

Black Douglas the Man

"Give a Dog an Ill Name and Hang Him"

Author: Heather Knight

"Black Douglas" earned a reputation as a feared and notorious bushranger who, along with his gang terrorised diggers on the Victorian goldfields and travellers on the roads to the goldfields during the early to mid-1850s. Today very few people have heard of Black Douglas and what is published about him is sparse and often inaccurate. So who was this little-known bushranger, "Black Douglas"?

William Douglas was most likely born between 1816 and 1818,¹ in Philadelphia² America, to one black and one white parent.³ In 1891 Douglas claimed his mother was an Irishwoman from Tipperary but this claim cannot be relied upon as he frequently changed the truth to suit his own purposes.⁴

Fast forward to 7th January 1835 when two seventeen year-olds, William Douglas and John Smith faced the judge at the Sussex Quarter Sessions in Rye, England. William Douglas, a servant⁵ and John Smith, a boatman, originally from Deptford in Kent⁶ were found guilty of stealing two coats.⁷ Douglas was given a sentence of seven years to be served in New South Wales, while Smith was to serve his seven years in Van Diemen's Land. The two teenagers were held on the Prison Hulk *Fortitude* at Chatham prior to being transported.⁸ John Smith was transported to Van Diemen's Land, per the *Aurora* (1), arriving in October 1835. He served his time without recorded incidents and received his Ticket of Leave in October 1839⁹ and by January 1842 he was a free man.¹⁰

The hulk record states that William Douglas was "disposed of" on 16th March 1835 when he was transferred to the convict transport ship *Marquis of Huntley* (sometimes spelt Huntly).¹¹

¹ William Douglas's age was given as 25 years in 1841 (b.1816), Tasmanian Archives, Indents of Convicts Locally Convicted or Transported from Other Colonies, CON 16/1/1 Images 198 and 199, William Douglas; William's age was given as 17 at the time he was received at the prison hulk *Fortitude* on 25th January 1835 (b.1818) Ancestry.com: Home Office: Convict Prison Hulks: Registers and Letter Books, 1802-1849. Microfilm, HO9, 5 rolls. The National Archives, Kew, England.

² Ancestry.com: New South Wales Convict Indents 1788-1842, Bound Indentures 1834-35 Image 175, Marquis of Huntly.

³ Douglas was described in convict and gaol records as a half-caste, a coloured man, Mulatto and an American.

⁴ *Bendigo Independent*, 11 May 1891, page 2.

⁵ Ancestry.com: New South Wales Convict Indents 1788-1842, Bound Indentures 1834-35 Image 175, Marquis of Huntly.

⁶ Tasmanian Archives, Convict Indent, CON14/1/51 Images 59 and 60, John Smith.

⁷ Ancestry.com: New South Wales Convict Indents 1788-1842, Bound Indentures 1834-35 Image 175, Marquis of Huntly; Tasmanian Archives, Convict Conduct Record CON31/1/40 Image 150, John Smith.

⁸ Ancestry.com Home Office: Convict Prison Hulks: Registers and Letter Books, 1802-1849. Microfilm, HO9, 5 rolls. The National Archives, Kew, England.

⁹ Tasmanian Archives, Convict Conduct Record CON31/1/40 Image 150, John Smith.

¹⁰ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 22 January 1842, page 4.

¹¹ Ancestry.com: Home Office: Convict Prison Hulks: Registers and Letter Books, 1802-1849. Microfilm, HO9, 5 rolls. The National Archives, Kew, England.

Earlier official records consistently give William Douglas's native place as Philadelphia,¹² but over the years as the truth was stretched, it was given as London,¹³ Boston¹⁴ and Bristol.¹⁵ His occupation was given as indoor servant,¹⁶ cook and servant,¹⁷ boat-man¹⁸ and in later records as a labourer.¹⁹ Douglas frequently gave false information to prison authorities regarding his birthplace, date of arrival and the name of the ship he arrived on. This may have been an attempt to outwit the authorities and escape his convict past; it may also have been the only control he had over his life.

William Douglas was one of 320 convicts who left England aboard the *Marquis of Huntley* on 23 March 1835 and arrived in Sydney on 5th July 1835.²⁰ William's time as a convict in New South Wales was brutal and would leave him permanently scarred and crippled in old age. The details of the punishments he received are horrific: between November 1835²¹ and June 1841 William received a total of 436 lashes, including 100 on one day, as well as twelve months in irons for offences such as being absent from his work; highly disorderly conduct; assault; neglect of work and being absent without leave.²²

On 2nd July 1841, two armed men with their faces covered, held up and robbed James Healey at Seven Mile Hollow on the Parramatta Road.²³ Healey recognised one of the thieves as John Wood, an assigned servant. The second man, described as stout and tall,²⁴ had his face covered with a black handkerchief but Healey knew him to be a man of colour by his hands. Wood and Douglas were quickly identified and were both found guilty of assault and robbery. Both men received a sentence of ten years to be served in Van Diemen's Land.²⁵ John Wood and William Douglas were amongst forty-three convicts transported on the schooner *Marian Watson*, which arrived in Hobart on the 8th March 1842.²⁶

¹² Ancestry.com: New South Wales Convict Indents 1788-1842, Bound Indentures 1834-35 Image 175, Marquis of Huntly.

¹³ PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1854-1856) Image 361, Alexander Douglas.

¹⁴ PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1886-1887) Image 241, Charles Douglas. Possibly meant to be Boston, Lincolnshire, England.

¹⁵ *Bendigo Independent*, 11 May 1891, page 2.

¹⁶ Ancestry.com: Convict Indents 1788-1842 Annotated Printed Indentures 1835, List of Male Convicts by the Ship Marquis of Huntley.

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.

¹⁸ PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1854-1856) Image 361, Alexander Douglas.

¹⁹ PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1890-1891) Image 323, Charles Russell.

²⁰ <https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/douglas/william/38045>

²¹ The convict conduct record states Nov 1834 but this must be an error as he wasn't convicted until Jan 1835.

²² 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.

²³ *Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser*, 20 August 1841, page 2.

²⁴ *Sydney Herald*, 8 July 1841, page 2.

²⁵ *Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser*, 20 August 1841, page 2.

²⁶ *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 11 March 1842, page 2; 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; Tasmanian Archives, Convict Conduct Record CON31/1/4 Image 206, John Wood.

When William Douglas arrived in Van Diemen's Land, he was 25 years of age and his height was recorded as 5ft 9½ inches tall.²⁷ The convict conduct record gives a good physical description of William Douglas: he had a copper complexion; a large head and woolly hair; no whiskers; a broad visage and a high forehead; black eyebrows and brown eyes; a flat nose and a large mouth and chin. He also had the following tattoos: woman and stars back of left arm; an anchor almost illegible back same arm and a star back right hand.²⁸

William Douglas served at least some of his time in the infamous Port Arthur Penitentiary. Mercifully no more lashes are recorded but William was far from a model prisoner and his conduct record is a long one. His offences included disorderly conduct, obscene language, refusing to work, insubordination, possessing tobacco, smoking, refusing to work, being absent without leave and being involved in prize fights. His record also includes assaults on another prisoner and an officer. The punishments were harsh and included regular stints of hard labour, often in chains and time in solitary confinement.²⁹

There are two records of William Douglas being involved in prize fights (bare knuckle fighting) in Van Diemen's Land: on 28 September 1850, for which he received four months hard labour and 14 February 1851.³⁰ The prize fight on 28th September 1850 between "Black Douglas of Sydney" and Bob Fee was reported in detail in a Sydney newspaper. Douglas, the taller of the two was the favourite at 13 stone compared to his opponent's 11 stone 9 pounds.

THE RING. Gallant Fight in Van Diemen's Land between Bob Fee of Sheffield, and Black Douglas of Sydney...At an early hour crowds of nobby equestrian and dragsmen, with a motley assemblage of humble toddlers were soon wending their way to the convincing ground, which was a sweet little spot on the George-Town Road. The Blues, unluckily, were on the alert, and a shift was compelled to be made for fear of ulterior consequences. "The office" was given to the initiated, and they stole away in beautiful style to a sequestered bit of turf on Clarence Plains, where the roped arena was put up, long before the unlucky toddlers could find out the whereabouts. At half-past seven o'clock Fee made his appearance...Douglas, who soon followed was waited on by Minton the snob, and a novice...

After three hours and twenty-nine minutes the fight was terminated when Douglas hit Fee below the belt, a move which was considered deliberate and a foul.³¹

There was big money involved prize fights. In one fight between two men referred to as "Black Charley" and "Lockwood" in October 1856, the prize was £250 aside. These fighting

²⁷ Tasmanian Archives, Indents of Convicts Locally Convicted or Transported from Other Colonies, CON16/1/Images 198 and 199; William Douglas.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Reviewer*, 26 October 1850, page 2.

matches were considered a degrading spectacle, attracting the worst type of ruffian but they were a popular form of entertainment, particularly on the gold fields. The match held at Dunolly between Black Charley and Lockwood in 1856 went for 227 rounds and reportedly had an audience of between 7-10,000 men.³² Bob Fee, who beat Black Douglas in September 1850, participated in a fight in 1857 for £400.³³ It is possible that William came by the name "Black Douglas" through prize fighting. Douglas was later to admit in court that he participated in prize fights and that, "I have gained that petty renown which at first gave popularity to my name."³⁴

In September 1851 William's ten year sentence expired and he was a free man.³⁵ He promptly left Van Diemen's Land, boarding the screw steamer, *City of Melbourne* on 19th September 1851, bound for Melbourne and the newly discovered gold fields.³⁶

Initially William was at Golden Point (Ballarat) and he was almost certainly involved in prize fights:

...Black Douglas was upon the Point soon after the arrival of the prospectors...the monotonous avocations of the diggers were occasionally enlivened with prize fights, principally on Sundays, and rows on ordinary days...³⁷

Prize fights were well known for the disreputable characters they attracted and often occurred early on a Sunday morning which was seen as a "desecration of the Sabbath".³⁸ Shortly after the arrival of William Douglas in Port Phillip a fight took place on a Sunday on the Ballarat Diggings which was attended by about 3000 spectators.³⁹

Keeping company with ruffians, rogues and scoundrels soon had consequences for William and within six months of his arrival in Port Phillip, William "Black" Douglas had the description of "notorious" attached to his name.⁴⁰

The favourite haunt of Black Douglas and his gang was the Black Forest between Macedon and Kyneton, but they also frequented Kyneton and the Bendigo, Castlemaine (Forest Creek, Fryers Creek & Mount Alexander), Ballarat, McIvor (Heathcote) and the Maryborough diggings. The gold fields were dangerous places and crime was rampant:

...Fryers Creek has ever been noted as the resort of a most notorious gang of ruffians, headed last summer by the well-known Black Douglas. It is calculated that at this moment there cannot be less than from fifty to sixty of these

³² *Argus*, 27 October 1856, page 5.

³³ *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Reviewer*, 5 December 1857, page 2.

³⁴ *Argus*, 8 February 1854, page 5. At the time of Douglas's death as "Charles Russell" in 1892, the *Bendigo Independent*, 4 June 1892, page 2 claimed that Charles Russell was not the bushranger "Black Douglas", but "Black Charley" the pugilist, however, Black Douglas was in gaol at the time of this fight in October 1856.

³⁵ *Launceston Examiner*, 13 September 1851, page 8.

³⁶ Libraries Tasmania Name Index. 543634. POL220/1/1 p425 Departures: The *City of Melbourne* from Launceston to Melbourne; 19 September 1851; Steerage; William Douglas; Free by Servitude.

³⁷ *Star*, 13 September 1856, page 4.

³⁸ *Melbourne Daily News*, 28 January 1851, page 2.

³⁹ *Geelong Advertiser*, 1 November 1851, page 2.

⁴⁰ *Argus*, 4 March 1852, page 2.

characters all residing in one spot, and they are a terror to the surrounding country.⁴¹

The road through the Black Forest was a particularly dangerous place. The road was teaming with diggers and drays and one newspaper reported that there were 300 drays on the road to the diggings;⁴² the road was in a terrible condition; the police were many miles away and there were plenty of places for bushrangers to lurk.⁴³ Hold ups and robberies on the roads to the diggings were a daily occurrence and there are numerous newspaper reports of people being held up in the Black Forest, sometimes by a gang (or gangs) of four or five men, sometimes mounted, sometimes on foot – but there's no mention of Douglas or a black man.⁴⁴ On some of these occasions, the victims were tied to trees.⁴⁵ Being highly recognisable, it is possible that if Black Douglas was involved he kept out of sight or was well disguised, as it was his colour and height that had betrayed him when he committed highway robbery in 1841 in New South Wales.⁴⁶

In January 1852 a man named Fahey was in the custody of Constable John Tucker for stealing gold. The constable was in the process of taking Fahey to the watch-house at Kyneton when he was accosted by Douglas who managed to free the prisoner.⁴⁷ Douglas was captured in March⁴⁸ and in April found himself in the Supreme Court where he was found guilty of common assault against the constable.⁴⁹

William Douglas served a sentence of two months for assaulting the constable. On the day of his release, 21st June 1852, he was arrested in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, for being drunk and disorderly. The mounted police attempting the arrest were attacked by about thirty or forty of Douglas's "associates" and were forced to use the flats of their swords to disperse the crowd. Douglas was said to have been "particularly violent". He was captured after receiving a severe blow to the back of his head.⁵⁰ When he faced the judge for this offence, William Douglas was no longer, he was now Alexander Douglas. The substantial fine of £5 was paid and Douglas was released.⁵¹

In August 1852 Douglas was before the magistrate at Kyneton for passing "Don Havanna" flash notes;⁵² in November 1852 he was arrested at the Bendigo diggings with a large cargo of sly grog destined for the gold fields;⁵³ in June 1853 he was arrested at Ferguson's Inn, Broadford (the reason was not stated) by the Kilmore police⁵⁴ and in July he was before the

⁴¹ *Tasmanian Colonist*, 20 December 1852, page 4.

⁴² *Geelong Advertiser*, 1 December 1851, page 2.

⁴³ *Argus*, 7 April 1852, page 4.

⁴⁴ *Argus*, 10 December 1851, page 3; *Argus*, 7 April 1852, page 4; *Argus*, 9 July 1852, page 3; *Argus*, 3 August 1852, page 2; *Geelong Advertiser and Intelligencer*, 18 September 1852, page 2.

⁴⁵ *Argus*, 10 December 1851, page 3.

⁴⁶ *Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser*, 20 August 1841, page 2.

⁴⁷ *Argus*, 15 April 1852, page 4.

⁴⁸ *Argus*, 4 March 1852, page 2.

⁴⁹ *Argus*, 15 April 1852, page 4.

⁵⁰ *Argus*, 22 June 1852, page 3.

⁵¹ *Argus*, 23 June 1852, page 5.

⁵² *Argus*, 4 August 1852, page 5.

⁵³ *Geelong Advertiser and Intelligencer*, 26 November 1852, page 2.

⁵⁴ *Argus*, 28 June 1853, page 4.

court for drunkenness but was discharged.⁵⁵ Stories were circulating widely that he had been seen carrying the body of one of his victims slung over his shoulder, "but such was the terror of his name that no one dared to attempt to ascertain the fact."⁵⁶

To date, Douglas had only been arrested in Port Phillip for relatively minor offences but in December 1853 he made the mistake of assaulting one Robert Roberts and found himself before the court at Ballarat for the serious offence of robbery with violence. The newspaper record of this court case gives us the best insight into the intelligence, level of education and eloquence of the newly branded "Alexander Douglas" who defended himself as well as any barrister could.

BALLARAT QUARTER SESSIONS SECOND DAY. February 1854...The prisoner addressed the jury in a speech of great ability. While dwelling upon the point that he had no legal assistance, it was evident there was not much loss to him from the case being in his own hands. He said that his character had been much prejudiced by vile rumours and reports, and he then read the following singular document written by himself. It is as follows. "Your Honor and Gentlemen, &c. being placed at the bar of this tribunal, and, permitted by law to defend myself, I must, in justice to myself, digress from the present case. My character requires justification and I cannot attempt to defend myself without bringing that character before your notice, for it is by a public exposition alone that it can possibly be justified. I have been two years in the colony of Victoria, having arrived here from Van Diemen's Land, where certainly I admit having carried on a pugilistic profession. But with all my publicity, there is not the slightest record in that country to tax me with any crime, or any offence. Now, consider, gentlemen, that a Government and a large population that has never recognised crime or offence against me, for the space of ten years' residence amongst them how truly upright must have been my moral character. As a matter of frequent occurrence, I have been often urged into the prize-ring, and there, Gentlemen, I have gained that petty renown which at first gave popularity to my name. In all these encounters, I have been strongly opposed by a certain party of oppositionists, whose losses have been great in consequence of their often bringing and backing men to encounter and defeat me. Severe losses on their side and a series of success on mine, have caused the most terrible feelings to exist, which was certainly sprung up into a most unmanly, unchristian like persecution that almost ever existed. The breaking out of the gold fields brought a great number of people from Van Diemen's Land to this country, which gave an opportunity to my persecutors to arrive here on Ballarat. Some of them had located themselves, and even in a strange country they were determined either to crush my fame as a pugilist, or blast my character as an honest man. Thus, then, gentlemen, I have shewn you the nature from which all my defamation of character arises, &c &c &c. (Here occur the following words in pencil) – "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

⁵⁵ Argus, 8 July 1853, page 5.

⁵⁶ Argus, 31 March 1852, page 4.

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. What use was it for him to do good if he were continually liable to this persecution, and dismissed from time to time penniless and dependent on his friends?" [His] Honor summed up, during which the prisoner, with great coolness and decorum, corrected His Honor as to one of his notes of evidence. During his summing up His Honor remarked, that the prisoner's defence of that day would not have disgraced the best barrister in that court. The jury retired, and in a quarter of an hour returned, and found the prisoner guilty of a common assault, only.⁵⁷

It was a performance worthy of an Oscar. Douglas was sentenced to twelve months hard labour in the Geelong Gaol.⁵⁸ He was released in November 1854 and the next day he was arrested in Geelong, drunk and disorderly.⁵⁹ Again. Sadly, this was to be the pattern of behaviour for the rest of his life.

By April 1855 Douglas and his mates were on the Alma Diggings, about two miles from Maryborough where they were making a pretence of washing tailings.⁶⁰ There was a shortage of police to monitor the population of about 15,000 gold miners owing to the government removing police from the outstations and the diggers were noticeably apprehensive at the gang's presence.⁶¹ A series of robberies by a group of five bushrangers took place on the New Bendigo Road which resulted in a woman being shot and killed.⁶² This was the final straw; the diggers decided to take matters into their own hands; if the police wouldn't defend them, they would defend themselves.

On the 6th May 1855, Douglas and his crew attempted to rob the tents belonging to a group of Maori miners. A mob of between 100-300 miners (400 according to some reports), took the law into their own hands and arrested Douglas and about seven other men, tied them up, destroyed their tents, and were preparing to carry out "Lynch law". The captured men were "escorted in great triumph" to the Maryborough lock-up.⁶³

On the 8th May 1855, Alexander Douglas and his associates faced the magistrate. Five of them were committed for trial on charges of robbery, but not Douglas:

The others, including the redoubtable Black Douglas, were remanded for further examination. Notwithstanding the reputation which this chief of robbers has

⁵⁷ *Argus*, 8 February 1854, page 5.

⁵⁸ *Argus*, 8 February 1854, page 5; PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1854-1856) Image 361, Alexander Douglas.

⁵⁹ *Age*, 14 November 1854, page 5.

⁶⁰ *Age*, 11 April 1855, page 7.

⁶¹ *Argus*, 5 May 1855, page 7.

⁶² *Argus*, 9 May 1855, page 5.

⁶³ *Age*, 9 May 1855, page 6 ; *Mount Alexander Mail*, 11 May 1855, page 2; *Age*, 14 May 1855, page 6; *Age*, 14 May 1855, page 3.

obtained, it seems difficult to establish any serious charge against him, and it is thought that he will have to be proceeded against under the Vagrant Act, as a consorter with thieves and vagabonds.⁶⁴

"Alexander" Douglas was found guilty of being on premises without lawful excuse. He was given a sentence of two years under the Vagrancy Act and was forwarded from Castlemaine⁶⁵ to Pentridge Gaol where he served the majority of his sentence.⁶⁶

While in gaol, Douglas helped put out a fire in the government paddock in January 1857 and this may be why he was released early for good conduct from Pentridge Gaol in February 1857,⁶⁷ much to the disgust of the newspapers, one of which made the unsubstantiated claim that, "This desperado has broken out of almost every prison in the colony..."⁶⁸

After his release from Pentridge, Douglas was sighted at Tarrangower⁶⁹ and Rushworth,⁷⁰ where he and his cronies were said to be in the business of easing travellers of their valuables once again.⁷¹ By June 1857 he was in the Yackandandah/Beechworth area where he was arrested several times for being drunk and disorderly and placed in the Beechworth Gaol. After a promise to leave the district, he was discharged.⁷² In June 1859 he was probably back in Bendigo where he was once again arrested on charges of being drunk and disorderly and using obscene language.⁷³

From June 1859 until 1863 the whereabouts of Douglas are uncertain. Finding him becomes difficult because he begins to use the names Alexander Douglas *and* Charles Douglas and there are other men by those names.⁷⁴ The next confirmed reference of him is in Armidale, New South Wales in November 1864.⁷⁵

By the time Douglas turned up in the Armidale Court, he had started to use the name Charles Russell. Between December 1864⁷⁶ and February 1866⁷⁷ he served several sentences in the Armidale Gaol for being drunk, using offensive language and vagrancy. As usual, he gave his best performances in court.

...ARMIDALE POLICE COURT...Friday, Jan 20...Charles Russell, an American mulatto who was apprehended for being drunk, and subsequently charged with no visible

⁶⁴ *Geelong Advertiser and Intelligencer*, 18 May 1855, page 2.

⁶⁵ *Mount Alexander Mail*, 18 May 1855, page 3.

⁶⁶ *Argus*, 15 May 1855, page 5.

⁶⁷ PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1854-1856) Image 361, Alexander Douglas.

⁶⁸ *Age*, 19 February 1857, page 4.

⁶⁹ *Mount Alexander Mail*, 27 March 1857, page 4.

⁷⁰ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 4 April 1857, page 2.

⁷¹ *Age*, 2 May 1857, page 6.

⁷² *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, 6 June 1857, page 2; *Argus*, 10 June 1857, page 4; *Mount Alexander Mail*, 22 June 1857, page 3.

⁷³ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 28 June 1859, page 2.

⁷⁴ There is no doubt he would have been in and out of gaol but the records may not be on-line. He may also have been in Sydney where the newspapers may not have reported every drunken incident.

⁷⁵ *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, 25 March 1865, page 2.

⁷⁶ *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, 21 January 1865, page 2.

⁷⁷ *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, 3 March 1866, page 2.

means of support, was brought up in custody. It appeared that Sen. Constable Cowley had received complaints of the prisoner's conduct, and on the previous evening he found him drunk and offering to fight persons. It was also stated that prisoner had just previously been discharged from Armidale gaol. Prisoner said, in his defence, that he could always support himself; he was a bushman, splitting timber, putting up fences, and in the harvest time reaping. In reply to a question from the Bench, he gave the name of Mr. Munsie as that of one person he had been working with, and said, crying, that he was so remarkably weak when he came out of gaol that very little liquor upset him. Sen. Sergeant Du Vernet said that prisoner was so remarkably weak he was wanting to fight everybody (a laugh). Prisoner then begged very hard for mercy, and promised to leave the town at once if he were liberated. Sen. Constable Cowley said that prisoner's conduct had been very bad indeed. The Bench admonished and discharged prisoner, but informed him that if he again appeared here he would certainly be dealt with under the Vagrant Act. Prisoner: "I will leave the town at once; thank your worship; G— bless you, my dear gentleman!" No one in court could resist laughing, and although the police ordered Russell out at once he kept lingering on his way, in order to express additional gratitude to the Bench.⁷⁸

This newspaper reference is interesting as it is the only reference to Douglas having legitimate employment of any kind and it is also a possible explanation for why he wandered from town to town.

The magistrates and the police in Armidale were running out of patience and the local newspaper ridiculed Douglas/Russell for his dramatic court performances.

...ARMIDALE POLICE COURT. Tuesday, March 21...Charles Russell was brought up in custody on a charge of having been drunk and using obscene language. Russell is a mulatto, and it will be remembered that on a previous occasion he whined and cried like a child. It appeared, from the evidence of Constable Rafferty, that between 2 and 3 on Monday afternoon he found the prisoner lying drunk in Beardy-street. On telling prisoner that he must get out of that, he used very obscene and threatening language. As prisoner resisted being taken to the lock-up, the constable had to obtain the assistance of a civilian. Prisoner said he did not recollect any portion of the circumstance; that he was only let out of prison yesterday; and that he had been very badly treated in this place. He was about beginning to cry again when Sen. Constable Cowley, the lock-up keeper, was called, and be proved that this was the fourth appearance of prisoner before this Bench since Nov. last, and that he had been convicted once by this Bench. Sen. Sergeant Du Vernet said that prisoner had been sent to gaol for two months by the Bench here, for vagrancy, and that he had previously been sent to gaol for one month by the Bundarra Bench. Prisoner begged hard for mercy, and promised that if let off this time he would leave the town at once. He said that he worked hard for his living, and that inebriation was his only fault. The Bench was sorry that the gaoler had not the means to keep such prisoners at really hard labour, and sentenced Russell to six calendar months in Armidale gaol, with hard

⁷⁸ *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, 21 January 1865, page 2.

labour. Prisoner said it was a fearful sentence. The Bench was sorry it could not give him more. Prisoner was removed, complaining about and evidently astonished at the sentence.⁷⁹

The Armidale Gaol record for "Charles Russell" gives us another interesting insight into the man. Now fifty years of age, Russell was recorded as being able to "read and write perfectly" and further, that he "reads any books he can obtain".⁸⁰ His last recorded sentence in Armidale Gaol was for five months from 28th February 1866.⁸¹ After repeated harsh sentences in Armidale, Douglas left town.

From 1866 Douglas is elusive until he fronts court in Burrowa⁸² as "Charles Douglas" in July 1875 on charges of drunkenness and making use of obscene language. He was forwarded to the Young gaol for one month's imprisonment.⁸³

By 1876 Douglas was sixty years old and his hard life had taken a toll. The Goulburn Gaol Entrance Book of 1876 although difficult to read, indicates that Charles Douglas had numerous scars, was slightly bald and had some broken bones.⁸⁴ NSW Gaol records show that he also made an appearance in Grenfell.⁸⁵

In January 1881, Charles Douglas was arrested in Goulburn and now he had a "profession":

...Charles Douglas (a man of colour) was charged by the police with vagrancy. Senior-constable Wheally stated that the prisoner was a reputed thief; he was drunk last night when he arrested him; he had been loafing about town for some time past to his knowledge, and had no fixed residence. Prisoner stated that he was a professional phrenologist, and got his living by his profession. Convicted of vagrancy and sent to gaol for one month.⁸⁶

In January 1882 Charles Douglas was gaoled once again in Goulburn⁸⁷ and by September of that year he had made his way to Wollongong. Despite his numerous aliases, Douglas was obviously well-known and recognisable. The local newspaper reported that Charles Russell,

⁷⁹ *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, 25 March 1865, page 2.

⁸⁰ Ancestry.com: State Archives NSW, Kingswood, NSW; Criminal Court Records 1830-1945; Court of Criminal Jurisdiction; NSW Returns of Prisoners in Gaol 1866-1869; Nominal Return of all Prisoners in Her Majesty's Gaol Armidale First Day of May 1866; Reel 2429.

⁸¹ *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, 3 March 1866, page 2.

⁸² Now Boorowa, NSW.

⁸³ *Burrowa News*, 17 July 1875, page 2.

⁸⁴ Ancestry.com: State Archives NSW, Kingswood, NSW; Gaol Description and Entrance Books 1818-1830; Entrance and Description Book, Goulburn Gaol 1869-1877; Entrance Book 1876; Series: 2229; Item: 6/5430; Roll: 1875.

⁸⁵ Ancestry.com: State Archives NSW, Kingswood, NSW; Gaol Description and Entrance Books 1818-1930; Description Book, Grenfell 1877-1897; Series: 2262; Item: 1486; Roll: 295.

⁸⁶ *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 25 January 1881, page 2.

⁸⁷ *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 26 January 1882, page 2.

"alias Black Douglas" had been arrested for being drunk and was gaoled in the Wollongong Gaol.⁸⁸

From July 1875 until May 1886, "Charles Douglas" or "Charles Russell" was seen frequently before the courts of Goulburn,⁸⁹ Yass,⁹⁰ Wollongong,⁹¹ Parramatta,⁹² Windsor⁹³ and Wagga Wagga⁹⁴ where he was regularly arrested on charges of being drunk and disorderly, vagrancy, obscene language and the occasional assault. He was often released from gaol and arrested again soon afterwards, often on the day of his release.

By late 1885 Douglas appears to have been making his way back to Victoria. In September he was in Wagga Wagga where received a sentence of four months in gaol⁹⁵ and by January 1886 he was in Ballarat where he was involved in a fight.⁹⁶ He was probably the Charles Douglas who was arrested in Kilmore for insulting behaviour in April 1886 and given fourteen days in a Melbourne Goal.⁹⁷ In June he was arrested for drunkenness in Carlton, this time using the name Charles Russell. This report depicts the pitiful picture Douglas now presented:

An old colored man, named Charley Russell, who was arrested on a charge of drunkenness presented a pitiable appearance. He stated he was a phrenologist, recently arrived from Sydney, and had nowhere to go. He had been arrested in Canning street, and was covered from head to foot with mud, and an old white belltopper which he wore, was sadly knocked about. The Bench decided to remand him for a week. The poor old fellow was suffering from sciatica, and could scarcely limp across the floor of the court.⁹⁸

A month later it was the same old story:

An incorrigible old vagrant, named Douglas, made his appearance before Messrs Call and Co. at the City Court this morning, on a charge of vagrancy. Of course, he was found drunk last night, but it was such an effective "bender" that he had to be carried from his cell into Black Maria this morning. He repelled the charge of vagrancy with scorn. He was a "Ph-ph-phrenologist" and a "Professional." There

⁸⁸ *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, 28 September 1882, page 2.

⁸⁹ *Goulburn Herald and Chronicle*, 18 March 1876, page 4; *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 25 January 1881, page 2; *Goulburn Herald*, 26 January 1882, page 2; *Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 1884, page 1; *Goulburn Herald*, 23 August 1884, page 3.

⁹⁰ *Yass Courier*, 16 March 1877, page 2.

⁹¹ *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, 28 September 1882, page 2.

⁹² *Cumberland Mercury*, 7 April 1883, page 4; *Cumberland Mercury*, 6 October 1883, page 4; *Cumberland Mercury*, 1 December 1883, page 3; *Cumberland Mercury*, 5 January 1884, page 3; *Cumberland Mercury*, 9 April 1884, page 2.

⁹³ *Hawkesbury Chronicle and Farmers Advocate*, 14 March 1885, page 3.

⁹⁴ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 22 September 1885, page 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ballarat Star*, 7 January 1886, page 2.

⁹⁷ *Kilmore Free Press*, 6 May 1886, page 2.

⁹⁸ *Herald*, 5 June 1886, page 3.

now, and if that wasn't lawful means of support he would like to know what was. Mr Call asked him, "Would you like to go into the Benevolent Asylum?" Douglas replied with great fervor, "That's just the very place I would like to get to. Have mercy, Mr Call, have mercy!" And he strolled down the passage to the cells with a profusion of "Have mercies" and "God bless you's," which will last him till Thursday next, to which date he is remanded.⁹⁹

In July 1886 Charles Douglas spent two months in the Geelong Gaol for vagrancy¹⁰⁰ and in the November he was arrested for being "idle and disorderly" and was given a twelve month sentence in the Geelong Gaol.¹⁰¹

A few months after his release from Geelong Gaol, Douglas was arrested in Wangaratta:

...Charles Douglas, a feeble old man of color, who in the early days of the colony figured on Ballarat and Bendigo goldfields as a pugilist and a rough customer generally, was charged with having been drunk and disorderly and with using obscene language. Constable Dainty proved the charges, and added that the defendant made use of most disgusting language. Douglas, in reply, said that he was drunk, and would not deny the charge. He was a phrenologist by profession, and 72 years of age. He promised never to appear before the court again, and if let off would leave the town without delay. Sergeant Steele said that two years ago Douglas received a sentence for vagrancy. The Bench fined him 5s, or six hours' imprisonment, for the first offence, and 10s, or fourteen days, for having made use of obscene language.¹⁰²

From Wangaratta Douglas found his way to Beechworth where he spent fourteen days in the Beechworth Gaol for being drunk and disorderly. The Victoria Police Gazette records that he had a broken knuckle on his right hand and had seven prior convictions.¹⁰³

In May 1888 he was arrested at Tallarook for the usual reasons and fined in the Seymour court:

...The usual half-crown fine was inflicted, and paid, after which the colored gentleman of science walked down the street, a self-satisfied personification of injured innocence.¹⁰⁴

A week later Douglas was in the Seymour court again on a charge of "no visible lawful means of support" and for the theft of a bridle. Douglas claimed that he:

⁹⁹ *Herald*, 10 July 1886, page 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ancestry.com: Victoria Police Gazettes 1855, 1864-1924; 1886; Charles Douglas.

¹⁰¹ PROV, VPRS 515/P0000 Central Register for Male Prisoners (1886-1887) Image 241, Charles Douglas.

¹⁰² *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, 3 March 1888, page 1.

¹⁰³ Ancestry.com: Victoria Police Gazettes 1855, 1864-1924; 1888; Charles Douglas.

¹⁰⁴ *Seymour Express and Goulburn Valley, Avenel, Graytown, Nagambie, Tallarook and Yea Advertiser*, 4 May 1888, page 2.

...had earned money by reading the heads of several of the leading residents of Seymour. Constable Bush here stated that prisoner had examined the heads of several drunken men in the bars...He had to be taken to the lock-up in a wheelbarrow. Prisoner — I know nothing about the bridle, your Worship. I never took it as God is my judge. I can't see well enough to steal. Mr Wyatt, P.M., stated that the Bench had no doubt of his guilt, but that one of his colleagues was a tender hearted man and was not quite satisfied. However prisoner would be sentenced to 14 days' hard labor in Melbourne jail. Prisoner turned to the Bench, blessed his Worship, said he was a sober and an honest man. He was then led away with a tear trickling down from the corner of his left eye.¹⁰⁵

After fourteen days spent in the Melbourne Gaol, Douglas was arrested again on his release and from 23rd of May earned a further six months in the Geelong Gaol.¹⁰⁶

In December 1888 he was arrested in North Melbourne:

...An elderly coloured man named Charles Russell, whose bearing and language bore witness to the fact that he was by no means lacking in education or a sense of decency, was charged with vagrancy. The old fellow made a profound bow to the Bench, and assured them that he was no vagrant, as he could earn his livelihood as a phrenologist. 'Other people are allowed to follow their professions, pleaded the defendant, and why should it not be lawful for me to follow mine?' Constable Scannell said that Russell had been found lying on the footpath drinking water out of the gutter, and was evidently in a very weak state. The defendant said 'I took a little drink, and have a weak bump in my pericranium, and when the constable saw me I was recruiting myself.' As the old man said he had a son at Castlemaine, a constable was directed to pack him off to that town by the next train.¹⁰⁷

Charles Russell immediately made his way back to Bendigo, where of course he was arrested for drunkenness and vagrancy. He presented a pathetic sight:

At Sandhurst, a few days ago, an elderly man, who was drunk and incapable of taking care either of himself or of his large swag, over which he was talking phrenology, was arrested. On presentation at the watch-house he gave the name of Charles Russell, and looked every inch of what he represented himself to be – an American of 73 summers and winters. He was a miserable specimen of humanity – tottering on a stick and having bleared eyes, a blotched face and travel stained and grimy clothing. He took much pride in asserting himself to be a phrenologist, and explained his miserable appearance by saying he was "down on his luck, which was very so-so." He offered to read the "bumps" of those present

¹⁰⁵ *Seymour Express and Goulburn Valley, Avenel, Graytown, Nagambie, Tallarook and Yea Advertiser*, 11 May 1888, page 2.

¹⁰⁶ Ancestry.com: Victoria Police Gazettes 1855, 1864-1924; 1888; Charles Douglas.

¹⁰⁷ *North Melbourne Advertiser*, 8 December 1888, page 2; although not impossible, there is no evidence that Douglas had a son and this was probably a "get out of gaol" tactic.

when his term of confinement within the watchhouse walls was finished, and he was much gratified when the offer was accepted.¹⁰⁸

Douglas, now Charles Russell, spent the remainder of his life shuffling between the Bendigo Goal and the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum. In May 1891 the Commissioners for the Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions were undertaking hearings in Bendigo and were shocked to hear that often old men, whose only offence was old age or extreme poverty, were sent to gaol due to the lack of accommodation in the Benevolent Asylum. The commissioners were informed that at present there were six old men in gaol serving time for vagrancy for lack of space in the asylum and they were astonished to hear that five out of six of them preferred gaol to the benevolent asylum. The reason given was that they were not allowed out of the asylum to drink but when they served short sentences in gaol they could get drunk on their release, before being incarcerated again. The commissioners decided to visit the gaol and interview some of the inmates who would have qualified for a place in the asylum. One of the men they interviewed was Charles Russell/Douglas and once again we get to hear his voice and see another performance:

...An old depraved looking black-fellow, of over six feet in height, stood at the head of the line, supporting his elongated bony frame with a stout stick. "This is an old man who calls himself Charles Russell, explained Mr. Kelly, "he has been a member of the prize-ring and his proper name is Douglas, but he says he is sorry for all his prize-fights and wishes to lead a better life." "What do you do for a living when out of this?" asked Professor Morris. "I'm a phrenologist, sare," was the reply. "God has given me the talent for observing the conformation of the human head, sare, and I exercise that talent to the best of my ability." The old fellow was evidently fairly educated, and one or two of the gentlemen present looked surprised at the wording of his answer. "I was in the Benevolent Asylum," went on the man, "but my mother being a Tipperary woman, I wished to go out on St. Patrick's Day like every other good Irishman to join in the celebrations, but the superintendent wouldn't let me sare. I said I would go sare, and he said I wouldn't, and I went." ... In answer to further questions the old fellow claimed to be a native of Bristol—his father an American and his mother an Irish woman, "but you know, gentlemen," he added, "I'm an Englishman, and an Englishman can't stand tyranny." The gentleman present evidently had heard sufficient of his story, and proceeded on their inspection of the gaol, evidently impressed with the fact that the men they had just interviewed were not amongst those martyrs to circumstances who were more "sinned against than sinning."¹⁰⁹

On the 8th March 1892, Charles Russell was arrested for the last time at Rochester and was given a three month sentence in the Bendigo Gaol. His health gradually faded and he died in the Bendigo Gaol Hospital on 15th May 1892.¹¹⁰ William Douglas, AKA Alexander Douglas,

¹⁰⁸ *Leader*, 29 December 1888, page 16.

¹⁰⁹ *Bendigo Independent*, 11 May 1891, page 2.

¹¹⁰ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 17 May 1892, page 3.

Charles Douglas and Charles Russell, was buried in the Bendigo Cemetery under the name of Charles Russell.¹¹¹

Prejudice worked heavily against William Douglas. He was a tall, powerful, black man – and he stood out – and that's what made him threatening in 1800s society. His colour and size, along with the alias of "Black Douglas" and the fact that he lurked in the equally scary Black Forest gave him a fearful reputation. Douglas does not appear to have ever been gaoled for highway robbery in Victoria;¹¹² he was either clever enough to avoid being caught, or he didn't commit many of the crimes attributed to him. Mostly, he was a petty criminal and more of a nuisance than a danger. Despite the use of several aliases and changing his birthplace and arrival details, he could never escape his criminal past or his notoriety because he was so noticeable. Douglas spent the majority of his seventy-six years either drunk or behind bars for drunkenness, disturbing the peace, assault, sly grog selling, obscene language and vagrancy. In old age he was the frequent subject of derision, pity and scorn; far removed from the fearful, notorious bushranger Black Douglas.

The following account was written in 1856 by a correspondent named "The Miner", reminiscing about Ballarat. Alexander Douglas was in gaol at the time it was written. "The Miner" appears to have either known Douglas, or people who knew him and his report shows another side of Douglas, and possibly of the man he might have been in another time and place; it is to him I give the last word:

UPON the principle of fair play, and, as the adage says, to "give the devil his due," we are bound to note that the notorious Douglas was not at this time the lawless villain he subsequently became. Douglas was not only a man of good parts, but one who had been also liberally educated...He appears to have been a man of great physical power and courage; inclined to be jovial; fond of fun and freedom, but not at this time disposed to criminal outrages on society. So far from this was he, that we have heard respectable individuals state that when, on the Point,¹¹³ at this period, they were glad to have him for a neighbor; his well-known prowess, and reputation alike for honesty and courage, albeit dashed with the rowdy in some of its less repugnant forms, constituting him a welcome member of the small and exposed community. With these traits there was, however, a weakness of character which induced him readily to yield to the solicitations of his companions; and that fact, connected with the extreme probability that the time and place furnished him with associates of selectest felony from "over the water," may explain his rapid descent to the lowest depths of crime and cruelty.¹¹⁴

© Heather Knight 2022

¹¹¹ <https://www.findagrave.com/> Bendigo Public Cemetery. Burial 16 May 1892. Plot Mon L3, Grave 12249.

¹¹² He was possibly the "Archibald Douglass, better known as Black Douglas" who was charged with assault and robbery in 1852, but due to the witness not appearing he was discharged; *Argus*, 8 July 1852, page 5. There was also an Archibald Douglas in the courts around the same time which may have confused the reporter.

¹¹³ Golden Point at Ballarat.

¹¹⁴ *Star*, 27 September 1856, page 2.