

Richard ‘Long Mick’ Ennis part two: the Sturgeon murder

One blustery afternoon in July 1856, a party of constables were scouring the bush around Antill Ponds in quest of two men who the day before had committed an armed robbery on the local postmaster, Charles Drabble. The constables didn't find the bushrangers, but they did find something else – the bleeding corpse of George Sturgeon, a prosperous local farmer, who had been shot in the head in the afternoon of 17 July 1856, leaving a wife and small children to mourn his loss.

Police immediately connected the armed robbery with the murder, and on that basis set about finding two (later three) bushrangers. According to newspaper accounts published a few days later:

“there is little doubt of them having been the same men who committed the robbery at Drabble’s, joined by a third man, at present unknown”¹

As is sometimes the case with flawed police investigations, an early error made by police contaminated the entire course of the investigation. That error was the insistence that the men who robbed Drabble must be the same men who murdered Sturgeon. At first glance, this seems reasonable; the murder occurred within 24 hours of the robbery, the robbers were known to be armed and heading towards the scene of the murder, and there was some (limited) evidence to suggest that the gun stolen from Charles Drabble may have been the murder weapon. But, the investigating constables failed to recognise that the murder may well have been unconnected to the robbery.

So, justified or not, police set about finding their highwaymen, and soon found many more than they actually needed. At first, suspicion fell on two notorious bushrangers, Joseph Gownlock and George Damper². Both men were former inmates on Norfolk Island; in fact, the recent release of a number of former Norfolk Island men onto Van Diemen's Land was causing a considerable stir in the press, with locals predicting crime and pandemonium. Thus, when Gownlock and Damper were identified as suspects within days of the murder, the public were well primed to believe them guilty.

¹ *The Courier*, 19 July 1856 p3

² *Launceston Examiner*, 22 July 1856 p3



Roadside memorial on the site of George Sturgeon's murder (Gravesites of Tasmania)

Gownlock was captured at Sandhill about a week after the murder, and remanded to Oatlands for examination;³ Damper had been captured a few days prior at Franklin Village near Huonville, and like Gownlock, remanded for examination⁴. Both were former Norfolk Island inmates, both had been convicted twice. But despite initial enthusiasm for Gownlock and Damper as potential culprits, they were discharged on the suspicion of murder.

The following week, William Ashlow, Jonathon Sutcliffe and **Thomas Knibbs** (remember that name) were also remanded to the Oatlands Gaol on suspicion of the 'wilful murder of George Sturgeon'⁵; the next week, another man, Thomas Ware, was remanded on the same charges. All four were discharged. So, by this stage, six men had been remanded on suspicion of murdering George Sturgeon, and all six had been discharged. Things were perhaps not helped by the Oatlands Protection Association publishing a reward of £30 for the apprehension of the murder and thus stoking an already frenzied community reaction to the murder⁶.

Things became even more confusing in August 1856, when a confidential informant approached a police magistrate in Hobart Town with details of the murder. According to this unknown informer, Sturgeon had been murdered by three men – one of average height and nondescript appearance, one very tall man with prominent cheekbones known as 'Tall Mickey', and a third man of average height who had two moles on his face and had served with the Lancers⁷. Police Magistrate Frederick Burgess published this information and offered a reward of £100 and a Conditional Pardon to anyone who could provide information leading to a conviction⁸.

Soon after, police at Port Sorell arrested a man named John Horrigan, alias James Richardson, alias 'Tall Mickey'. Richardson was remanded to the Hobart Police Office, where it soon became clear that the only incriminating evidence against Richardson was his nickname, Tall Mickey. The search went on.

Next on the list to be accused of the murder was one Abraham Boothroyd⁹, who, like everyone else before him, was soon discharged (he was in fact the eighth man to be charged and discharged). In December 1856, with the public growing restless over the failure to find the murderer, Mr Burbury of Oatlands announced an additional reward of £200¹⁰. This meant that there was now a staggering £230 (and a conditional pardon) available to anyone who could identify the murderer(s). Not surprisingly, the high level of interest in the case soon produced another suspect, Dennis Doherty. In January 1857, Doherty was remanded to the Oatlands Gaol to face trial for the wilful murder of George Sturgeon¹¹. Arguably Doherty was the most likely suspect yet; he fit the description of one of the men – same height, and had been in the army.

³ *Portland Guardian and Normanby General Advertiser* 30 July 1856 p3

⁴ *Launceston Examiner* 22 July 1856 p3

⁵ TAHO LC390/1/1

⁶ *The Courier* 23 July 1856 p3

⁷ *The Courier* 23 August 1856 p3

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Colonial Times* 28 February 1857 p2

¹⁰ *The Courier* 15 December 1856 p2

¹¹ *Tasmanian Daily News*, 8 January 1857 p2

Further, he had been identified by one of the victims of the associated robberies, James Knibbs, who saw Doherty in the Oatlands Gaol and identified him as one of the robbers. (Noting that, as we shall see later, Knibbs may not have been the most reliable witness). Although acquitted of the charge of murder, Dennis Doherty's trial provides the most comprehensive account of the evidence around Sturgeon's murder, thus it is to that trial which we shall now turn.

Murder trial number one: Dennis Doherty

On the morning of Saturday 25 July 1857, His Honour Sir Valentine Fleming once again donned his robes and made a stately appearance at the Judge's Bench in the Oatlands Supreme Court House for the trial of Dennis Doherty, accused of the murder of George Sturgeon. At this stage, authorities knew there was a third man involved, but nobody seemed to know who this mystery man was. So, not wanting to leave a murder unpunished, the court proceeded with trying Doherty for the murder.

As successive witnesses were called, a picture emerged of the day of the murder. Around midday, three armed men turned up at James Knibbs' hut: a short man, a tall man, and a third man who got no description at all. The short man ordered Knibbs out of the hut with the phrase 'old bugger, you are no good'. Knibbs noticed that this man was wielding a weapon which he knew to belong to Charles Drabble, the postmaster who had been robbed the day before. The armed men ransacked the hut and finally left as the sun was beginning to set. Knibbs noted that they left with four loaded guns, having spotted a hawker's cart off in the distance. The short man ordered Knibbs and his wife Mary Ann back into the hut, there to remain two hours or else 'they might come back and shoot us'. Knibbs very sensibly followed this order, despite having noticed the armed men taking off in the direction of Antill Ponds. The gang left as they had arrived – in a cart, a fact which would soon become highly significant.

William Bakewell, a timber getter working in the Western Tiers, also had the pleasure of meeting this armed gang. Bakewell's introduction occurred about a week earlier, following which he ran into them again the day before Sturgeon's murder. Bakewell was able to give a description of both Doherty and the mystery man, whom Bakewell remembered as "a tall man standing 6 feet 1 inches, wearing a Jim Crow hat", and that all three were heading towards Antill Ponds, soon to be the scene of the crime.



(Top) Dennis Doherty photographed late in life at Port Arthur (State Library of Tasmania)
(Bottom) Sir Valentine Fleming, Judge in the murder trial of Dennis Doherty (TAHO)

The fact of the murder was first discovered by William Lodge, who resided at nearby Lowe's Park. On the afternoon of the 17th July, Lodge saw George Sturgeon leave Lowes Park at about one o'clock; driving a cart in the direction of Kitty's Corners. The following day, Lodge was driving three sheep in the same direction when his dog began growling; Lodge kept going but the dog became even more agitated. Finally, at about four in the afternoon, Lodge noticed a log of wood on the side of the road. On closer examination, it turned out to be the body of George Sturgeon.

Lodge noticed several things immediately. Firstly, looking at Sturgeon's face, he noticed that 'blood had run from his left temple into his mouth' (at the inquest that followed, Dr Doughty told of extracting a piece of lead from Sturgeon's brain that produced 'a mortal wound which caused instant death'). Secondly, Lodge noticed wheel ruts in the ground and clear signs of a cart having turned around – in fact, a cart of the same description as that driven by Dennis Doherty and his armed companions just hours before.



The Halfway House Inn, Antill Ponds, where Sturgeon's body was taken for inquest (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

The constables called to the scene included long-serving Oatlands Chief District Constable Michael Quinlan (of whom more below), and Constable John Wiltshire. Quinlan and Wiltshire conducted a careful examination of the scene and found a number of clues. Wiltshire discovered nearby a double barrelled pistol, and wadding of the type used in loading the gun. Further down the road, tracks were found which led in the direction of Lowes Park.

Thus stood the case for the prosecution. Mr Macdowell, Doherty's very able barrister pointed the jury to the many inconsistencies in the case, calling two witnesses who had been visited by the gang and who swore that Doherty was not among them. In fact, if anyone was incriminated by the evidence obtained at trial, it wasn't Doherty so much as the mysterious third man, described by one witness as 'a tall, rawboned man with dark hair and whiskers', by another as being 6 feet 1 inches tall. This most certainly wasn't Dennis Doherty, who was acquitted of the murder, but convicted of other criminal assaults and sent to Norfolk Island.

All of which leads us to the obvious question – who was this tall, rawboned Irishman known as "Long Mick"? As we saw above, one man nicknamed 'Tall Mickey' had already been arrested and subsequently discharged; how many "Long Mick"s could there be? As it turned out, there was only one whom authorities took seriously for the murder, and it was none other than Richard 'Long Mick' Ennis.

From the available evidence, it seems to be the case that there were only two reasons for charging Ennis with the murder. Firstly, his unfortunate nickname, which the unknown informant had supplied to authorities as one of the murderers. And secondly, there was Long Mick himself, who – so say the constables – had incriminated himself at the time of his arrest. Not much to hang a murder case on, but that's exactly what happened.

Having failed to convict Dennis Doherty on the murder charge, police then charged Long Mick with the murder, arranging a trial for September 1857, the next available sitting after the failed trial of Dennis Doherty on the same charge. Sadly, no detailed record of Long Mick's trial has survived, other than the verdict – Guilty.

And the sentence? To be hanged, dissected, and anatomised.....

Stay tuned for part three – who really dunnit, why, and did they really "dissect and anatomise' Long Mick?