

Bushrangers at Timor Caves, New South Wales Australia

Part 2 – Jimmy Governor

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Part 1 of this article published in ACKMA Journal No 123, looked at the bushranger Fred Ward alias, “Captain Thunderbolt” and his signature dated 1865 in Main Cave at Timor NSW. Part 2 investigates the signature of outlaw Jimmy Governor dated 1899. Jimmy and his brother Joe along with Jacky Underwood are infamous after committing several brutal murders that quickly became known as the Breeelong Massacre.

The discovery of this outlaw’s signature raises questions about its authenticity. Is it possible that Jimmy visited or used this cave as a hideout? Is the date correct or was it a mistake? What previously documented sightings of his signature can be found?

“Jimmy Governor 1899” is written in black lead pencil on the wall in an obscure location well inside the cave and in the style of writing characteristic of the time. The signature was located by NHVSS members in 2007 (Argent 2007, Smith 2020).

So, what drove Jimmy and his two accomplices to become bushrangers/outlaws and what did they do during their reign of terror to have their names recorded in Australia’s history? What historic evidence can be found to substantiate authenticity of Jimmy’s signature? To set the scene let’s look at Jimmy’s life and whether he was in the Timor area during the year inscribed alongside his signature.



Jimmy Governor signature in Main Cave Timor - July 2020 - Photo by Garry K Smith

James (Jimmy) Governor (1875-1901)

Jimmy was born to a full-blood aboriginal father and a half-cast mother in 1875. He attended several schools: Gulgong, Denison Town, Leadville, Wollar, Coonabarabran and finally Allynbrook or Gresford in 1886. He was a bright student but was constantly taunted by the white students and adults (Daily Telegraph 13/8/1900)

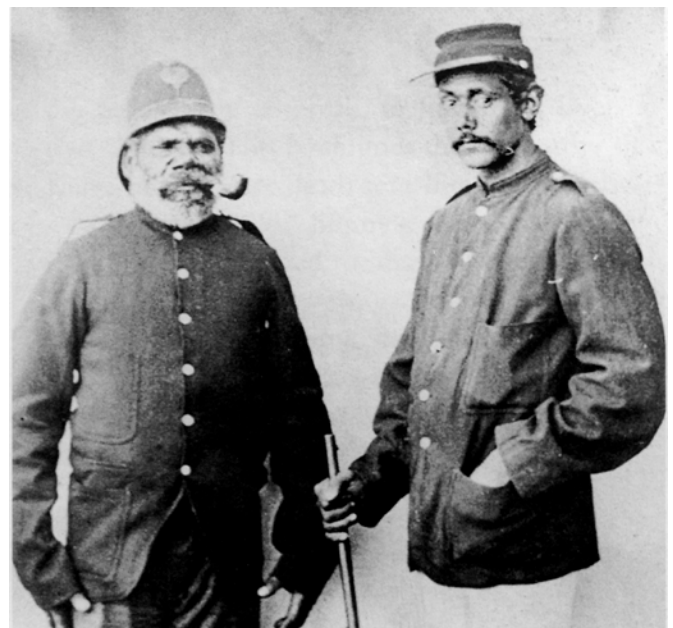
Young Jimmy was short for his age, good-looking and dark skinned with reddish hair (Walsh 1983). His father, Tommy was a hard worker and gained paid work in the European world, setting an example which Jimmy would follow. The family then moved to Leadville, east

of Dunedoo where Tommy discovered silver ore at Mt Stewart in 1887, which resulted in the opening of a mine a few years later. Tommy was given a horse, harness and cart as reward since aboriginals at the time had no citizenship rights and were not permitted to own land (Moore & Williams 2001). Soon after the family moved back to the Paterson River area, most likely Gresford in the Hunter Valley in 1888. On New Year’s Day 1890, a boy described as Tommy junior (most likely Jimmy, then aged 15) won the high jump at the Gresford Sports Day.

In 1890 the family moved to Singleton, where they lived in a tent at the “black’s camp” near St Clair, as described by a police officer’s report (Moore & Williams 2001). So besides being proficient at reading and writing through his education at school, Jimmy learnt the bush skills and traditional ways of his aboriginal heritage (Clune 1959). He became an excellent horse breaker, tracker, musterer, tree lopper and fencer. Work took him to many areas around the Hunter Valley and Central West NSW. “Increasingly, his employers refused to pay him, assuming as ‘a black’ that he should be satisfied with rations” (Moore & Williams 2001). He was a proud man stating at his trial for murder in 1900, “I always worked, and paid for what I got, and I recon I’m as good as a white man” (Moore & Williams 2001).

In the 1890’s the family moved back to the Gulgong-Wollar area, and they lived in the Aborigines’ camp at Wollar. Jimmy found conditions very difficult as spending time at “the Blacks’ camp only caused him humiliation and the streets of Gulgong, or any town, were constant reminders that they were his only by default ...so long as he was a quiet, good Black” (Davies 1979).

“In 1895 he turned 20, an adult who had been at work for five years and more. He was an educated white man; he was also an outcast half-caste” (Davies 1979). He was raised in two worlds and belonged to neither.



(L to R) Joe Button and Jimmy Governor - tracker at Cassilis Police Station 1896

At age 21, Jimmy presented himself at the Cassilis Police Station, and on the 15 July 1896 was sworn into the NSW Mounted Police Force as a blacktracker (Davies 1979). Initially proud of his new uniform and perceived status, he soon became very disgruntled at how he was treated as a blacktracker compared to white police and in December 1897, he quit the police force to move back to Gulgong with his family (Moore & Williams 2001).



Ethel Governor -
State Reference Library

Sometime during 1898, Jimmy met Ethel Page in Gulgong. Now aged 23, Jimmy had planned to marry 16yo Ethel at St Luke's Church of England, Gulgong on 10 December 1898. But in view of Ethel's advanced pregnancy (5 months) with their child, shame and nineteenth-century convention caused the ceremony to be transferred at the last minute to the church rectory (Davies 1979, Walsh 1983). Ethel had English parents who had both migrated to Australia. Interracial marriage was not considered socially acceptable at the time, particularly a dark skinned aboriginal like Jimmy, marrying Ethel, a white lady.

Ethel and their first child (Sidney born 9 April 1899)

stayed at the shack he inherited from his late father at Gulgong and his work as a horse breaker and fencer saw Jimmy and his brother Joe travelling to properties up to 100km and further from Gulgong. Jimmy was a hard worker and rarely if ever drank alcohol, but he was frequently taunted by racist comments and inequality, hence he often had quarrels with men who offended or cheated on him. But what Jimmy could not stand for was the constant whispers, giggles, insults and racial comments directed at Ethel (Davies 1979).

Gulgong at the time had just 100 or so residents. Gossip spread quickly after Jimmy made a complaint to the police that a woman's remarks were offensive. The woman was obliged to publish an apology in the local newspaper, "an amazing victory - but bought at a high price" (Davies 1979), as this resulted in an escalation of the taunting by townsfolk. During April 1900, to escape the constant taunting, Jimmy and his family moved to a farm called Breealong near Gilgandra after gaining a long-term contract to build nearly 5 km of fencing. The job consisted of splitting, boring wire holes and erecting posts (earning 10s, 10s and 12s per hundred respectively) on John and Sarah Mawbey's 1500-acre property (Davies 1979, Walsh 1983, Moore & Williams 2001).

The Mawbey's had agreed to pay Jimmy a wage (based on the quantity of fence posts) and provide basic rations of flour, meat and sugar and Jimmy had to pay for any extra general supplies (Moore & Williams 2001).

The basic food rations were usually delivered to their camp 3 miles (5km) from the Mawbey's house. However, Ethel Governor would often make the journey to collect tobacco and other general supplies for her family. Ethel also did regular servant and domestic duties at the Mawbey's house but wasn't paid anything. Several

historic accounts report that Ellen (Helena) Kerz (21yo) a school teacher boarding at the property and Grace Mawbey (16yo) constantly taunted Ethel about marrying an aboriginal and made fun of her baby (Moore & Williams 2001).

Injury was added to insult when John Mawbey rejected about 100 of the fence posts but offered to pay Jimmy only half price for them (Nepean Times 28/7/1900). Mawbey then used the condemned posts in his fence without paying and said he would pay in due course when other work was done. The payment was never made. (Nepean Times 28/7/1900). In June there was also a disagreement with Mrs Mawbey overcharging Jimmy for extra rations, which put him 15 shillings in debt. To compound the issue the Mawbeys decided to deduct this amount from money owed for completed fencing work, at a time when he had run out of supplies and had no money (Moore & Williams 2001).

Soon after Jimmy received a visit from his younger brother Joe and an old friend Jacky Underwood (sometimes called Jacky Brown) who camped for a period in a nearby paddock on the banks of Wallumburrawang Creek. "Under tribal law Jimmy, who had a job for which he was being paid and receiving rations, was required to also provide for these relatives who were not working. Because he was only receiving sufficient rations for himself and Ethel this demand to feed extra mouths was probably a contributing factor in the strains which developed" (Stackpool 1998). Jimmy offered to subcontract fencing work to Joe and Jacky, which they accepted and worked there for 3 or 4 weeks.

Joe and Jacky were intending to travel through to Coonamble to visit relatives so Jimmy asked if they could return with his nephew Peter Governor and Jackie Porter to also help with fencing work. They all returned in a week or two and set up camp nearby on the Mawbey's property. They were all then subcontracted by Jimmy to do fencing work. Stress on Jimmy would have been high as it was his responsibility to provide for everyone's needs in camp and Ethel was constantly in his ear about the taunting she was receiving at the Mawbey household (Sydney Morning Herald 29/10/1900).

Many reports say that Jimmy, Joe and Jacky, often romanticised about becoming bushrangers and bragging that each was better than the other and they could not be caught by the police. The four aborigines had been subcontracting to Jimmy for about a week, when things came to a head after an argument in camp on Friday night, 20 July 1900 (Nepean Times 28/7/1900).

Around 10pm, armed with a nulla nulla (also known as a waddie or boondie), tomahawk and unloaded rifle, Jimmy and Jacky went to the Mawbey's old home (Old Breealong Inn) where the men folk (John Mawbey plus 3 other men) were staying after sacking wheat on the Breealong property. Jimmy wanted to sort out a matter related to supply of rations, so he fronted up to the door and chatted with Mr Mawbey, while Jacky stayed out of sight with the weapons. After being satisfied with the outcome that rations would be supplied the next day, they headed off toward the new home a mile away, knowing that only the women were there. Most reports state that it was just Jimmy and Jacky, however this conflicts with Jimmy's statement months later at his trial when he stated that Joe and Ethel were also with them at both Mawbey's houses but they had all agreed on the night to cover up their involvement. (Moore & Williams 2001 p.34, Nepean Times 28/7/1900, Sydney Morning Herald 24/11/1900).

Jimmy wanted to confront Mrs Sarah Mawbey about the things she was saying to Ethel. At the new house that night, there were the 3 women: Mrs Mawbey and her 18yo younger sister Elsie Clarke and Helena Kerz, plus seven of the Mawbey children (Walsh 1983, Moore & Williams 2001).

Upon Mrs Mawbey answering the door Jimmy blurted out, "Did you tell, my missus that any white woman who married a black-fellow ought to be shot? Did you ask my wife about our private business? Did you ask her what sort of nature I had - black or white?" Mrs Mawbey and Helena made a sneering laugh at Jimmy pointing to the door. "Go home" she said in the voice of command that might be used to a dog. "Pooh, you black rubbish, you want shooting for marrying a white woman!" sneered Helena. With that Jimmy broke into a rage and struck Mrs Mawbey and Helena in the mouth. (Sydney Morning Herald 24/11/1900, Clune 1959)

A frenzied uproar broke out and others in the household awoke, some trying to assist the older women and some children fleeing out the windows to raise the alarm. Jimmy now in an uncontrollable rage began bashing the women and those trying to help, with his nulla nulla. Some of the children escaped out of the windows so Jimmy ran after them, quickly catching and laying into them with his weapon, so fiercely that they were killed. Jacky had remained behind to guard the badly injured women, then when Jimmy returned, they both laid into all the women and children till none were standing. Moore and Williams (2001) "believe that Joe took an active part and Ethel was at least a witness." In total there were 3 dead and 2 more who died shortly after from their horrendous injuries - the details too graphic to reproduce here. Two young children survived unscathed in the kitchen; one child survived by hiding under a bed. Another child Albert 'Bertie' aged 9 escaped and ran the mile to the other house on the property where his father John Mawbey and two other men were that night, to raise the alarm (Clune 1959, Moore & Williams 2001). Many reports say that Jimmy and Jacky quickly fled on foot after committing the atrocity. They arrived back at their bush camp and quickly packed up. Jimmy's threatened Joe with being tomahawked if he did not join them on the run (according to Jimmy's statement to a reporter after his capture), however this is contrary to what Jimmy later detailed in his statement to the court (Sydney Morning Herald 29/10/1900, 24/11/1900). From this point the three aboriginals became wanted men on the run hunted by posses of police and civilians alike.

Jacky Underwood had a bad limp after a fall from a horse as a child and had later lost one eye so was easily identifiable. He was quickly caught in a few days but the Governors escaped (Moore & Williams 2001). Jimmy and his brother Joe made their tracks through rough country in NSW, terrorizing townsfolk and remote property inhabitants, taunting police with hand written notes scrawled on pieces of paper and with their bush prowess outwitting police and civilians alike. They went on a 14-week, 2000-mile (3219 km) rampage, terrorizing a wide area of north-central NSW, committing more than 80 crimes including armed hold-ups. They robbed more than 35 huts and homesteads, including burning two of them to the ground while seeking revenge on persons who had wronged them (State Library NSW website, Moore & Williams 2001).

While on the run the Governor brothers committed more horrendous murder, killed 2 men, a child and a heavily pregnant woman and her unborn child (Biber 2008).

Jimmy was out to settle old scores, mainly with men he had worked for and whom he believed had treated him badly. The Governor brothers travelled along the Goulburn River around the Wollar area, then moved on to raid properties in the Paterson Valley and eastward through Allynbrook to rob huts in the Gresford district. Many of the settlers had already deserted their properties after being warned that the Governors were out for revenge and had already committed many murders. Such was the fear in the population over large areas of the Hunter Valley that business and schools closed and nobody travelled unless they had to.

While ever the Governors were at large, white settlers and squatters fled the countryside to seek refuge in small towns as they lived in fear of being the next victims, but those in power saw it as challenging colonial rule and delaying the white penetration of the Australian frontier (Sydney Morning Herald 30/7/1900, Biber 2008).

At Gulgong, 50 armed men patrolled the town perimeter and ladies practiced target shooting in the riverbed nearby. Wollar was like a besieged city with armed guards patrolling day and night. In the Ulan district forty-three people camped at Ulan Church after fleeing their home out of town. Only four out of 35 homes in the area remained occupied. Those remaining to defend their homes were terrified and constantly on guard for the slightest movement or noise, especially at night. (Moore & Williams 2001). There were frequent newspaper reports of farmers opening fire in the direction of a noise on a dark night, to kill their prize bore or an innocent kangaroo. One ambush party after hearing a sound after dark, let forth with a volley of shots to find in the morning they had killed an old cow with 13 shots. The following night a draught horse was done to death in a similar manner (Gulgong Advertiser 17/8/1900).

The newly appointed NSW Minister for Works, Mr O'Sullivan, toured the troubled area and reported: "There was a reign of terror around Cassilis and Merriwa, and many women and children were living in these towns in consequence of the depredation of the black bushrangers. Houses were empty, dogs were dying on the chain, and cows were sick with milk fever through not being milked" (Singleton Argus 8/9/1900).

On 22 September it was reported that Jimmy had raped a 15yo white girl at Cobark River (Singleton Argus 25/9/1900). Urgent representation to the Government resulted in the reward being increased on 25 September, from £200 to £1,000 for each Governor, dead or alive and outlawry was urged. (Dubbo Dispatch 26/9/1900, NSW Police Gazette 10/10/1900, The Murrurundi Times 10/11/1900, Biber 2008). Up to 2,000 volunteers and police (accompanied by bloodhounds and black trackers) were involved in the hunt for the Governor brothers, described as "the largest manhunt in Australian history" (Moore & Williams 2001).

The NSW government instigated the 'Felons Apprehension Act, 1899' on 2 October 1900 to proclaim the Governor brothers' outlaws so that, if they failed to surrender themselves to Maitland Goal by the afternoon of 16 October 1900, they became 'outlaws', who could legally be shot and killed on sight (Sydney Morning Herald 3/10/1900, NSW Police Gazette 10/10/1900). They were the last to be proclaimed outlaws in Australia (Walsh 1983). Under the 1899 Act, anyone found to be aiding or harbouring an outlaw or withholding or providing false information to a member of the police force, could be imprisoned for up to 15 years. (Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal 24/8/1900, Eburn 2005)



Jimmy Governor's Campsite - Photo by Garry K Smith

Jimmy's tracking skills and knowledge of police tactics kept them one step ahead of their pursuers as they moved north to the Forbes River, to evade capture. However, they came unstuck on 13 October 1900 when two civilians came across Jimmy and Joe and fired at them. They both got away, but Jimmy was seriously wounded, shot in the hip and mouth causing considerable blood loss. He had lost four or five teeth and his cheek had been ripped open, which made it hard for him to eat and probably inflicted such pain as to affect his thinking (Sydney Morning Herald 29/10/1900, Stackpool 1998, Moore & Williams 2001). The brothers then became separated when crossing a river.

Jimmy was captured a fortnight later at Bobin near Wingham on 27 October 1900 and Joe was eventually shot dead, at Mount Royal north of Singleton on 31 October 1900 (Walsh 1983).

Jimmy faced Sydney Central Criminal Court on 22-23 November accused of 'feloniously and maliciously murdering Ellen Kertz', the teacher employed by the Mawbey family. He was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging, but the execution date was delayed by almost two months due to planned festivities to celebrate Australian Federation in early January 1901. Warders kept a diary of Jimmy's time in the condemned cells, stating he "spent his last days reading the Bible, singing native songs and blaming his wife" (Walsh 1983, Biber 2014). He met his death by hanging at Darlinghurst Gaol on 18 January 1901. (Singleton Argus 19/1/1901)

The court found Jacky Underwood guilty of murder on 2 October 1900 and he was hung at the old Dubbo Gaol on 14 January 1901 (Sydney Morning Herald 3/10/1900, Moore & Williams 2001).

This surely would have to be one of the most horrific bushranger stories to emerge from our Australian history. Thomas Keneally's novel written in 1972, called 'The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith' was based around the

true story of Jimmy Governor and in 1978 it was made into an award-winning drama film.

So, what can be ascertained from the history books and reports, to verify the authenticity of the 'Jimmy Governor 1899' signature at Timor?

Jimmy attended school and learnt to read and write. It was reported on about the 9/8/1900 that a pencil and cheque book were stolen amongst other things from a hut not far from Gunnedah. The cover of the cheque book was later recovered with a pencil written note by Jimmy. Several other letters written in lead pencil (with poor spelling), taunting the police, were left at various locations as they fled their pursuers (The Age 9/8/1900) (Sydney Morning Herald 9/8/1900) (Newcastle Morning Herald 9/8/1900).

One note written by Jimmy, says that he had read the Mudgee newspaper articles about the efforts to capture them, and several different notes were signed "Jim Governor" (The Age 9/8/1900, Geelong Advertiser 10/8/1900, The Walcha Witness 18/8/1900). There was however one exception where a letter was signed "Jimmy Governor" as reported in the Singleton Argus, 18 September 1900, however this is relying on the accuracy of one journalist. It appears that most of the notes taunting the police were signed "Jim Governor".

If we follow the Governors' tracks they moved on to Quirindi, Colly Creek - within 10 miles of Murrurundi (Singleton Argus 6/9/1900) to Nundle, then around the Crawney Pass range (4/9/1900), Glenrock Station, Moonan Brook, Stewarts Brook and on to Tomalla Station (Singleton Argus 15/9/1900), Mount Royal and down through the Hunter Valley to Gresford and Dungog. During their zig zag run from the law, they had passed near to or through the Timor Caves area. See picture of the Governor's campsite at Crawney Pass.

But did the Governor brothers actually detour to the

caves on this occasion around August/September 1900? There is no historic record that they did. But if they did then it is doubtful that Jimmy would have signed his signature as 'Jimmy Governor' as the majority of notes he had been leaving for police were signed as 'Jim Governor', besides the date next to the cave signature is one year earlier. Could the date be a mistake? Probably unlikely as Jimmy was reading the newspapers he came across. Hence, we can almost rule out that he left his signature in the cave while on the run during 1900.



Jimmy Governor - New South Wales State Archives and Records Darlinghurst Gaol - Photographic Description Book-Jimmy Governor alias Jimmy Grosvenor.

So, if the signature is authentic and matches the date, it was written one year before he became an outlaw. He could have been signing his name as 'Jimmy' prior to the 1900 murders and possibly started signing his name as 'Jim' to be considered a more mature man after becoming a bushranger. Alternatively, he may have always signed as 'Jim' and was referred to as 'Jimmy' by his mates and people who knew him. Unfortunately, an extensive search for his marriage certificate was unsuccessful and no original signed letters or notes could be located.

After Jimmy was captured, he was taken to Wingham and placed in a wooden cell at the police station. Jimmy signed his name on the cell wall, while being held captive there for several days (Northern Star 1925, Western Age 1933). However, the wooden cell was relocated to make way for more courthouse facilities. The cell is now located at the Manning Valley Historical Society Museum, Wingham but unfortunately the signature was painted over years ago.

During 1899, the year of the signature in Main Cave, Jimmy was travelling substantial distances from his wife, child and home at Gulgong in order to gain work as a horse breaker and fencer. Gulgong to Timor is 221km (137miles) by road, which is within the approximate distance he was travelling for casual work. If he was in the Timor region (when not an outlaw), then it is conceivable that a local resident could have told him about the caves as they were well known at that time. Unfortunately, during the research for this article, no reference could be found as to Jimmy having visited the Timor Caves nor of him working in the immediate area during 1899.

While on the run, Jimmy and Joe did hide out for several days in a cave on James Cross' property near Gulgong (Moore & Williams 2001, p.195), so there is evidence that they used caves to hide from their pursuers. It seems the authenticity of the 'Jimmy Governor 1899' signature at Main Cave - Timor, remains unresolved till further evidence emerges.

Conclusion

It appears plausible both bushrangers 'Jimmy Governor' and 'Fred Ward' knew about these caves, due to their movements and acquaintances during their lifetimes. Also, it is feasible that each bushranger could have been in the Timor Caves vicinity at some point during the year that was inscribed with their signature.

It is unlikely that either bushranger used the caves to hide out from the law, as they would have been unable to escape if their whereabouts was known by the police or posse. The caves however may have been a good place to shelter during bad weather.



Melissa Hadley in Main Cave Timor

If we analyse the characteristics of both signatures to see if they fit with the time period, does this give us a clue to authenticity? Both are written in a running writing characteristic of the time period. They are written with mediums (reddish-brown chalk and black pencil), readily available during the time period. Both signatures are dated and this was typical for early visitors to caves and other natural features to carve or write their name and date at a location to prove they had been there. The interesting thing is that the signatures are in different parts of Main Cave and both in obscure locations so as not to be obviously seen. Is this an indication that they didn't want their signature seen?

A research request to the State Library of NSW resulted in the following reply "We have searched the collections of the State Library of NSW (including the Mitchell Library, the Dixson Library and the State Reference Library) thoroughly. We do not hold any original writings by Frederick Ward (Captain Thunderbolt) nor Jimmy Governor. As far as we can tell, none of their writings survive." They list a comprehensive list of reference books about both bushrangers. "None of these books include any reproductions of the signatures of these two men. We suspect that if the signatures of these men have survived anywhere, then any such documents would have been reproduced in some of the books listed above."

Given that no authenticated signatures for either man could be located after an extensive search while writing this article it is not possible to conclusively say that these signatures are authentic. However, given the accumulation of circumstantial evidence currently available, we must consider that both signatures may be authentic till proven otherwise.

Acknowledgement

A special thank you to Katerina Fulton for proof reading this article.

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