A BUSHRANGING INCIDENT AT GYMPIE, 1869

by Craig Edgman

When bushranging is mentioned in a Queensland context at all, it is most often a solitary reference to James McPherson, *The Wild Scotchman*. The assumption which frequently follows is that McPherson was our *only* highwayman. However, this Caledonian delinquent was simply one among scores of individuals who, with varying degrees of success, tried their hands at robbery under arms in this state. In fact, the Wild Scotchman had been in custody eighteen months when the opening of the Gympie goldfields late in 1867 acted as the catalyst for one of the most active bushranging periods in Queensland’s history. In the short time I have available this morning, it would not profit me to attempt an overview even of this specific outbreak. Rather, since my brief is equally to entertain as well as inform, I would like to recount one particularly dramatic holdup which may serve to highlight that the Wild Colonial Boys had their day in Queensland too.

The mail was a favoured target for bushrangers. The Cobb and Co. coach which departed Gympie for Brisbane on Wednesday morning the 6th of January 1869 was especially tempting. In addition to the mails it numbered among its passengers several of that town’s businessmen and William Selwyn King, erstwhile manager of the Kilkivan branch of the Bank of New South Wales. The latter was carrying 2,000 pounds in half notes for delivery to the Sydney Head Office. The evening before the coach’s departure, 5 to 1 odds were being offered around town on the likelihood of its being “stuck-up”.

The coach had travelled only five miles that morning and was ascending a rise when an armed and masked man rushed from cover into the road ten yards ahead of the team and, in a distinctive Irish accent, ordered the driver to bail up. Simultaneously another armed bushranger materialised behind the coach and issued a similar command. Covered by a revolver and a double-barrelled gun, the coachman felt compelled to comply.

Unexpected resistance was to come from within the coach however. Selwyn King, the bank manager, was also armed with an impressive Tranter revolver and not inclined to surrender meekly. He immediately fired at the leading bushranger who staggered momentarily as if wounded before recovering himself and replying with a volley of three shots. The first of these wounded the passenger to Selwyn King’s right,
David Walker, passing through his wrist. The second whistled through the cabin harmlessly, though so close to Selwyn King’s head that he reported later he had smelt its passage. The third lodged in the frame of the coach where it was later recovered. Further resistance at this point would have been foolhardy, and the passengers prepared to disembark at the agitated bushrangers’ commands.

First out of the coach was Joseph Freeston, a Gympie businessman. Understandably anxious at the reception he might receive at the hands of his captors, Freeston emerged denying responsibility for having fired the offending shot. Selwyn King would later allege that Freeston went further and specifically identified him as the one who fired, though this would be vehemently denied by the accused. Less affected by the gravity of the situation was another passenger, Henry Smith, who had boarded the coach merrily drunk. He greeted the bushrangers with approving smiles and quipped about the inexpert shooting he had witnessed. Richard Dwyer presented a more stolid demeanour when his turn came to leave the cabin. By all accounts he surrendered to his misfortune without comment. The stricken Walker remonstrated angrily with his persecutors as he alighted from the coach. Indicating his arm he demanded, ‘Look here you wretches, see what you have done.’ His protest elicited no sympathy, however, and an order to ‘stand off, and pull out your pockets’ was his sorry consolation.

Selwyn King was the last to disembark. It reflects some credit on the bushrangers that they made no attempt to molest their provocator beyond the predictable demand to surrender his cash and valuables. In a remarkable oversight, neither of the coach robbers made any attempt to disarm their captive. Maintaining an admirable presence of mind, the bank manager contrived to conceal his revolver beneath the tails of his shirt.

With their watches and cash confiscated, the passengers’ presence was no longer required. They were directed to a log some ten yards distant where the bushranger with the gun mounted a guard. The other directed his attentions to the remaining passenger, Gympie storekeeper Thomas King, who occupied the box seat beside the coachman.

At this point in the proceedings, the inebriated Smith rose from his seat on the log and casually, though perhaps not elegantly, swung his coat over his shoulder. This unexpected movement distracted the robber on guard duty, allowing the indefatigable Selwyn King time to retrieve his pistol for another affray with his captors.

The banker vaulted the log, ran himself into a more favourable position, then turned and fired two shots, this time at the bushranger with the double-barrelled gun. The first charge evidently found its mark, for the man faltered, exclaiming, ‘Oh you bloody dog’, and loosed his grip on his firearm. Selwyn King fired twice more to cover
his retreat (the final shot misfiring) then dashed for the safety of the scrub.

Wounded and doubtless exasperated by such determined resistance, the two desperadoes evidently decided they had had enough of the stick-up game for one day. Vowing revenge, they ordered the passengers back into the coach and commanded it to drive on. The mail and other valuables among the luggage were not touched and the coach departed to the strains of a bushranging song struck up by the still stonkered Henry Smith. The sum of the bushrangers' booty amounted to £24 in cash, some gold and two watches.

Selwyn King rejoined the coach at the Seven-Mile shanty, and the alarm was soon raised. The bushrangers, despite being wounded, managed to evade the immediate efforts of the police to capture them. A week later, however, Sergeant Matthew Collopy of the Gympie police happened upon a man named William Bond camped in the bush three miles from town and suffering from a bullet wound. Arrested and subsequently identified as one of the coach robbers by his distinctive voice, Bond received the exemplary sentence of 20 years hard labour and fifty lashes.

William Selwyn King was feted as a hero by the townsfolk of Gympie, officially thanked by the Queensland Government, and presented with a gold watch by his grateful employers.5 Of Bond's accomplice no trace was found, though suspicion rested on a notorious young horse-thief named George Palmer.6 His next attempt at bushranging would result in murder, and for this crime the law exacted upon him its ultimate penalty. He was hanged at Rockhampton Gaol in November of 1869.

NOTES

References
1. Gympie Times, January 14, 1869.
2. Except where otherwise acknowledged, these events have been reconstructed from evidence presented at trial and committal hearings as reported in the Gympie Times of January 16, 1869 and January 23, 1869, and the Maryborough Chronicle of October 26, 1869, and from the Gympie Times January 7 report of of the hold-up quoted in the Cleveland Bay Express, January 30, 1869.