

Black Douglas: The Man and the Myth

By Heather Knight

Today, “Black Douglas” is not a name most people would have heard, but anyone living in Port Phillip District in the early to mid-1850s would have known the name well. Douglas gained a reputation as a feared and notorious bushranger who, along with his gang, terrorised diggers and travellers on the roads to the Victorian goldfields, relieving them of their cash, gold, horses and valuables. The favourite haunt of the gang was the Black Forest between Macedon and Kyneton but they also frequented Kyneton as well as the Bendigo, Castlemaine (Forest Creek, Fryers Creek & Mount Alexander), Ballarat, Mclvor (Heathcote) and Maryborough diggings.

William Douglas was the son of an American Negro and a white parent and he was most likely born in Philadelphia.¹ William was sentenced to seven years in January 1835 at Rye in Sussex for stealing two coats² and in 1841 he earned himself an extra ten years in Van Diemen’s Land for a highway robbery committed in New South Wales.³ In September 1851 his sentence in Van Diemen’s Land expired⁴ and soon afterwards he arrived on the goldfields in the Port Phillip District.⁵ Not long after his arrival in Port Phillip he changed his name from William to Alexander Douglas,⁶ the name associated with Black Douglas.

There is no doubt that Douglas was a member of a gang of bushrangers who terrorised travellers on the roads. They also made a nuisance of themselves on the goldfields, robbing the tents and gold pans of the diggers,⁷ stealing horses⁸ and committing other crimes such as selling sly grog. Douglas is mentioned in newspaper court reports of the 1850s for assault,⁹ sly grog selling,¹⁰ being (frequently) drunk and disorderly¹¹ and for passing counterfeit notes,¹² but strangely, I have only discovered one, brief, first-hand newspaper account of him in relation to bushranging and that was the hold-up of a man on the Ovens diggings in 1853, an account written in 1889.¹³

Douglas’s name, “Black” Douglas, his skin colour, stature, and the fact that he lurked in the equally frightening Black Forest, created the ultimate bogeyman story. I suspect however, that some crimes have been attributed to Black Douglas that he did not commit and that over time the legend, as often happens, has become much bigger than the man himself.

¹ Tasmanian Archives, Indents of Convicts Locally Convicted or Transported From Other Colonies, Item CON 16/1/1 Image 198-199.

² Ancestry.com: New South Wales Convict Indents 1788-1842, Bound Indentures 1834-1835 Image 175, Marquis of Huntly.

³ *Australasian Chronicle*, 19 August 1841, page 3.

⁴ *Launceston Examiner*, 13 September 1851, page 8.

⁵ Libraries Tasmania Name Index. POL22/1/1 Page 425. Departure: The *City of Melbourne* from Launceston to Melbourne; 19 September 1851; Steerage; William Douglas; Free by Servitude.

⁶ *Argus*, 14 April 1852, page 2.

⁷ *Age*, 14 May 1855, page 3.

⁸ *Argus*, 28 June 1853, page 4; *Argus*, 10 August 1853, page 5; *Argus*, 20 August 1853, page 6.

⁹ *Argus*, 15 April 1852, page 4.

¹⁰ *Geelong Advertiser and Intelligencer*, 26 November 1852, page 2.

¹¹ *Argus*, 8 July 1853, page 5.

¹² *Argus*, 4 August 1852, page 5.

¹³ *Mount Alexander Mail*, 9 October 1889, page 2.

MYTH ONE – William Douglas was 6 Foot 3 or 4 Inches Tall

Black Douglas was said to have been a powerfully built man of 13 stone¹⁴ and six foot 3 or 4 inches tall;¹⁵ a man of “gigantic proportions”.¹⁶ While he was often described as a big, powerful man, Douglas’s actual height was 5ft 9 ½ inches,¹⁷ and while 5ft 9 ½ was tall for his time, it is six inches shorter than 6 foot 3 or 4 inches.

MYTH TWO – Black Douglas Robbed and Tied Sixteen Victims to a Log

One story claims that Douglas and his gang robbed their victims, stripped them naked and tied them to trees with their boots full of bull-ants.¹⁸ Another story is that he robbed sixteen people and chained them to a log;¹⁹ this is possibly another version of the bull-ant story. I have found no evidence for either of these claims, however there may be an explanation for the basis of the story.

After the discovery of gold in July 1851, crime and theft was rife and there were several gangs of bushrangers on the roads and goldfields who were working the same areas. There are numerous newspaper reports of the victims of bushrangers being tied to trees,²⁰ indeed, Douglas himself was tied to a tree after being captured by the police in 1852,²¹ but not one of the reports that I have found mentions Douglas by name or a black man.

There are two possible sources for the basis of this story: in May 1855, while Douglas was on the goldfields at Alma near Maryborough, there were a series of hold-ups on the Bendigo Road. One newspaper reported the hold-up of seventeen people over several hours.²² There is also an account of a bushranger, thought to be Gipsy Smith,²³ an escaped convict from Van Diemen’s Land and the leader of a “formidable gang of bushrangers” who robbed sixteen men (separately) in a week and tied them up to trees during October 1856²⁴ – at a time when Douglas was in gaol.²⁵

MYTH THREE – Black Douglas Murdered a Woman

Author James Flett described Black Douglas as being in a “gang of cut-throats” and gives Douglas the credit for shooting a woman in the face for not giving up her purse.²⁶ Douglas almost certainly had

¹⁴ *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Reviewer*, 26 October 1850, page 2.

¹⁵ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 17 May 1892, page 3.

¹⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1852, page 2.

¹⁷ Tasmanian Archives, Conduct Registers of Male Convicts arriving under the Assignment System on Non-Convict ships and on strength in Nov 1844, CON35/1/1 Image 187; William Douglas. Height as 5ft 9 ½ inches. PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1886-1887), Image 241, Charles Douglas, height 5ft 9½ inches; PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1854-1856), Image 361, Alexander Douglas alias Black Douglas, height 5ft 9 ¼ inches; PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1890-1891), Image 323, Charles Russell, height 5ft 8 ½ inches.

¹⁸ <https://twistedhistory.net.au/2016/07/27/victims-tied-naked-to-a-tree-with-their-boots-full-of-bull-ants/>

¹⁹ https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Russell

²⁰ *Geelong Advertiser and Intelligencer*, 10 July 1852, page 2; *Argus*, 26 January 1853, page 4; *Argus*, 14 June 1855, page 5.

²¹ *Argus*, 22 April 1852, page 4.

²² *Argus*, 9 May 1855, page 5.

²³ Real name William Turner, *Argus*, 20 October 1856, page 7.

²⁴ *Argus*, 22 October 1856, page 5.

²⁵ PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1854-1856), Image 361, Alexander Douglas alias Black Douglas.

²⁶ James Flett, *Dunolly, Story of an Old Gold Diggings*, Hawthorn Press 2nd edition 1874, page 115.

nothing to do with this event. On the 29th April 1855, during a spate of robberies along the road from Avoca to New Bendigo, a gang of five men held-up a party of four men and a woman. The woman was shot in the chest, not in the face and later died of her injuries. The government posted a reward of £125 and gave a detailed description of the five men involved²⁷ none of whom were black or named as Black Douglas. The murder of the woman and the robberies made the miners at Maryborough understandably nervous and they took it upon themselves to capture Black Douglas and his mates on the 6th of May 1855²⁸ and he was subsequently gaoled for two years for vagrancy.²⁹ There is no evidence that he shot or killed the woman.

James Flett claimed that Douglas was sentenced to fourteen years for the shooting of the woman.³⁰ Douglas's convict record and gaol records are well documented and he did not serve any sentence longer than two years in Victoria, and that was for vagrancy.³¹

MYTH FOUR – Black Douglas Robbed the Gold Escort Near Mclvor

Black Douglas was credited with robbing the private gold escort near Mclvor (Heathcote), in July 1853.³² The private gold escort was ambushed at Mia Mia between Mclvor and Kyneton on 20th July 1853. Four men in the convoy, three troopers and the driver, were shot and seriously wounded. 2,323 ounces of gold and £702 10s in money were stolen. The value of the stolen property was calculated at approximately £6,360 and it was a sensational story at the time.³³ Shortly after the robbery, an enormous reward of £500 was offered, as well as a pardon and free passage to any person involved in the robbery who gave information leading to the conviction of the robbers.³⁴ Numerous men were rounded up, although most were later released. Not surprisingly, in the heat of the battle there was confusion as to how many men attacked the escort. Robert Warner, the superintendent of the escort, had the impression that there may have been more than six men involved, possibly as many as fourteen.³⁵ Trooper John Morton, who was shot in the shoulder, believed there may have been eight or ten men.³⁶

One of the men involved in the escort robbery, John Francis, turned Queen's evidence against his accomplices, including his brother George. John Francis gave evidence that only five other men were involved in the robbery: George Francis, George Wilson, George Melville, William Atkins and Joseph Grey.³⁷ Some of these men were clearly identified by the escort troopers. Upon his arrest, George Francis gave the names of four additional men who were involved: George Elston, Edward McEvoy, Robert Harding and a man named Shepherd, commonly known as Ruggy. These four men were discharged.³⁸ Douglas, was not named by either of the brothers.

Soon after his capture, George Francis committed suicide at Rocky Water Holes (Kalkallo) while in police custody, thereby denying the court the opportunity to question him on the information he gave. John and George Francis and their wives and George Wilson all had berths booked on the *Madagascar* for London. John Francis and George Wilson were apprehended aboard the *Madagascar* with their portion of

²⁷ *Argus*, 9 May 1855, page 5.

²⁸ *Age*, May 1855, page 3.

²⁹ *Age*, 14 May 1855, page 6.

³⁰ James Flett, *Dunolly, Story of an Old Gold Diggings*, Hawthorn Press 2nd edition 1874, page 115.

³¹ *Argus*, 15 May 1855, page 5.

³² *Age*, 17 May 1852, page 6.

³³ *Argus*, 25 July 1853, page 5; *Tasmanian Colonist*, 4 August 1853, page 3.

³⁴ *Victoria Government Gazette* No. 45, July 27th, 1853 page 1049.

³⁵ *Geelong Advertiser and Intelligencer*, 26 July 1853, page 2.

³⁶ *Argus*, 19 September 1853, page 5.

³⁷ *Banner*, 26 August 1853, page 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the gold. George Melville had a passage booked per the *Collooney* for Mauritius, while Atkins and his wife had a receipt for a passage to Sydney.³⁹ Only three men were brought to trial⁴⁰ and only a portion of the gold was recovered.⁴¹ Grey disappeared. Wilson, Melville and Atkins were found guilty and executed on 3rd October 1853.⁴²

Neither the troopers nor the informer, John Francis, who in his evidence gave a detailed account of the event, much of which was corroborated by the troopers, mention Douglas, or a black man. At no point was there mention in the newspaper reports or court proceedings of Black Douglas and I seriously doubt that John Francis would admit his own guilt, provide the name of his own brother to the police but not that of Douglas if he was involved. The first mention I found of Douglas being given credit for the escort robbery was by an imaginative journalist at the time of Douglas's death in 1892, some thirty-nine years after the robbery.⁴³

Even during the 1850s there were numerous rumours about Black Douglas. While defending himself in court in 1854 for assault, Alexander Douglas laid out some of the claims against him:

... And now I shall lay before you these imaginary crimes. There was a report (the prisoner continued) that I was captain of four armed banditti in the Black Forest. It was publicly rumored that I have been seen carrying the body of dead commissioner in a sack. There was a report that I had got 21 years. There was a report I had escaped from Pentridge (a place I never saw), with three bullets in my body. All these scandalous reports have militated against me (continued the prisoner with great pathos and eloquence) and thus a man, from no crime whatever, has been vilified and abused – held in abhorrence – and rendered notorious though the records of crime did not bear witness against him.⁴⁴

It was a good performance, if not entirely true.

Douglas was an educated, highly intelligent and clever individual who, despite his noticeable presence, somehow continuously evaded the police for highway robbery but was regularly arrested for being drunk and disorderly, for assault and for other minor offences. He had participated in a highway robbery in 1841⁴⁵ and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that he was a known thief and a member of a gang of bushrangers, however, I have found no evidence that he tied sixteen men to a log or to a tree naked and filled their boots with bull-ants. There is absolutely no evidence that he murdered a woman or was involved in the McIvor gold escort robbery in 1853.

In July 1853, when before the court for drunkenness, Douglas complained:

...that the police were always pouncing on him and that he had a bad reputation without a cause. The Mayor reminded him of the saying, - "Give a dog an ill name and hang him," and then discharged him.⁴⁶

© Heather Knight 2022

³⁹ *The Argus*, 19 September 1853, page 5.

⁴⁰ *Banner*, 26 August 1853, page 6.

⁴¹ *Argus*, 19 September 1853, page 5.

⁴² *Argus*, 4 October 1853, page 5.

⁴³ *Age*, 17 May 1892, page 6.

⁴⁴ *Argus*, 8 February 1854, page 5.

⁴⁵ *Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser*, 20 August 1841, page 2.

⁴⁶ *Argus*, 8 July 1853, page 5.