



John Glover : National Gallery of Australia

**ACTIVITY:** Sea disaster  
**CASE:** [GSAF 1831.01.22.R](#)  
**DATE:** Reported January 22, 1831  
**LOCATION:** Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

**NAME:** Robert Dudlow  
**DESCRIPTION:** He was a free servant<sup>2</sup> of Mr. Aylwin.

**NARRATIVE:** Squalls and high winds upset the boat. When he “quitted his hold of the vessel” it was though that he was seized by a shark.

**NOTES:** <sup>1</sup> Glover’s painting on this page may depict the indigenous Tasmanians, the semi-nomadic Mouheneener tribe. A series of bloody clashes with the settlers, and the diseases they brought, reduced the aboriginal population who were replaced by free settlers and the convict population.

<sup>2</sup> Although a Free Servant was not a slave, their relationship to their employer was regulated by the Masters and Servants Acts, laws of the 18th and 19th century that required the obedience of servants to their employer, infringements punishable by a jail term with hard labor.

**We regret to state that the squalls and high winds which prevailed last week were attended with several serious and fatal accidents. On Christmas day Mr. Gordon, as Coroner, held two inquests on the bodies of the unfortunate men who were drowned. The one was on Robert Dudlow, a free servant of Mr. Aylwin. The boat had scarcely left the shore when the black girl, whom he is bringing up, ran to him saying the boat had gone down, which he discovered floating under water. Assisted by Mr. Chipman, he succeeded in rescuing Brown, the man who had charge of the boat, and at the imminent risk of his own life dashed through the breakers and dived and brought up his assigned servant, who had sunk to the bottom, and by proper care was ultimately restored to life. The unfortunate Dudlow, however, it would appear, when he had quitted his hold of the vessel, had been seized by a shark, as his remains were much mutilated. The other inquest was on Alexander Burns, an assigned servant of Mr. Mather, who with another was upset on the same day, proceeding to his master’s farm at Muddy plains, with a cargo of goods. The boat had been picked up, divested of all its load, by Mr. Cox’s servants, and the poor man was completely jammed into the aft sheets. A whale boat also belonging to the Deveron was upset in the harbour on Saturday, when a seaman named John Smith was unfortunately drowned.**

*The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser  
 (news report from the Hobart Town Courier)  
 Saturday January 22, 1831, page 3*

The law prevented workers from organizing for better work conditions. As little as one hour's absence without permission by a free servant could precipitate a punishment of prison or the treadmill. In 1840, employees in Australia who left their employment without permission were subject to being hunted down under the Bushrangers Act.

On January 5, 1831 (less than three weeks before this incident), the Bushranger Walmsley, companion of Webber and 'Bold Jack' Donohue was captured by four mounted troopers at Mr. Campbell's farm (Mt. Philo on the Western Road). When captured he was wearing a blue silk jacket and carrying a very fine pair of silver mounted pistols. Taken to the watchhouse, he was secured by a chain and ring attached to the wall.

**Note:** Glover's painting on the previous page may depict the indigenous Tasmanians, the semi-nomadic Mouheneener tribe. A series of bloody clashes with the settlers, and the diseases they brought, reduced the aboriginal population who were replaced by free settlers and the convict population.

#### **ASSESSMENT OF CASE INVESTIGATOR:**

**Invalid:** I am unaware of any reference to this purported shark attack in any Tasmanian archives. The rather sketchy account of this boating accident reported in *The Sydney Gazette* (quoting the *Hobart Town Courier* as its source) is clearly lacking in details, not least being where the accident occurred and, perhaps more crucially, when the body of Dudlow was recovered (i.e. how long it was immersed in seawater after the accident). This of course has an important bearing on the 'mutilation' to Dudlow's body referred to in the newspaper account.

To illustrate this point, please refer to the following source material regarding an unrelated but very similar boating accident in Tasmanian waters in 1855 which was reported in the *Hobart Mercury*, April 16, 1855:

'Fifteen people who had attended the funeral in Rokeby of a young girl burned to death at South Arm, boarded a boat for the melancholy return trip across Ralph's Bay. The wind blew up strongly against the crowded little vessel and within half a mile of the shore, she was blown onto her starboard side, immediately foundered, and sank in only four metres of water. Six people were drowned including the bereaved mother of the dead girl. Five bodies were recovered within hours, but that of a man named George Sandwell, was not found until the following day: *'A warp belonging to the boat was being hauled out when the body was found entangled in it. The clothes were all off and the flesh dreadfully eaten away.'*

The flesh loss described is considerable and was more than likely the work of ground sharks of the sevengill species (*Notorynchus cepedianus*), a scavenger of long standing in the waters of the Derwent estuary.

Sea-lice (small crustaceans of the order *Isopoda*) are also known to infest and eat away the flesh of immersed bodies, but the rate of consumption is generally more gradual. In one modern drowning case for example, a forensic pathologist in Hobart examined the body of a man which had been in the water for thirty-six hours and although sea-lice were present in the clothing and some orifices of the deceased, no major disturbance of the flesh had yet

taken place (*Dr Rob Kelsall, Forensic Pathologist, Royal Hobart Hospital – Pers. comm. Jan 2003*). George Sandwell's body by comparison had been in the water for less than twenty-four hours.'

**SOURCE:** Black C. – *White Pointer South* Pg 11, Wellington Bridge Press 2010.

The above excerpt gives some perspective to the purported 'mutilation' of Dudlow's body. As we cannot glean from the newspaper account how long the corpse had been immersed before recovery, it is impossible to attribute the reported mutilation to either sharks *or* sea-lice with certainty. If the body wasn't recovered for days, sea-lice would be the most common cause of the damage in temperate Tasmanian seas. If, however, Dudlow's remains were indeed shark mauled, it should probably be assumed that the damage inflicted was post-mortem given the lack of any corroborating evidence of a shark having attacked Dudlow while he was alive.

My conclusion is that if Dudlow's body was mutilated by sharks, it was as a result of opportunistic scavenging, as in the case of George Sandwell above. It is my personal opinion that these circumstances do not constitute a shark attack as such.

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Chris Black, Global Shark Accident File