

John Hundy

1858 - 1861

John Hundy was born to William and Catherine on the 28th of December 1858 at Campbells Creek. He was William's eighth child and Catherine's sixth, their second together, with their first son George just fourteen months old. John was a half-brother to Thomas (15), James (13), Elizabeth (11), William (8), Michael (5), and Patrick (3). He also had two step-sisters and one step-brother from his mother's first marriage. John was baptised at four months of age by Father McCarthy of Mudgee with Patrick Hayes and Margaret Garth the witnesses.¹ Patrick may well have been a relation of Catherine's, though, no records are available to confirm any relationship. The family were living at Campbells Creek having moved from their previously stated residence at Grattai. John was just 12 months old when his oldest brother, Thomas, contracted dysentery and died at home after an illness lasting five days.² Thomas was the first of William's children to die. Sadly, John also died in mysterious circumstances just under two years later, one month short of his third birthday. John's death was reported by his father to the authorities as occurring at Merri Merri Creek, north-west of Coonamble, N.S.W. on the 7th of December 1861. The information supplied by William resulted in his death certificate stating he'd died of a 'severe cold' and did not receive the benefit of medical attention.³

He died on an isolated section of Marthaguy Creek where assistance would not have been available in what was very sparsely populated country at the time. He was buried there by his family with his older brother, James, officially listed as the witness.⁴ Whilst the officially recorded cause of death is listed as a severe cold, local folklore describes a very different scenario. Property owners in the district tell of a tragic accident resulting in the untimely death of young John Hundy. The story goes that the Hundy family were camped with a mob of cattle on the banks of the Marthaguy. The mob was made up of bullocks which had been penned in makeshift yards for the evening presumably after being driven along the creek towards a land holding somewhere in the Coonamble district belonging to either William or someone he may have been working for. It is claimed that John fell into the yards and was trampled by the bullocks resulting in his death.⁵ I have heard this version of events from several sources both within the family, and among locals in the Coonamble district, where it is accepted as fact. Given William's convict past it is entirely plausible that he might have sought to protect himself from any suggestion of negligence or foul play as a consequence of a highly developed sense of mistrust of the authorities courtesy of his convict days. He may have felt he had no alternative but to concoct a story to fend off any potential for suspicion based on his status as an emancipist.

William certainly had the opportunity to prevent any serious investigation of the events. The isolated location in which John died would've also prevented any medical attention being provided to him whatever it was that led to his death. He was buried on the spot rather than transported into Coonamble for burial at the cemetery there. The death certificate lists only James Hundy as being witness to the burial, though, it does list a Mr. Smith as the undertaker.⁶ The lack of detail suggests a burial hastily undertaken in the absence of the usual formalities and religious ceremony. His gravesite is marked with a remarkably well-preserved sandstone headstone which in recent times has been

protected by the inclusion of the area in a nature reserve. Over the years floods have washed over the site moving the headstone around resulting in the exact location of the grave being lost, however, it is unlikely the headstone is far from its original location. A photo provided to me by Phil and Moira Tolhurst of 'Willie Station' shows the headstone in its original location with a timber balustrade around the grave. The balustrade is long gone but as the second photo shows the engraved inscription on the headstone is still clearly legible. Today, John Hundy's burial site is still isolated, surrounded by large pastoral properties and dry scrub. Standing in its presence on a stifling hot summer day with the cicadas monotonous droning among the Poplar Box and Coolibah, and the glare of the floodplain's bare cracked clay reinforces its lonely and desolate nature. One-hundred-and-forty years on, the site still has an overwhelmingly brutal sadness about it. I can only imagine the grief the family must have endured upon his death and subsequent burial and then having to leave behind the still soft earth of his grave as they moved on with the mob of cattle to their destination.

It is, perhaps, fitting, given the mystery surrounding the death of John, one last story remains tying him into the legend of the exploits of the famous bushranger, Ben Hall. Local legend has it that, after robbing a bank in Warren, Ben Hall and his gang made their escape north toward the river country of the Barwon where they came across the freshly dug grave of John Hundy on the banks of the Marthaguy. In need of somewhere to stash their ill-gotten gains the soft earth would've provided a quick and easy option, and it's believed they took advantage of John's recent burial to hide their loot in the grave.⁷ It would also have been the last place anyone would think, or want, to look. There is no way of knowing if there is any truth to the story, and it is more than likely any kernel of truth may have been lost long ago with the re-telling of the story over the years. Nonetheless, the fact the story exists at all is remarkable and is testament to the extraordinarily evocative setting of John Hundy's isolated grave.