

'How Gilbert Died' Teachers Background Notes

Gilbert

John Gilbert was an Australian bushranger who was born in Canada in 1842 to English parents. The family migrated to Australia in 1852, as part of the wave of immigrants attracted by the gold discoveries in New South Wales. In 1862 Gilbert became a bushranger, riding first with Frank Gardiner's gang and then Ben Hall's. They specialised in holding up banks and stage coaches.

In 1864 Gilbert shot dead a police sergeant guarding a coach. The government declared him, Ben Hall and John Dunn, another member of the gang, outlaws and posted a reward of one thousand pounds (over \$40,000 in modern terms) on each of their heads. As outlaws they could be legally shot on sight by anyone, police or civilians.

The gang split up and Hall was killed on May 6, 1865. His death is memorialised in the poem 'The Death of Ben Hall'. On 13 May 1865, Gilbert and Dunn hid out in a hut owned by John Kelly, Dunn's grandfather, at Binalong, near the town of Young. Kelly reported them to the police. When the police ambushed the hut, Gilbert was shot while covering Dunn's escape. Gilbert's body was buried in a paddock of the police station

The Author

Andrew Barton Paterson is possibly Australia's best known poet. He is most famous for the poem 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Waltzing Matilda', Australia's unofficial national song.

The Poem

The poem was first published in *The Bulletin* magazine in 1892. Paterson's family owned a farm in the Binalong area and he attended Binalong Primary School from 1869 to 1874. No doubt he grew up hearing stories of Gilbert's exploits and his death from neighbours and school mates.

Scaffolding the Poem

Content

Before reading the poem, students might need to have the concept of outlaw explained to them. Although often used today to refer to someone who disobeys the law, it originally referred to someone who through government proclamation, had been denied the protection of the law. Thus an outlaw could be legally shot on sight by anyone, police or civilian.

Language

Terms students may be unfamiliar with include:

- grandsire - grandfather
- rifle breech – where rifle is bent for loading
- watershed: an area between two rivers; in this case between the Murrumbidgee and Lachlan rivers in NSW
- 'a black that tracked': this term sound racist today; it refers to Aboriginal trackers who worked with the police and who were renowned for their observation and deduction skills.

References

Clune, Frank, *Wild Colonial Boys*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948.

Prior, Tom, Wannan, Bill, Nun h., *A Pictorial History of Australian Bushranging*, Paul Hamlyn, Sydney, 1969.