

# JAMES MCKEOWN

## FROM FACT TO FOLKLORE TO LEGEND TO FABLE...AND BACK AGAIN!

### Part 1

– Dr. Dan Catchpole\*

It is well known that all 'historical facts' about Jenolan Caves have been passed on from guide to guide over the years. In this manner, much of what is spoken by guides about Jenolan's early history is considered 'folk lore' or 'legend', principally as most have never actually seen any original documents from those years.

In typical fashion, the story of the first Europeans to enter the arches and caves, James and Charles Whalan, following their attempt to hunt down the 'notorious bushranger' James McKeown somewhere around the late 1830s, early 1840s, is generally told by guides as a piece of 'theatre' to entertain the tourists, or brushed over with a degree of skeptical uncertainty.

The first Jenolan guides to tell this story were Charles Whalan and his family themselves. Indeed, all historical accounts, published and private, appear to emanate from the Whalan clan and those immediately associated with them. As the original guides were the actual reported captors of James McKeown, the story would have been relayed as factual eyewitness accounts, reliving the exciting day of his capture.

Over time, as the story was told and retold by many guides, the Whalan family became more distantly associated with the Caves and the eyewitnesses to the McKeown episode died, it appears to have taken on a more theatrical telling...

*'For several years this desperado carried on his depredations, retiring to the security in these, at that time, unvisited, mountain fastnesses. During the hunt for McEwan's den his pursuers saw the great black caverns, now called the Grand Arch and the Devils Coach-house.'*

(J.J. Foster, 'The Jenolan Caves, New South Wales', 1890, Pub: Charles Potter, Government Printer, Sydney).

However, as the telling of the story became entrenched as part of a guides 'script', the realities of the story were lost in time, relegating to being considered 'folklore'. Over time, historians and interested publicists tried to conduct 'research' so as find evidence of the account to back up what was spoken of by the guides, but with little success. Ward L. Harvard in 'The Romance of Jenolan Caves', (1933) states....

*'The problem is to determine just when and how white man first happened here. No authentic records are available, and our deductions, if we make them, are based upon tradition....and it is unbelievable that there is not extant and contemporary with it some record of their discovery'.*

Later books designed for tourist sales state openly that the story of McKeown is none but a 'romantic tale' to entertain the tourist.

*'There is no 'James McKeown' in contemporary court records and the first newspaper account appeared 50 years later in Charles Whalan's obituary in a Bathurst newspaper, not by itself convincing historical evidence'....*

(Julia Horne, 'Jenolan Caves, When the tourists came.', 19??)

Most recently, the very existence of James McKeown has even been brought into question.

*'Many believe that the bushranger McKeown did not exist. There is no clear record of McKeown's imprisonment at Hartley or Bathurst or his supposed transportation to Norfolk Island..'*

(Nigel Price, 'An Investigation of the European History of the Tuglow Caves Area prior to 1900.' 20 April 2007 – ([www.glenreef.com.au/EuropeanHistory.pdf](http://www.glenreef.com.au/EuropeanHistory.pdf)))

The very absence of tangible documentation relating to the McKeown account, even beyond the reports of eyewitness account published by the Whalan family, has caused many speculations about the veracity of what is commonly still used by Jenolan's guides as a history lesson during their tours of the caves.

So how complete has the research been? It appears that the skepticism relating to the McKeown story has not been built on their being tangible evidence which contradicts the story or specifically raises doubt about it. Rather, it's the absence of any records at all, which are independent of the Whalan accounts, which has led to the factual basis of the story being questioned.

The research that has been undertaken to date has neither proven that the story is true or false. Yet, this absence of information has caused some to extrapolate their own conclusions about what they considered to have 'really happened', such unsubstantiated statements being integrated into our telling of the story with the result that we move further away from the truth.

It needs to be born in mind that when researchers find 'nothing', they have not necessarily proven anything.

With the availability of information on the intranet, the chance of finding useful new information about McKeown will greatly increase.

Such a find was made through a website called [www.Ancestry.com.au](http://www.Ancestry.com.au) which has led me on an intriguing journey, gathering records and documents relating to a 'James McKeown (McKeon)' which I believe could well be the McKeown of Jenolan fame.

It is hoped that at the end of the journey, the truth of this man's life will be retold accurately, without bias or heresy and with veracity. Because, if you consider the story as told by the Whalans, James McKeown had one very interesting life!

Most early newspaper articles and tourist books indicate James Whalan is said to have captured James McKeown around 1838. Hence, are there any independently generated records of a James McKeown around Bathurst – Oberon – Lithgow – Hartley around the late 1830's?

Figure 1 shows a record from a 1846 ledger listing convicts following a 'muster', who were listed as having been on a ship called the Lady Franklin which 'returned in 1844'. This James McKeown was noted to have been tried in 'Bathurst NSW 1836' and sentenced to 'Life'. He had also received a 'TK of Leave' or ticket of leave, which gave him freedom to live and work in a given district, having served out his sentence time or receiving some suitable favor for good behavior etc.

A later document, from a similar muster in 1849, also lists James McKeown (number 13073) as arriving on the 'Lady Franklin in 1844 from Norfolk Island' (see Figure 2). The *Lady Franklin*

was a barque built by convicts at Port Arthur specifically for the transportation of convicts between Norfolk Island and Hobart (see Figure 3).

Interestingly, this record lists the 'Dates of Trial' for not only James McKeown's conviction which sent him to Norfolk, but also his original conviction which saw him transported in the first place.

It notes (Figure 4) that not only was he tried in 'NSWales 1836', but also was tried in 'Down 1824', that is County Down, Ireland. Note that his original sentence was for '7' year, the standard amount given, whilst 'lifers' required a further 8 years, making the total '15' which has been noted.

Knowing that this James McKeown originally came from County Down Ireland, further searching of the internet led me to the website for the County Down Museum, which fortunately provides an online database for convicts who had been transported from there to the colonies.

A brief scan of this database identified the following information...  
([http://www.downcountymuseum.com/prisoners\\_australia.aspx](http://www.downcountymuseum.com/prisoners_australia.aspx))

<b>Surname</b>	McKEOWN
<b>Forename</b>	James
<b>Alias</b>	McKEON
<b>DOB</b>	c1793
<b>Place of Trial</b>	Downpatrick
<b>Date of Trial</b>	24 Mar 1824
<b>Sentence</b>	7 years
<b>Native County</b>	Downpatrick
<b>Occupation</b>	Ploughs, shears
<b>Age</b>	32yrs
<b>Religion</b>	Catholic
<b>Crime</b>	Robbing houses of worship
<b>Ship</b>	Asia 1 (3)
<b>Departure Date</b>	Cork 29 Oct 1824
<b>Arrival Date</b>	21 Feb 1825
<b>Assigned to Work</b>	Parramatta. R.SMITH at South Creek.
<b>Certificate of Freedom</b>	31/260 34/1299
<b>District</b>	Bathurst

If this is the James McKeown of Jenolan history it corrects three pieces of information which have variously been quoted and misquoted in reports about him. Firstly, his name is spelt 'McKeown' not 'McEwan' (which is Scottish in origin!).

Secondly, for James McKeown to be tried in 1836, his capture by James Whalan would have been before then, making the discovery of the caves around 1836 or even 1835 as quoted in John L Horrocks's Handy Guide 'Jenolan Caves' chapter (Pub 51 Market St, Sydney, Year 1890+???)

Finally, indeed James McKeown was sent to Norfolk Island, but he did not die there as was stated in Fosters account (J.J. Foster, 'The Jenolan Caves, New South Wales', 1890, Pub: Charles Potter, Government Printer, Sydney) but returned to Australia which is more in keeping with the report in The Argus newspaper on 1899.

things. Of most importance, we need to determine what he was tried for which had him sent to Norfolk Island? Only by uncovering this information will we potentially find a link between him and the Whalans, and indeed Jenolan. Till the next exciting episode!

Whilst such leads are intriguing, before we can conclude that this James McKeown is the one of Jenolan fame, we need to verify many more

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Name	Where Tried and Date of Trial	Ship and Date of Arrival	Remarks
Michaels Charles <i>alias Cannichale</i>	Switzerland 1843 10	Equestrian 1843	3 <sup>rd</sup> Class Pass Mr Bradshaw New Norfolk
Masters Richard	Swiss 1843 7	Do	Mr Manners <i>Richmond</i>
McKeown James	Bathurst, N.S.W. 1844	Lady Franklin 1844	HP Please

Figure 1 – Extract from Convict Muster ledger of 1846. (Source: www.Ancestry.com.au)

No.	Name	Ship	Place & Date of Trial	Position
1298	Mc Donald James	Lady Franklin	Bathurst 1844	Free
	Knabberty James	Do	Do 14	Revised by Mr Macbride, Murrumbidgee
	McLure Jeremiah	Do	York 10	Free
	Wellington John	Do	Lancaster 1844	Second Partner
1303	McKeown James	Do	Swiss 1844	"

Figure 2 – Extract from Convict Muster ledger of 1849. (Source: www.Ancestry.com.au)



Figure 3 – Stamp from Norfolk Island illustrating the Lady Franklin.

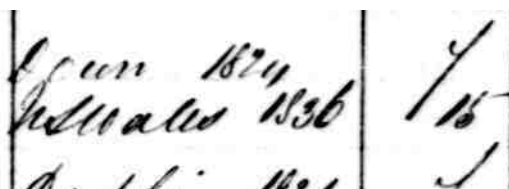


Figure 4 – Close up of 'Date and Place of Trial' column from Figure 2 above.