, so, after a short time, Mary Ann left Cooyal and moved back to Dungog where Fred Ward followed her. Mary Ann later claimed that, during this time, the same Wesleyan minister who had married her previously, married her again, although no Marriage Certificate has ever been found. Fred Ward had to attend regular muster at

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Mudgee Police Station. In October 1861, Ward borrowed a horse and returned to Mudgee to attend muster. When he arrived, he was arrested again, for arriving late for muster where he had been assigned, and for being in possession of a horse for which he could not prove ownership. He was returned to Cockatoo Island to serve the rest of his sentence plus a further three years for the second crime of stealing the horse. Two weeks after he was arrested Mary Ann gave birth to their first child, a girl named Marina Emily Ward.

The next few months are somewhat of a mystery, however, one account states Mary Ann placed her child in care as soon as Marina was weaned and then moved to Balmain (near Cockatoo Island) where she found employment as a housemaid under the name Louisa Mason. Folklore says that she frequently swam or went to the island with food for Ward and a file so he could cut through his chains. Whether or not this is true will never be known; however on 11th September 1863 Fred Ward and another prisoner named Fred Britten escaped by swimming to Balmain and it is believed Mary Ann assisted in this escape. The police were slow to admit of their escape as no one had ever escaped from Cockatoo Island before.

After being hidden for several days until the police search ceased, the men moved north, to be followed a few weeks later by Mary Ann. They were reported at Singleton in November and shortly afterwards robbed a hut near Uralla, of a firearm and food. Shortly afterward, both men parted company with Britten going to Victoria. Ward returned to the Hunter region to meet up with Mary Ann. There he held-up the Rutherford tollbar and thus began the “time of the bushranger Captain Thunderbolt.” Over the next 6 and a half years, he ranged from southern Queensland to the Hunter Valley, from Stroud near the coast, across the Liverpool Plains, west to Bourke and Mudgee and, for the last two years of his career, around Armidale and Uralla. It was south of Uralla at Kentucky Creek that Thunderbolt was finally chased, shot, and killed by Constable Alexander Binning Walker on 25 May 1870. Although there is still argument as to the real name of the person who was actually shot at Uralla. Was it Fred Wordsworth Ward or, as the members of his family claim, his brother William (Harry) Ward.

Despite having two children (and a third in March 1866) all evidence indicates that Mary Ann accompanied Ward and the gang on many of their depredations although she probably never carried any firearms as she had real dislike of them. Also, she seems to have been very adept at finding food and shelter for the gang in the mountainous terrain, in which they concentrated most of their activities, including catching and butchering stolen cattle. She also seems adept at going into townships undetected to obtain supplies or information about police and coach movements as well as the latest gossip. Several reports report her as looking like a young man wearing knee-length, Wellington boots, moleskin trousers, Crimean shirt, monkey jacket and a cabbage tree hat, the dress of the flash stockmen of the day (and at a time when women didn't wear men's clothing). Also, she rode astride and not sidesaddle. She was obviously a very intelligent and smart woman. She was also reported as being very attractive.

Although a half-caste she was only slightly darker of complexion than most countrywomen and had European looks rather than Aboriginal. Her weakness was that she fell in love with the wrong man but even there, she was proud of her association with Ward. On several occasions she referred to herself as the "Captain's Lady" and held her head high whenever she said so. Also, she was totally loyal to Ward. Despite her circumstances, including being on the run and hiding from the police, she endeavoured to spend as much time as she could with her children. This was to get her into trouble

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and she was arrested on three occasions and charged with vagrancy and receiving stolen goods. On one occasion Ward rescued her from a station where she was being held, while on another she served three months of a prison sentence before outcry in Parliament saw her released.

Mary Ann, daughter of James Bugg, and his wife Elizabeth, died of pneumonia on the Goulburn River west of Muswellbrook on 11 November 1867 soon after being taken to the house of a Mrs. Bradford. Mrs. Bradford had been approached by a grieving Ward who said the woman was to be found in a gunyah near by. The woman was dying and he asked if Mrs. Bradford could care for her or, if not, report the circumstances to the police. Mrs. Bradford subsequently found the woman and took her to her house but she died overnight. From birth records (BDM V1868 1400 161) she had a fourth child not long before her death, as a son Frederick Wordsworth Ward was registered in the “Tamworth Wesleyan Circuit” after her death in early 1868 to Frederick & Mary Ann Ward. This birth may have contributed to her death.

Soon afterwards, the newspapers were reporting that Louisa Mason, alias Yellow Long, had died of pneumonia.

Who was this woman? Was it Mary Ann who, knowing she was dying, had left her children, and rejoined Ward for a last few days, or weeks in the bush? Or was it indeed a new woman, Louisa Mason. Again, there are some strange coincidences. Mary Ann allegedly used the name Louisa Mason during the time she was supposedly in Balmain preparing for Ward's escape from Cockatoo Island. She is believed to have used other aliases from time to time and may have also been known as Yellow Long. Whatever the truth, with her passing Australia's colonial history lost another extraordinary person. She was a clever and talented individual, spirited, perhaps a bit of a larrikin, a mother and a loyal partner. The sort of person that colonial Australia of the 1860s needed, and possibly ahead of her time. She may be criticised for her willing involvement with one of Australia's most notorious villains but she is not the first or last woman who may be 'guilty' of letting her heart rule her head. At least with Ward she was given the opportunity to show her spirit and determination at a time when most women were subjugated to a life of raising kids and crops. To quote Patrick White, "it is questionable if ever a bushranger had a mate more serviceable or devoted." Let us remember her for the free spirit she was the many fine qualities she displayed and the hope that her life was happy and her death quick and painless. Let us also hope that her descendants remain true to her memory.

Barry Sinclair(barrymor@tpgi.com.au)
Captain Thunderbolt Family Historian and Researcher

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