A SKELETON IN THE SAND

I

A skull and a number of human bones were discovered last week on Bellambi Point, by Mr. Zolliner, a gentleman staying at the Queen’s Hotel, while out walking. When found, the upper portion of the skull was protruding from the sand. After removing the skull, Mr. Zolliner searched for other portions of the human anatomy, and found most of the larger limb bones and portions of the shoulder bones. The bones show signs of great age exposure. The teeth of the skull were perfect, with the exception of one of the incisors, which was missing, and appeared to have been so for years, probably ever since the dissolution of the spirit from the body, which may have taken place 50 or 60 years ago, judging from the appearance of the bones. All the teeth are rather well preserved, and show no signs of decay before death. The ossiferous enamel on the skull and accompanying bones has been entirely removed, so that the remains are rather scaly and brittle. Of course, the discovery and the smack of sensation it carries with it has been a fruitful theme for conjectures, but from its manifest antiquity, and from the formation of the cranium, its shallowness and narrowness, and the soundness of the teeth, the supposition that these remains are those of an aborigine are the most acceptable. All the incisor teeth have been lost since the discovery, but the molars remain intact. The fact that a single front tooth was missing when removed from the sand might argue in favor of the hypothesis that the remains are those of a black, as it is understood to have been a traditional custom amongst the blacks to knock out one of the front teeth, as a mark of fellowship or a caste distinction, which was performed at a certain age, and admitted the subject to certain rights and privileges. The remains are exhibited in the bar of the Queen’s Hotel.

—Illawarra Mercury, 30 January 1890.

II

The human skull and other bones found at Bellambi Point some days ago have proved a book-mark in history’s page. Two old residents have turned up the pages from memory’s record, to episodes which they connect with the discovered remains, and the result, though corresponding in a slight degree, differs in many points of detail. As there is invariably something of interest, and at times something of awe in the unearthing of human bones, the statements of two old residents of this district regarding the discovery may not be uninteresting. Mr. A. Stewart, who is residing with his son-in-law Mr. James Kirby, Crown-street, says he is of opinion the remains were those of a bushranger, who was shot by a man named James Garratty, in 1828. The bushranger was an assigned servant to a person named Clayton, who lived at Appin. He having escaped from his master, appeared at intervals in this district, associated with a band of brigands. On one occasion they called on a settler named M’Cauley, and appropriated a musket; with this in their possession, they proceeded to the home of Pat and James Garratty. The latter was standing in the doorway of the domicile, and held his finger up as a warning to the leader, who was advancing towards them. The bushranger fired, but fortunately the missile only removed the finger Garratty at that moment held up in warning. Immediately the brother, Pat, fired, killing the bushranger, and the gang fled instantly. At that time, there were no police in this district and no
magistrates, so the Garratty’s were forced to journey as far as Appin to inform the police of the adventure and death of the bushranger. The police buried the body in a mound of sand, not far removed from the scene of the victim’s death. The spot where the burial took place was between Bellambi and a small perminence to the north of it, known as M’Cauley’s point.

Mr. F. R. Cole, Customs Officer at Wollongong, who has a very early experience of this district, and has an unwritten history at his finger ends, thinks the remains (if of a white man) are those of the victim of a tragedy committed some fifty years ago by a man named M’Lachlan. The details are at variance somewhat with those given by Mr. Stewart in the former narrative, and if the names have not been forgotten or the occurrences misplaced by our informants during the long lapse of time, it is very manifest two deaths and two interments must have taken place almost coincidentally. The victim referred to was a young man, whose name is forgotten, and who joined M’Allister’s gang, a lawless band of men, carrying on their depredations in this and the Cowpasture (now Camden) district upwards of 50 years ago. M’Allister, who owned a farm at Appin, was the captain of the gang and under cover of an informer to the police, assisted the gang in evading justice for many years. M’Lachlan, who was the perpetrator of the crime, was also a member of the gang. He is described as a man of murderous proclivities, and having conceived the notion that his victim and confederate was but a spy to their actions, he lost no time in sending him to his last account. The body was buried in sand at Bellambi Point by members of the gang, and it is averred that much displeasure was shown by several of them at M’Lachlan’s crime, but as he was a desperado of the truest type, fearless and decisive, they were afraid and unwilling to take exception to his cold-blooded crime. M’Lachlan, at the time under notice, owned a farm at the Cabbage Tree, and, of course, will be remembered by the older residents, as many years after the gang had been broken up by capture and settlement, he spent the remainder of his days there in comparative peace.

—Illawarra Mercury, 6 February 1890.

1. Later the Queen’s Hall Flats in Market Square, next door but one to the Museum.
2. Spelt Geraghty in Pat’s obituary notice, and Gerraty in Alexander Stewart’s reminiscences.
3. Alexander Stewart in his reminiscences said the bushrangers “went to Peggy McGawley’s.”
4. According to Alexander Stewart’s reminiscences, it was Pat who was wounded, and James who shot the bushranger—as indeed this account says a few lines above. Pat’s obituary notice did not mention James’s part in the battle at all.
5. Alexander Stewart said “The dead bushranger was afterwards buried in sand at the corner of Peggy McGawley’s point, which is the first point on the beach north of where the Bellambi jetties now (1894) are.” In his Reminiscences he reaffirmed that the bones found in the sand were those of the bushranger shot by James Gerraty.
6. I have seen no reference elsewhere to these Highland caterans; but this incident can hardly, by any stretch of the imagination, be the same as that referred to by Stewart.

—Ed.