The Ballad of Moondyne Joe

In the Darling Ranges, many years ago,
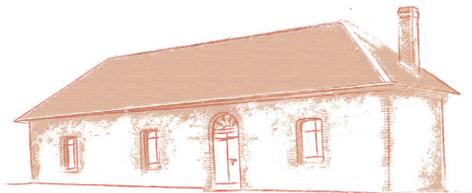There lived a daring outlaw, by the name of 'Moondyne Joe'.
He stole the squatter's horses, and a sheep or two or three,
He loved to roam the countryside, and swore he would be free.
The troopers said we'll catch him, but we know it's all in vain,
Every time we lock him up he breaks right out again.
'Cause in he goes, and out he goes, and off again he'll go,
There's not a gaol in W.A. can keep in 'Moondyne Joe'.

Anonymous

It were Moondyne of course
That took Ferguson's horse.
He'd hidden the same
In the hills of that name.
When he found it had gone
Ferguson searched all the Swan,
And offered a pound
For when it was found.
But Joe has it hid
And he pockets the quid.
In a month to the day
Again the horse goes astray.
But Ferguson's no fool
Goes along to Moondyne Pool.
To see if it's true
The police comes too.
When his sentence is gone
Joe is done with the Swan.
They call me bushranger—
I'll feel quite a stranger;
So by the Mass
I'll try the Vasse.
At Ellensbrook
The silly old rook
Gets a job
At Fifteen Bob.
No more I don't know
That's the story of Moondyne Joe.

Learn more about Moondyne Joe and other stories about Toodyay's past at Newcastle Gaol.

Located on Clinton Street, Toodyay
open weekdays 10.00am - 3.00pm
open weekends 10.00am - 3.30pm
admission fees apply

For more information about Toodyay's historic sites, visit the Toodyay Visitor Information Centre on Piesse Street, Toodyay.

Toodyay Visitor Centre
7 Piesse Street
TOODYAY WA 6566
Tele: (08) 9574 2435
Fax: (08) 9574 2431
http://www.toodyay.com

Front cover image of Moondyne Joe supplied by Ian Elliot, author of "Moondyne Joe, the Man and the Myth" published by Hesperian Press.

Image of escape proof cell courtesy of Fremantle Prison.

MOONDYNE JOE

In the 1850s a Welshman became infamous in Western Australia as a convict, an escapee and hero of the average man from the bush. Not quite a bushranger but worse than just a horse thief, Joseph Bolitho Johns became better known by his nickname, Moondyne Joe.

February 1853

Johns arrived in Australia aboard the convict ship Pyrenees, facing ten years imprisonment at the Convict Establishment.

He had been arrested in Wales and proven guilty of stealing several cheeses, 3 loaves of bread 2 pieces of bacon, part of a shoulder of mutton & a piece of suet.

Johns' good behaviour on the ship meant he was offered his ticket-of-leave upon arrival in Fremantle.

What is ticket-of-leave?

A convict would receive a ticket of leave if they passed a period of probation with good behaviour. The ticket allowed the prisoner the freedom to seek employment, acquire land, marry, and bring family from overseas to join them.

They were not allowed to leave a district without permission, carry firearms or board a ship.

Once a ticket of leave prisoner completed half their sentence under these conditions they were entitled to a conditional pardon. This removed all restrictions except the right to leave the colony.

Johns worked in Fremantle until the end of 1854 before receiving his conditional pardon. Sometime prior to 1860 he moved to the Avon Valley district.

1861

Johns was arrested in Newcastle for illegally branding a brumby and jailed in the Newcastle Convict Hiring Depot. The building was old and dilapidated and he easily escaped taking the horse and the Resident Magistrate's saddle and bridle.

He was re-captured days later, and sentenced to "three years penal servitude", to be served at the forbidding Convict Establishment (now known as Fremantle Prison)

1864

Johns is pardoned and released.

1865

Johns is arrested again for "killing an ox with felonious intent" and sentenced to ten years imprisonment back at Fremantle Prison.

He escaped three times in four months, on the last attempt breaking into Everett's Store in Newcastle to obtain supplies for a trip to South Australia. He was recaptured only 300kms from Perth.

1866

The name Moondyne Joe appeared in the press for the first time on 8 August in relation to this escape, cementing Johns into Western Australian history and folklore.
On his return to Fremantle Prison, Johns was subjected to one of Governor Hampton's "escape proof" cells.

The name "Moondyne" is thought have originated from Joe's hiding spot in the Moondyne Hills near Toodyay. Many of the settlers who knew him from this area regarded him as something of a hero for his ability to continuously evade the authorities. It is thought that people like this helped hide and feed him whilst he was on the run.

This was a 4' x 7' cell lined with jarrah planks nailed to the walls with hundreds of metal studs. Three layers of bars were put on the windows and he was handcuffed, wore leg irons and was chained to the floor.

Governor Hampton is reputed to have said to Johns on inspection "If you get out again, I'll forgive you."

In this tiny cell Johns began to suffer physically and was assigned to "exercise"; breaking stones in the main parade ground of the prison.

1867

The guards were foolishly relaxed in overseeing this work and didn't realise, until it was too late, that Johns had chipped his way through the wall one day, escaping once again.

This time, "Moondyne Joe" was on the run for nearly two years, his most successful escape yet.

25 February 1869

It was bad timing that saw him caught again when he broke into the Houghton's Winery in the Swan Valley for supplies.

Unbeknownst to Johns the police had been investigating a drowning nearby and literally walked into him as he ran out of the winery.

Upon his re-imprisonment he petitioned to see the Governor, asking him to uphold his promise of release for escaping again.

27 June 1873

To avoid losing face the Governor was forced to honour his words and Joe was released.

He went on to marry Louisa Hearn in Fremantle and together they travelled around the state searching for work. His final imprisonment was at Fremantle Lunatic Asylum where he died of "senile dementia" on 13 August 1900, aged 71.