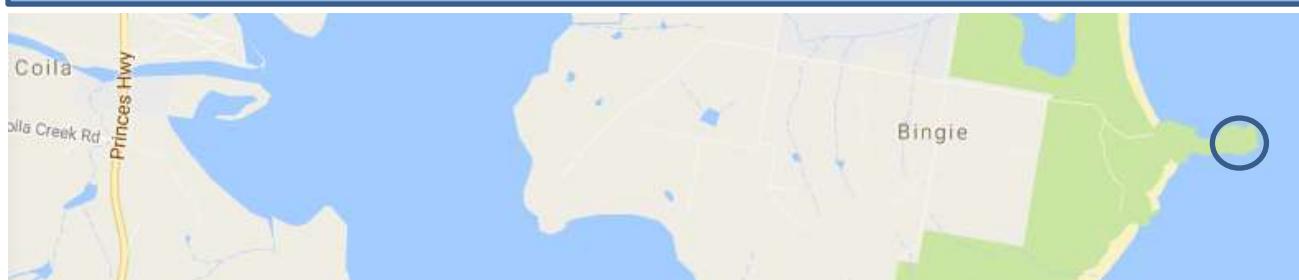


“Monaro”—Wrecked off Kelly’s Point, Moruya, 1879

by Shirley Jurmann



Reefs south of Moruya Heads were the cause of several ship wrecks. The “Kameruka” was wrecked off Pedro Point in 1897 and earlier the “Monaro” in May 1879 was wrecked a little further south at Kelly’s Point, off Bingie. In both cases, there happily was no loss of life. All passengers and crew were rescued but not without some difficulties.

The “Monaro” built in 1876, was 521 tons gross and 302 tons net. She was rigged as a two- masted schooner and her length was 180 feet, beam 24.7 feet and depth 15.6 feet. She was an excellent little steamer and cost the I.S.N. Company about £18,000, only a couple of years before she was lost. Her loss was the start of a run of bad luck for the I.S.N. Co. They expended several thousand pounds in having the “John Penn” lengthened and renovated as a replacement for the “Monaro” only to have it run aground a few miles north of Moruya a few months later. The “John Penn” was replaced on the South Coast run by the “Kameruka” which was also wrecked some years later.

The “Monaro” left Sydney for Merimbula at 9.30 a.m. on 28th May 1879. She was carrying passengers, a crew of 22, men and materials for the Montague Island lighthouse, and goods on consignment. The weather was good and she had a splendid, uneventful trip until she met with her ill-fated accident at 3.30 a.m. on the following morning.

Captain Francis Sheed had retired to his cabin about midnight, leaving Mr George Furze, the chief officer, in charge. Rocky Montague Island, lying off Narooma, is surrounded by many reefs on which the sea breaks heavily in rough weather. A strong current often runs on the ocean side of the island, forcing vessels to pass between the island and the mainland. As the ship had cargo and men for the lighthouse on Montague Island this may have been the reason the ship was too close to shore, about six miles south of Moruya Heads. The chief officer was steering the usual course or perhaps a point more to sea. The morning was extremely dark and raining heavily, with lightning to the south, but the sea was calm at this stage.

Captain Sheed and most of those in their bunks were woken when there was a heavy crash as the ship collided with the reef. The fore part of the steamer on striking, appeared to rise considerably and again dip forward, the whole vessel giving two or three terrible rolls, which ended with a violent lurch to one side. The side of the ship was stove in, causing the engine room to at once fill with water, forcing the occupants to flee on deck. When the crash occurred the Captain immediately rushed on deck in nothing but his night-shirt. He ordered the boats to be lowered and the women and children put into them. The boats were fully equipped with a man in charge. They were ordered to lay by the ship till daylight. Preparations were made to land provisions and shelter for the passengers. The men obeyed orders with coolness while most of the passengers displayed a marked degree of courage. They were lowered to the waiting boats by rope. The women and children were remarkably composed although one little girl was haunted by the idea of the open jaws of a shark waiting for her. When it was the turn of the male passengers to be lowered, one man displayed a reluctance to leave the ship. He was a “new chum” in the colony, having recently arrived from Ireland. His fear of leaving the ship was almost more than his fear of staying on the ship. He almost had to be lassoed to compel him to leave. Whether through fear or awkwardness he and the rope he was being lowered on, parted company and he fell heavily into the boat on top of two men who collapsed under his considerable weight. When they recovered their footing the “new chum” had a narrow

escape from being thrown over the side of the small boat. Later this same gentleman pulled under water a policeman who was attempting to assist him in his frantic efforts to get on land when the boat reached shore.

Soundings were taken all around the vessel to ascertain the general position as regard to the reef or rock. It was feared that she might be on the edge of some perpendicular ledge from which she might be swept into deep water at any moment. Fortunately it was found there was no immediate danger of her being swallowed up, as the rock was found to extend all around. No land could be seen from the wreck. Rockets and blue flares were fired off in the hope that the shore might be discerned.

Most of the crew remained on deck until daylight when the adjacent shore became visible and a place selected for landing. All hands set to work to land the passengers and provisions. This was safely accomplished in about two or three hours at a place a little north of the disaster scene. Captain Sheed and a few crew members remained on the wreck for some time but finding that the vessel was hopelessly fast and damaged on the rocks they went ashore also.

When the first boat reached shore they were met by one farmer who informed the officer in charge of the boat in a most churlish manner, that the land was his and he would not allow carts and horses to cross it in order to rescue passengers or cargo. This was in complete contrast to the actions of Mr and Mrs Hampson on a nearby farm and the hospitality in general of the people of Moruya. Joseph Hampson arranged for a man to ride to Moruya to send a telegram to the I.S.N.Co. for help, and also containing information about the wreck. He assisted to remove passengers and crew to his house, which was soon packed with men, women and children, while some had to shelter in a shed. Mr P. Mylott of Tuross Heads spotted the wreck and sent information to Mr J. Emmott who proceeded in his own vehicle, accompanied by three other traps to the scene of the wreck, with a view of removing the women and children to more comfortable quarters in town.

Meanwhile the people needed to be fed and kind-hearted Mr Hampson gave the men a fat bullock to kill for themselves. There were no substantial yards suitable for slaughtering on the property so the problem presented itself of how the animal was to be caught and converted into beef steaks and roast. Necessity though is the mother of invention. The bullock was herded into a secure 40 acre paddock and about 20 hands, including the chief engineer, the firemen and the cook gave chase. Round and round the paddock went the bullock. Round and round the paddock went the men in a yarding style never before witnessed by the inhabitants of Moruya. Brains eventually triumphed over brawn and his bullockship was cornered. The men were determined he should not be allowed to get away and one of the engineers crept through the fence. He seized the bullock by the tail and twisted it around one of the rails. A struggle took place, the like of which would never be forgotten by those who witnessed it. The engineer was determined that the bullock would not get away without at least leaving behind the material with which to make oxtail soup. The bullock tossed and writhed but the engineer held on. The tail did not give way but the engineer collected many splinters. Some of the sailors decided the way to go was to employ the methods they usually used to secure pigs and calves on board steamers and managed to get a noose around one of the bullock's hind legs. Other men helped and thus relieved the tailkeeper. Once the stern end was secured the bullock was attacked in front and speedily had his figure-head fatally stove in with an axe. The bleeding, skinning and cutting up was done in much the same novel style as the capturing was done. However by the time Mr Emmott and Mr McKeown sent out their spring carts with extra blankets and Mr Ferguson and Mr Harvison sent their traps so people could be moved into town, they were cooking and enjoying a hearty meal of beefsteaks and were reluctant to leave. Mr Hicks, school inspector, drove his buggy to Bingie and brought back two lady passengers. Mrs Croxon also sent her spring cart to convey six male passengers and luggage.

The passengers were eventually conveyed to Moruya township where they were accommodated at the Adelaide and Kildare Hotels and some in private homes. They remained in Moruya until the "Kiama" arrived from Sydney and took them back to Wollongong. The "new chum" caused a fuss. After leaving Moruya on a punt to board the "Kiama" he discovered he had left his coat behind and demanded the punt return to pick it up. This "polite request" was refused. When the punt reached the bar he had to wade through shallow water to board the "Kiama" and he lost one of his boots. He then fell into a waterpool in the sand and was almost swallowed up, eventually rising hippopotamus-like from the water.

The sea began to rise the following day and it was the opinion of all that if the conditions had been that way when the ship struck the reef there would have been severe loss of life. Before Thursday night the stern part of

the vessel was broken up and on the following night only the compartments before the bridge were left intact. It was considered that not even the engines could be saved. Nearly all the passengers' luggage had been taken on shore along with small portions of the cargo. The Captain had remained cool and calm throughout the rescue operation but became extremely upset the next day when he saw his beloved ship being broken up. He later spoke in the highest terms of the hospitality and consideration given by the people of Moruya and Mr and Mrs Hampson in particular. He also praised the conduct of the crew and passengers, some of whom worked as volunteers in endeavouring to save life and property.

The passengers were Mr and Mrs Walter Buckle and three children from Mount Keira, Mr and Mrs James Cummings and seven children from Shellharbour, Mrs C. Friend and son, Mr and Mrs Higgins, Messrs. George Phillips, E.B. Myers and child, A.H. Wright and J. Frost. Mr and Mrs Buckle and family had been on their way to Bega to visit friends but gave up the idea after being wrecked. Mr and Mrs Cummings and family had been on their way from Shellharbour to settle in the Bega district. All were taken back to Wollongong even though most wanted to go further south. From there they were taken to their intended destination.

The Captain and several of his officers remained at the site for some days until the hull was sold and they were instructed by I.S.N.Co. to leave. The hull of the wreck was purchased on the account of Messrs. Coman Brothers and Mr D. Kiss for the sum of 133 pounds. An auctioneer held an auction on the shore and sold off some goods without proper authority. There was a court case over a case of saddlery consigned to Mr Gentle of Bega. He had paid over 30 pounds for it in Sydney. It was sold off at 12 pounds, probably because no more bids took place when the authority of the auctioneer was questioned. The buyer then on sold it for over 24 pounds.



The ship broke up and wreckage was strewn along the shoreline. The rusted remains of the boilers remain on Bingie Point to this day.

The Marine Board conducted an investigation and issued the following report:

"Whereas the Marine Board have instituted an inquiry respecting the loss of the steamer Monaro, which took place on the 29th May last, the said Board now report that the said loss was caused by the wrongful act or default, firstly, of Francis Sheed, the master, in ordering a course to be steered which led to the wreck of the vessel.

Secondly, by the wrongful act or default of George Furze, the mate, for not calling the captain when the thick weather set in, and not otherwise taking sufficient precaution to keep the vessel clear of the land".

As a result of this report Captain Sheed and Mr Furze were charged with default and had to show cause why their certificates should not be suspended or cancelled. They were found guilty and Captain Francis Sheed and officer George Furze had their certificates suspended for three months. Captain Sheed was very well thought of along the coast and was known for his unvarying kindness and attention to passengers as well as for the care and caution of his command. Many people thought he had been unfairly treated. A subscription was started towards presenting him with a testimonial. It was expected that 200 pounds would be raised in the Merimbula district and similar movements were started in Bega, Bombala and Wolumla.

Several ships were also wrecked trying to cross the bar to enter or leave the Moruya River, most belonging to the I.S.N.Co.

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Queanbeyan Age, 7th June 1879

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Monaro and Cooma and Bombala Advertiser, 13th August 1879

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