

An Encounter with Captain Moonlite

The following is an extract from
 “The Story of My Life as I remember it”
 by William Maypeace Hobbs

William Maypeace Hobbs was born on the 20th March 1856 in St Dunstan, Stepney, England. He migrated to Australia in 1858 on the ship “Pam Hush” with his parents John and Maria and siblings John and Annie, along with his father’s sisters. His brother Alf who he mentions in the story was born in Australia. By the time of this story his mother had died and his father had remarried.

On arrival in Sydney William’s well educated father secured a job with the Sydney School of Arts. In 1867 his father resigned this position with the intention of moving to a property of 640 acres he had purchased at Wagonga Inlet. In the area now known as Hobbs Bay and Hobbs Point.



William Maypeace Hobbs died in Sydney in 1936.

The following extract is of their voyage from Sydney to Wagonga and their encounter unbeknown to them with Captain Moonlite.

My father selected a ketch named the “Comet” which he chartered from a Mr Harrison and Captain Scott. After loading up the Comet with all our goods and chattels and twelve months supply of provisions, the Captain brought the ketch round into Woolloomooloo Bay where she anchored and where Jack and I were taken on board, and we divided the time (a week) in fishing and caught some fair size mackerel and yellow tail and eating and sleeping until one fine morning father and Mother, Annie and Alf came on board, and we set sail for our destination, Wagonga River. We were nearly a week beating about before we got as far as Kiama and it was very rough, so much so that when we were in the trough of the seas, we could not see land, and we afterwards heard that Captain Stobe, who was the Pilot at Kiama, and also the uncle of our step mother, had a boat out on the lookout for us, however, everything passed off Ok with the exception that we were running short of water, but

the only difference it made to me was that the cook of the “Comet” had to boil our plum duff in salt water, so as to conserve the fresh water for drinking, however, after another week we sighted Mount Dromedary, and Montague Island after which we came up to Wagonga Heads, too late to enter the river that night so had to beat about until daylight next morning when we were all locked in the cabin, with the exception of Dad who remained on deck, while we crossed the bar, the Captain being up the foremast giving directions which way to steer, it was a very anxious time as the owner or Captain had never been there before and we had to go broadsides on to the rollers which several times threatened to capsize us, and what made it more unpleasant for us was seeing the remains of another ketch called “Porpoise” lying high and dry on the sand spit, as we passed in, as we did safely, and for which we were all very thankful, and when we entered the river we thought we were in Paradise, everything in the way of trees were beautifully green, the scent of the Sassafras trees, and other shrubs was almost overpowering and the continual notes of the Bell birds all being new to us, we thought we had been transferred to another world, especially so, upon rounding one of the points in the River, our Point with the house near the water came into view, we were all anxious to get ashore, after spending nearly three weeks at sea. That afternoon we got up to the jetty, but we did not start to unload the “Comet” until next morning, the sailors helping to carry the goods up to the house. It did not take us long to unload, the next job was to load up again with produce from the farm, and also a few tons of paint ore, a kind of red conglomerate which, on being crushed, produced a very fine red paint. With about 20 or 30 tons of this, and about a few thousand tie nails, about 50 or 60 bags of onions, some cases of fruit (I think early Peaches) several bags of oysters and that completed the return cargo and the “Comet” got ready for sea again but before leaving us, one of our neighbours named Sam Pool promised to take the Captain out bee nesting they borrowed our largest galvanized tub to put the honey in, and which they filled to the brim, as it was a very old hive and had plenty of honey. They put it on board, said goodbye and that night got down the River to the Heads where they remained for a month or so waiting for a favourable wind to cross the bar, it was only after some weeks that we saw a boat pulling up the River and were astonished to see the Captain of

the "Comet". He said he had waited for a chance to get over the bar, Dad asked what had become of the fruit, oysters etc. He replied that he had to pitch them all overboard, as they went bad, and needless to say we had seen the last of our new tub, as he forgot to bring it back with him and that was the last we saw of the Ketch "Comet" and Captain Scott, although we heard a good deal of him, but under the name of Captain Moonlite as he was then known by.

I could hardly credit that our Captain Scott could turn out to be such a bad character, and take on bushranging which he afterwards did and was eventually hanged in Darlinghurst Goal for his crimes. The three weeks we were cooped up with him on the Comet, no one could have been more kind and considerate than him to our family as I remember him, he was not a tall man, with a sandy beard, and rather a pleasant good looking man of about 35 I should think, well spoken and very moderate in his language and altogether appeared to be a thorough gentleman. So that's that.

Editors Notes

Amazing though this story is, it is corroborated by the historical facts.

The Testimonial to William's father from the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts published in the Empire 29 May 1867 gives us the date he resigned his position with the intention of moving his family to Wagonga. He did not move there straight away but sent Abel Arnold down first to build a house and establish an orchard. John and his second wife had made a number of trips down to Wagonga. Their 2 year old son Robert had died in Moruya on one of the return journeys in March 1866.

You will find more on the Hobbs family in Laurel Pacey's book "Narooma's Past Steamers and Sawmills and Salmon."



The life of Captain Moonlite has been well recorded by historians. He was Andrew George Scott, the son of an Anglican clergyman from County Down Ireland. He was baptized on 5th July 1842. In 1861 he and his brother had moved with their parents to Auckland, New Zealand.¹ 1868 saw Scott in Australia where he got an appointment as a lay reader and by March 1869 he was in living at Egerton near Ballarat where he robbed the bank of gold but managed to convince the authorities that the Bank's Agent had performed the robbery himself. September 1869 saw him in Noumea but by

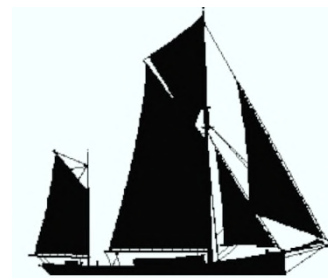
December 1869 he had returned to Sydney where he sold the gold and started spending freely.

An article in the Illustrated Australian News 24 December 1879 on Moonlite's career states "the next thing Scott did was to purchase the Ketch "Comet" at Stubbs's auction rooms for £270, but he had to pay £360 for repairs which were found to be necessary, and his ready money was running short he had to mortgage and subsequently sell her."

The "Comet" was advertised for sale by Stubbs and Company in December 1869, she was listed as 45 tons burthen.² The reason for the auction and why Scott needed to pay out for repairs was early in December she had sunk at Moore's wharf during a severe storm³. The insurance company had however managed to raise her a few weeks later.⁴

So the Hobbs family had trusted their lives to a man who was not a qualified master, had never sailed on the South Coast, was a known con man, and would go on to style himself as Captain Moonlite.

Details of the Ketch "Comet"



It is not known when the "Comet" was built. There had been many vessels of that name built over the years.

The illustration left is a representation of what she may have looked like. This is based on the description "as being under mizen, jib and staysail, the mainsail and gaff-topsail having been taken in"⁵ when she sank coming into Moore's Wharf.

KETCH COMET.

On account of whom it may concern.

Now lying off Cuthbert's Wharf.

R. F. STUBBS and CO. have received instructions to sell by auction, at the Rooms, on **WEDNESDAY, December 29th, at 11 o'clock,** The well-known ketch Comet, of 45 tons burthen. She is in excellent order, all her sails are nearly new, and she is well found in other respects.

No reserve.
Terms, at sale.

SMH 25 Dec 1869

² Sydney Morning Herald 25th December 1869.

³ The Empire 8th Dec 1869.

⁴ Sydney Morning Herald 16 December 1869.

⁵ The Empire 8th Dec 1869.

¹ Australian Dictionary of Biography.