

Not Mary Watson's cottage: A reassessment of the ruined stone building, Jiigurru (Lizard Island Group), northern Great Barrier Reef

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Abstract

The remains of a nineteenth century stone building at Watson's Bay, Lizard Island, Jiigurru (Lizard Island Group), are referred to today as 'Mary Watson's Cottage'. As such, the ruin provides a tangible link to the young woman who fled Lizard Island in 1881 with her infant son and Chinese employee, only to die of thirst on nearby Howick No. 5 Island. The association of the extant stone structure and the historic personage of Mary Watson has become a powerful, seemingly unbreakable, association. However, an historical archaeological reassessment of the evidence provides an enriched history of the stone building that counters the current narrative. The stone building was built in 1860 by members of the Paddon and Co. *bêche-de-mer* station (1860-1861) during their 15 month stay on the island. Nearly two decades later, in a state of disrepair, it was rebuilt by Robert Watson and Percy Fuller of the Watson and Fuller *bêche-de-mer* station (1879-1881). The likelihood is that it was never the home of the Watsons. Instead, it fulfilled its original purpose as a storeroom and *bêche-de-mer* curing house. Yet, since the twentieth century, emotive forces have enmeshed the Mary Watson story with the visible ruin on Lizard Island as the 'home' she fought to defend against attack. It is time to acknowledge the building's true past, and time to acknowledge Paddon and Co.'s stone building. By doing so, the ruin's narrative is extended and its role in the nineteenth century *bêche-de-mer* industry is elevated, while continuing to honour the building's symbolic association with Mary Watson.

Introduction

The ruined stone building at Watson's Bay has become a physical embodiment of the collision of cultures on the sea frontier of northeast Queensland. At Jiigurru the lives and traditions of Aboriginal Traditional Owners, whose association with the island spans thousands of years, collided with the European newcomers, from 1770 onwards (Fitzpatrick et al. 2018:2). Jiigurru (Lizard Island Group) comprises five islands, which today forms the Lizard Island National Park: Lizard Island, Palfrey, South, Osprey, and Bird Islets. Lizard Island is about 9.9 km² in area and lies 93 km northeast of Cooktown and 31 km off the coast of Cape Flattery (Dingaál). Traditional Owners visited the islands for foods such as 'wild yam, shellfish, fish and turtle', and because it was a place of 'initiations, intergroup gatherings, judicial deliberations, and the place for knowledge to be passed down from the "clever men" to young males' (Lambrides et al. 2020:47).

Initially, the visits of seafaring Europeans to this sacred land and seascape were fleeting. Cooks Look, the highest point on Lizard Island, rising 359 m, signaled Jiigurru's presence in the seascape to passing navigators. A bay on the northwest side of the island, later named Watson's Bay, provided safe anchorage and an entry point for visitors to the island landscape. Once water and wood supplies were replenished, the visiting vessels left this designated night anchorage of the Inner Route through the Great Barrier Reef to resume their voyages (King 1847:10). However, the rise of *bêche-de-mer* fishing along the northeast coast of Australia during the mid to late nineteenth century saw increased visitation to Jiigurru including the establishment of several

bêche-de-mer stations in the Watson's Bay area of Lizard Island. The earliest recorded station was the short-lived enterprise of Captain F.C. Crew of the *Oratava*, from Ascension Island, in 1846 (*Age* 28 September 1935:7; *Sydney Daily Advertiser* 14 August 1848:2; *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 January 1848:2). This was followed by the Paddon and Co. *bêche-de-mer* station, with Captain William Banner and the naturalist John MacGillivray 1860-1861 (MacGillivray 1860a, 1860b, 1860-1861, 1861a, 1861b, 1862a-1862h); John Delargy's *bêche-de-mer* station 1867-1869 (Mullins 1994:59-60); and Robert Watson and Percy Fuller's *bêche-de-mer* station 1879-1881 (Armstrong 1998; Mary Watson Diaries OM81-120). Captain Phillip Garland is also believed to have had a *bêche-de-mer* fishery at Jiigurru in the early 1870s (*Brisbane Courier* 24 November 1874:2). Of these, the Delargy, Paddon and Co., and Watson and Fuller stations lasted for between one and two years; however, documentation is most forthcoming for the Paddon and Co. and Watson and Fuller stations. John MacGillivray's five unpublished journals 1860-1861, as well as a series of articles MacGillivray wrote that were published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1862 provide documentation on the Paddon and Co. station (MacGillivray 1860a, 1860b, 1860-1861, 1861a, 1861b, 1862a-1862h). The 1881 diaries of Mary Watson, Robert Watson's wife, and the newspaper articles of 1881 reporting on the events at Lizard Island provide documentation on Watson and Fuller's station (Armstrong 1998; Mary Watson Diaries OM81-120).

MacGillivray and Watson provide eyewitness accounts of life and *bêche-de-mer* activities on Lizard Island at a significant period in the history of Queensland's *bêche-de-mer* industry. The Paddon and Co. station operated before the

establishment of Cooktown in 1873 and was driven by former sandalwood traders of the Western Pacific, like Robert Towns and James Paddon, who shifted their focus to collecting *bêche-de-mer* and other marine resources along the northeast Australian coast as sandalwood supplies in the western Pacific diminished (Bowen and Bowen 2002:142, 145; Mullins 1994:56; Shineberg 1967:129). On the other hand, Watson and Fuller's station operated within a more established industry in the late 1870s to early 1880s, with a local *bêche-de-mer* fishing industry hub at Cooktown. The MacGillivray and Watson accounts also provide information on the unique stone building (now ruined) at Lizard Island which is situated towards the southern end of Watson's Bay about 60 m from the shoreline.

This paper's reassessment of the stone building at Lizard Island seeks to address the knowledge gaps in previous archaeological studies of the site (e.g. Heyworth 1987; Russell 1999; Waterson et al. 2013). For instance, Heyworth (1987) had no knowledge of the ruin's association with the Paddon and Co. *bêche-de-mer* station, attributing construction to Robert Watson. Similarly, Russell (1999) was unaware of the earlier provenance. More recently, Waterson et al. (2013), describe the documentary evidence for Paddon and Co.'s operations on Lizard Island as 'scant and somewhat contradictory' (Waterson et al 2013:594), concluding that 'the nature of the historical occupation of Watson's Bay remains unclear and even the origin and function of its famous ruin are uncertain' (Waterson et al. (2013:604). This paper seeks to overturn that opinion.

This study adopts a chronological biography of the building approach, using archival documents and evidence from previous archaeological surveys, to explore the building's origin, history and function. However, before doing so it is necessary to revisit the circumstances that led to the building's enmeshed association with Mary Watson.

Historical overview of the attack at Lizard Island in 1881

The association of the stone building being the Watson's home first arose in the twentieth century (see Roberts 1989) but stems from the events that unfolded in late September 1881 and early 1882. On 21 October 1881, a Chinese fishing boat reported at Cooktown that, two days earlier, they had observed eight large canoes and about 50 Indigenous people at the station, and fires burning all over the island (*Brisbane Courier* 22 October 1881:4). A party went to investigate and found the Watsons' 'hut' in disarray, but no sign of the station's four occupants: Mary Watson, her infant son Thomas Ferrier, and Chinese employees Ah Sam and Ah Leung (*Brisbane Courier* 27 October 1881:2). The station's other eight occupants, including Mary's husband Robert Watson, had left Lizard Island on a fishing cruise in early September 1881 (*Capricornian* 12 November 1881:1). What followed was months of land and sea searches looking for the four missing inhabitants of Watson and Fuller's station. The progress and developments of the searches, together with much speculation, was reported in hundreds of newspaper articles published across Australia under titles such as 'The Lizard Island Tragedy', 'The Lizard Island Massacre', 'The Lizard Island Outrage', 'Cannibalism at Lizard Island', 'The Heroine of Lizard Island', and 'The Lizard Island Mystery', for example (*Burrowa News* 11 November 1881:2; *Evening News* 15 November 1881:2; *Evening News* 9 November

1881:2; *Evening News* 15 March 1882:5; *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 November 1881:6; *Sydney Morning Herald* 19 December 1881:8). These reports focused on the woman of the story, whose home on the island frontier off the northeast coast of Australia was under attack, with home portrayed both as an abstract, emotive concept and as a tangible structure under siege.

The consensus was that the four missing people had been murdered, or that they were being held somewhere (*Brisbane Courier* 25 October 1881:2). By early November, it became clear that one of the four missing people had been killed during the initial attack, when Robert Watson went through items brought back to Cooktown from his station soon after the alarm had been raised that included his wife's 1881 diary (*Evening News* 15 November 1881:2). The diary's last entries for 29 September to 1 October mention the death of Ah Leung on the first day, Mary firing at her attackers on the evening of the second day, and Ah Sam being speared seven times on the third day (Armstrong 1998:87).

The mystery of what had become of them was not revealed until crew members of the *Kate Kearney* found the remains of Mary, Thomas, and Ah Sam on Howick No. 5 Island on 18 January 1882, where they had died of thirst (*Brisbane Courier* 24 January 1882:2). Some pencilled pages found near Mary's body described their ordeal after escaping Lizard Island in a cut-down ship's tank used for boiling *bêche-de-mer* (*Brisbane Courier* 23 January 1882:3). The brevity of this overview masks the intricacies of the months-long search for the missing people that was driven by the conviction that the region's Indigenous people were responsible for four murders (see Falkiner and Oldfield 2000 for a detailed account).

Missing from the European accounts of 1881-1882 is the Traditional Owners' perspective of the events that unfolded. For the Dingaal people, the Watsons' occupation of a sacred Dingaal initiation site was the cause of hostilities at Lizard Island in 1881 (e.g. Baillie 2000:16; Bowen and Bowen 2002:143; Cairns Historical Society D22219; Falkiner and Oldfield 2000:84). The late Dingaal Elder Gordon Charlie notes that the Dingaal men who went to Jiigurru in late September 1881 were not trying to kill Mary Watson; instead, they wanted to drive her off the island (Falkiner and Oldfield 2000). Today, the Dingaal Traditional Owners consider the ruined stone building site 'significant as a symbol of the end of traditional ways, their displacement from traditional lands, the violation of sacred sites and completion [competition] with Europeans for resources' (Queensland Heritage Register 1992).

Establishment of the stone building

The stone building that has emerged as the 'Watson's Cottage' was built by members of the Paddon and Co. *bêche-de-mer* station. The 76 people strong workforce of the Paddon and Co. station arrived at Lizard Island in July 1860, from Dillon Bay, New Hebrides (Vanuatu), aboard the *Julia Percy*. MacGillivray (1860b, 16 July 1860; MacGillivray 1862a) describes the passengers as comprising 17 white men (8 of whom belonged to the *Julia Percy* crew), 7 Chinese men, 2 mixed-race children, and 50 islanders, including 10 females, from the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, and the Loyalty Islands. Divided roughly in two, members of the remaining shore party commenced construction of the building in August 1860, while the rest, aboard the *Julia Percy*, made intermittent trips along the northeast Queensland

coast in search of sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* (MacGillivray 1860a, 1862a). By September 1860, the stone building, constructed by a group that included four white men, ‘was beginning to show itself above the sand’ (MacGillivray 1862c). Progress on the building was slow as fishing activities took precedence; however, within a year of commencement the building was complete and one of the rooms of the building was used as a drying house (MacGillivray 1861a, 1862h). MacGillivray (1861a) notes that, having joined the shore party, he slept in the ‘*bêche-de-mer* house’ in February 1861 while he waited for his hut to be built. Extensive historical research indicates that there was only ever one stone building built at Watson’s Bay. Therefore, MacGillivray (1861a, 1862a, 1862c, 1862h) clearly provides the building’s provenance, which many subsequent writers appear to have been unaware, attributing the building to the Watsons (e.g. Baillie 2000:16; Heyworth 1987:4; Queensland Heritage Register 1992; Russell 1999; Waterson et al. 2013:604).

The intervening years 1861-1879

Various visitors to Jigurru provide observations of the building for the period between the departure of the Paddon and Co. contingent in October 1861 and the establishment of Watson and Fuller’s *bêche-de-mer* station in late 1879 (MacGillivray 1861a, 1862h; Robertson 1981:164-167). For instance, in May 1863, shipwrecked sailors from the *Antagonist* found the stone house roofless, so they made a temporary roof using the lifeboats’ oars and cut branches of scrub and grass to provide shelter for the night (*Sydney Morning Herald* 26 February 1864:4). The need to make a temporary roof indicates that the roof of the building had been damaged since its completion in 1861, or that unspecified roofing materials had been removed by Paddon and Co. for use elsewhere.

In December 1871, the Australian Eclipse Expedition aboard the S.S. *Governor Blackall* visited Lizard Island and found wall remnants of a stone building, and on the wall, a cross painted in a thick black pigment which was about 3 m by 1.8 m across (*Empire* 1 January 1872:3). A passenger accompanying the expedition noted the wall as ‘the wall of a residence created by some persons years ago – probably parties engaged in the *bêche-de-mer* trade’ (*Empire* 1 January 1872:3). The description of ‘the wall of a residence’, suggests that not all four walls remained in 1871. If so, the rapid decay of the building could have been through the collapse of the walls or perhaps the building’s stones were taken for ballast.

The steamer *Kate*, conveying the Governor of Queensland and party north, anchored at Lizard Island, 15-17 September 1872. Amongst the Governor’s party was the photographer F.H. Rogers who recorded that an excursion was made to the island where they observed a stone house with a black cross and the letters ‘DIG’ inscribed on it, which they assumed meant that stores were buried underneath the walls. Rogers noted the stone house as ‘small’ and that it had been erected by Captain Charles Edwards (*Brisbane Courier* 31 October 1872:7). Rogers’ attribution to Edwards might stem from Rogers knowing that Edwards was a partner in the Paddon and Co. business at the time the stone building was erected at Lizard Island in 1860, or he might have had knowledge of more recent visits to Lizard Island by Edwards that led him to this conclusion. There is some evidence that Edwards might have resumed operations at the former Paddon and Co. *bêche-de-mer* station on Lizard Island during the 1860s and early

1870s (e.g. *Brisbane Courier* 20 September 1864:2; *Sydney Morning Herald* 19 November 1870:4).

In October 1872, Alfred Giles of the Overland Telegraph Expedition visited Lizard Island and observed that: ‘On the sandhills near the beach were the remains of a house built of stone, and near which we found three graves’ (*Observer* 19 June 1926:19). These graves might have been some of the graves of the 23 or 24 men and 2 women of the Paddon and Co. station who died on the island between September 1860 and September 1861 (MacGillivray 1860c, 1860-1861, 1861a, 1862h). In September 1878, James Henry Shaw, accompanying William Bairstow Ingham to New Guinea, observed the remains of a stone house, situated opposite the *Voura*’s anchorage in Watson’s Bay: ‘A dead stone wall, on which some rough hand had painted a black cross, is all that remains to mark the spot [of a *bêche-de-mer* station] and a white man’s resting place’ (*Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 31 May 1879:852). In April 1879, the journalist ‘Wanderer’ made similar observations to those of earlier visitors:

We also visited the remains of a *bêche-de-mer* smoke house, and close to it found two graves, distinguishable by two cairns of stones, shaped in the usual manner. In addition, painted on the smokehouse, a huge cross appeared, and the Christian emblem can be seen for miles across the blue Pacific (*Queenslander* 19 July 1879:77).

The term ‘remains’, used by eyewitnesses on the condition of the stone building, is, in some cases, ambiguous. It could simply mean the building was roofless rather than there being any structural deterioration of the stonework.

Watson and Fuller rebuild Paddon and Co.’s stone building

The observations made of the stone building during the intervening years of 1871, 1872, 1878 and 1879 all report ‘remnants’ or ‘remains’ of the building. Therefore, if the stone building was used by Watson and Fuller’s *bêche-de-mer* station (1879-1881), it would have had to have been rebuilt. This appears to have been the case. The sketch in the *Illustrated Sydney News* in 1881 (Figure 1) shows six structures at the Watson and Fuller *bêche-de-mer* station. The largest of the four structures in the foreground is the 1860-1861 stone building, which fits the known orientation of the present building’s remains (*Illustrated Sydney News* 24 December 1881:4). The 1881 sketch shows the stone building as an intact and roofed structure, which means that Watson and Fuller must have rebuilt and used the stone building. They probably used the stone building as their smoke house because a building of stone would be more suitable for curing *bêche-de-mer* than a timber one. The rebuilding must have occurred between late 1879 and early 1880, when Watson and Fuller established their *bêche-de-mer* station at Lizard Island. The establishment of their station cannot be earlier because Watson was *bêche-de-mer* fishing in the Louisiade Archipelago area from early to mid-1879 (*Queenslander* 9 August 1878:173).

Robert Watson stated at his wife’s inquest (24 January 1882) that he had built a dwelling, smoke, and storehouse (Robertson 1981:164-167). Watson’s statement becomes ambiguous once ‘rebuilding’ is considered as building. Examination of the building in the 1990s revealed indications

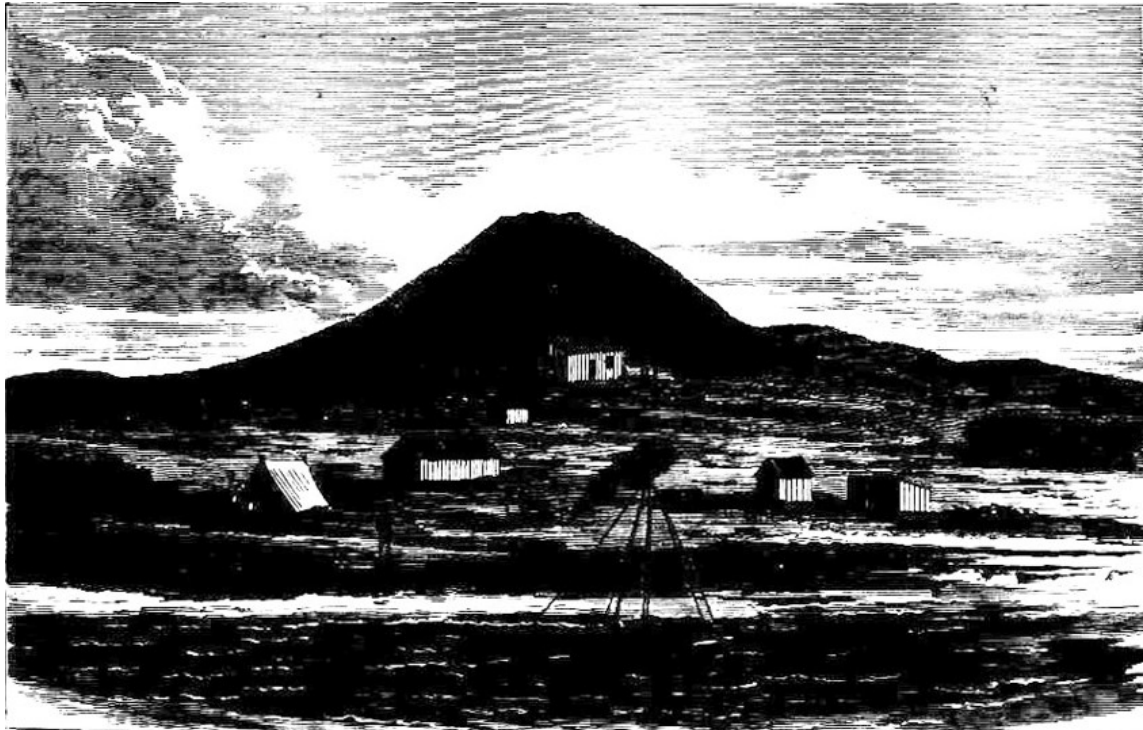


Figure 1. Watson and Fuller's *bêche-de-mer* station 1881. The largest structure depicted in the foreground, off-centre left, is believed to be the stone building. The building in the centre background is believed to be the Watson's cottage (*Illustrated Sydney News* 24 December 1881:4).

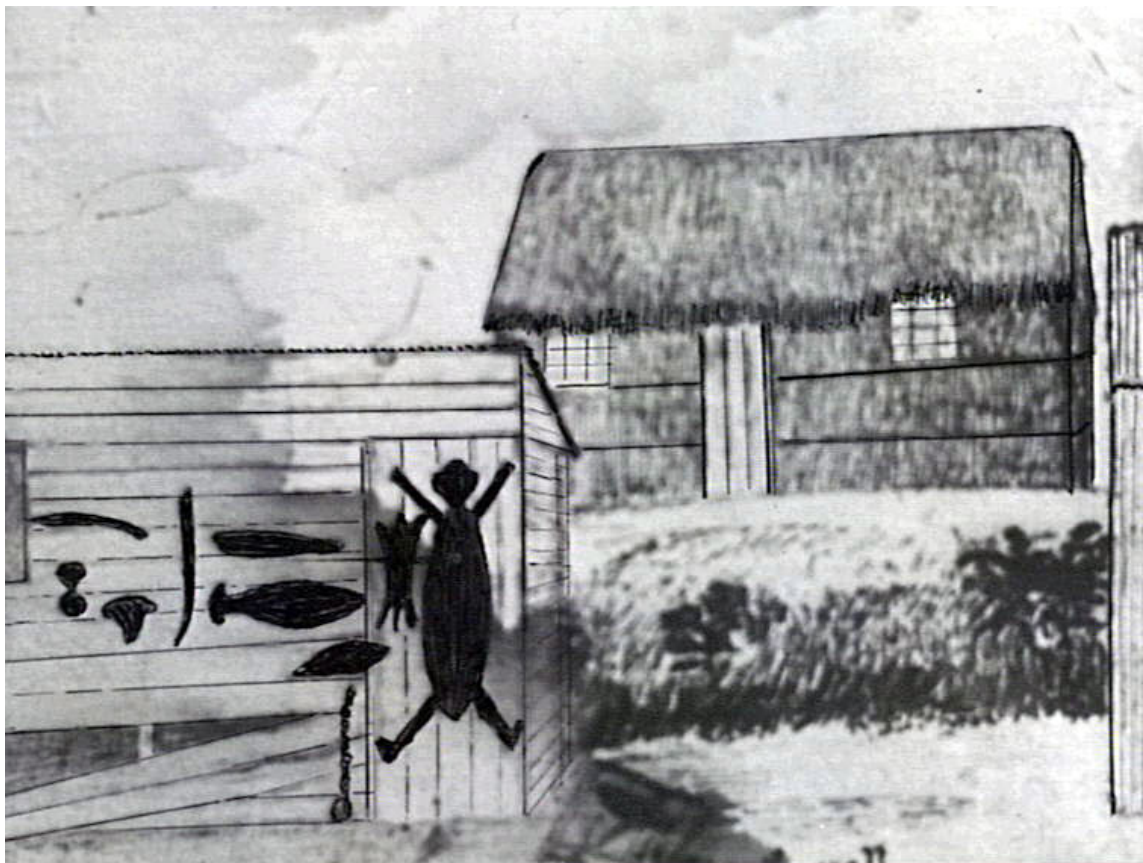


Figure 2. Percy Fuller's October 1881 sketch of the Watson's house (background) on Lizard Island records Aboriginal motifs drawn in tar on a storeroom (foreground) (Cairns Historical Society P08310).

that the stone building's construction may have occurred in stages. For instance, Russell (1999:3) notes that a collapsed internal wall, narrower than the external walls (35 cm) and not tied into the exterior walls, may have been added later. Inconsistencies in the flush pointing also suggest building work executed in stages (Russell 1999:2). Indications of a staged construction fits MacGillivray's (1862a, 1862c, 1862h) account of the long time it took to build the stone building; alternatively, they could be indicative of reconstruction work done sometime later.

Was the stone building the Watson's home?

There has been much debate over whether or not the now ruined stone building was the Watson's home from 1879-1881 (e.g. Baillie 2000:16; Heyworth 1987:4; Queensland Heritage Register 1992; Waterson et al. 2013:604). The idea of it being their home appears to have started in the twentieth century with W.O. Roberts' visit to Lizard Island in 1937 and the subsequent republication of his visit in 1989 (Roberts 1989; Waterson et al. 2013:604). Roberts (1989) recorded that 'All that remains of Mrs Watson's hut are the stone walls about twelve feet square with no roof'. By the time of Roberts' visit in 1937, the timber buildings of the Watson and Fuller station, which included huts for accommodation, a store house, wash house, pig house and fowl house had disappeared leaving the stone building to be interpreted as the Watson's cottage (Armstrong 1998:30, 61, 70, 94). This first linking of the remaining stone walls as being Mrs Watson's cottage has been perpetuated by subsequent twentieth century writers (e.g. Falkiner and Oldfield 2000; Heyworth 1987; Queensland Heritage Register 1992; Robertson 1981; Russell 1999; Waghorn et al. 1999). However, several points indicate that the stone building was not the Watson's home. For example, Mary Watson makes no direct reference to the stone building in her 1881 diary (Armstrong 1998; OM81-120 Mary Watson Diaries). Her only mention of the material structure of her home appears in a January 1881 diary entry which says that 'Bob [Mr Watson] repaired the grass of the walls [of the house]', implying that the house was not built of stone (Armstrong 1998:10). Furthermore, Robert Watson stated at his wife's inquest, on 24 January 1882, that he had built a dwelling, smoke and storehouse, and cultivated a small portion of the island (Robertson 1981:164-167). This implies that their dwelling was not the stone building, but, as previously mentioned, he could have considered 'rebuilding' as building when he referred to building the above structures.

Further evidence supporting the stone building was not the Watson's home comes from Percy Fuller and his 1881 sketch of the Watson's home, made shortly after the disappearance of Mary, her son and Ah Sam (Figure 2). Fuller's sketch depicts a building with grass walls and roof over a presumed timber framework. The other building in Fuller's sketch shows Aboriginal motifs depicted on one of its walls that were made at the time of the attack at Lizard Island in 1881 (Figure 2). Fuller's portrayal of the Watson's home is comparable to the building furthest from the beach in Figure 1 (see Figures 1 and 2). Confirmation that the Watson's cottage was furthestmost from the beach is corroborated by George Ernest Morrison who spent a week at Lizard Island in June 1883 on his way to New Guinea and noted that the house furthest from the beach was the Watson's former house, which was now occupied by Fuller:

Fuller ... lives with his one white companion in the hut formerly occupied by Mrs Watson. The boats lie snugly below the house, while between are the huts of the blacks, the smokehouse, the storehouse and the half tank in which the fish are boiled (Age 15 December 1883:13).

Morrison's source was Fuller who was on the island at the time of Morrison's visit (Age 15 December 1883:13).

Further descriptions of the buildings at Watson and Fuller's station come from Dr Richard William Coppinger who visited Lizard Island aboard H.M.S. *Alert* in May 1881. Coppinger noted that '[t]he buildings consisted of two or three rudely-built dwelling huts, and a couple of sheds for curing and storing trepangs' (Coppinger 1899:190). Although not mentioned, the stone building must be one of the sheds Coppinger refers to. Coppinger's number of buildings matches the number depicted in the sketch published in 1881 (see Figure 1). In 1888, the *Cintra's* memorialist reported that 'traces' of Mrs Watson's house were still visible on the island, as well as coconut trees planted by her and 'a large quantity of banana trees are now flourishing there' (*Euro Advertiser* 21 September 1888:3). The reference to 'traces' of Mrs Watson's house suggests that the writer is making a distinction between the stone building that in 1888 was probably still intact and another building in a more fragmentary state. Finally, in 1911, the search party looking for the missing boys aboard the *Valda* visited Lizard Island. The *Cairns Post* (18 November 1911:2) reported the visit and categorically stated that the stone house and the location of Mrs Watson's habitation were at two separate locations:

Near the landing place [Watson's Bay] are the walls of a stone hut, which was built some years ago by a man who settled on the island and remained there a short time. In a valley, divided from there by a rocky headland, was seen the site of the habitation of the woman who is now referred to as the 'Heroine of Lizard Island [Mrs Watson].

From this assessment of the available documents, it appears that Paddon and Co's building experienced some degree of deterioration during the years between the disbandment of the Paddon and Co. *bêche-de-mer* station in October 1861 and the establishment of the Watson and Fuller *bêche-de-mer* station in late 1879. Repairs were then made to the stone building by Watson and Fuller so that it could be used as a smoke house and store for the processed *bêche-de-mer*. The building's use continued after the disbandment of the Watson and Fuller partnership in 1881. For instance, as evidenced by Morrison, Fuller continued *bêche-de-mer* operations at Lizard Island until at least 1883, and possibly up until 1885 (Age 15 December 1883:13; *Brisbane Courier* 26 June 1885:6). Other *bêche-de-mer* fishermen are recorded in the Jigurrú area up to 1891, as well as in 1909, who probably also made use of the stone building (*New South Wales Government Gazette* 22 May 1891:3881; *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 June 1909:7).

The stone building becomes a ruin for the second time

The stone building gradually became a ruin for the second and final time during the twentieth century. From the available sources, the building first became roofless followed by the gradual deterioration of the walls over the century. As noted above, the walls of the stone building were visible in 1911

(*Cairns Post* 18 November 1911:2). Also, prior to World War I, Ion Idriess visited Lizard Island and recorded that the stone building: ‘looked exactly like a blockhouse, which is what it had been built for. It was roofless now, but three walls and part of the other were still standing, roughly built of lime, mud and stone’ (Idriess 1948:41). Idriess’ term ‘blockhouse’ suggests a building in the military sense, that is a building with few openings (windows), which would be in keeping with a smoke house. As mentioned previously, Roberts (1989) noted that he saw stone walls 3.6 m square with no roof. This suggests that what Roberts saw in 1937 was a remaining corner of the once larger 14.1 x 9 m building, with two of the four walls observed being internal walls. This raises the possibility that this might also have been what was observed by the visitors to Lizard Island before World War I. Photographs from the 1950s to the present show the stone building in various stages of ruin, ranging from diminishing portions of three walls to portions of two walls standing (Figures 3-4) (e.g. Cairns Historical Society P06863, P08543 P31319, P36848; Cooktown Museum; National Archives of Australia Item ID 11494797-11494799; Russell 1999:1, 3, 4, 6-10). Today (2025), only a corner connecting fragments of the two remaining walls still stands to a maximum height of about one metre (see Figure 4).

Survey and excavation of the stone building

Several investigations of the ruined stone building site were undertaken during the late twentieth century which provide information on the building’s fabric, dimensions, and construction methods that complement the building’s historical narrative. (e.g. Heyworth 1987; Russell 1999; Waghorn et al. 1999). In 1984, Heyworth, an architect with the Queensland Department of Public Works, conducted a survey of the ruined stone building and excavated the site to establish the building’s dimensions, construction details, and whether it was indeed the Watson’s home (Heyworth 1987). Later, in August 1999, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with members of the Dingaal community, undertook restoration works of the ruin (Cairns Historical Society D22219). Russell, a conservation stonemason, led the restoration work (Russell 1999).

Observations revealed that the building’s dimensions were 14.1 m x 9 m (Heyworth 1987: Appendix A). Remaining foundation walls showed five areas (rooms) demarcated within the building’s footprint (Figure 5) (Heyworth 1987:1). Of these areas (rooms) labelled A-E, Heyworth (1987:1) speculated that area C might have been a passage or storeroom. The stone building was built from locally quarried Finlayson granite probably sourced from ‘an adjacent domed out-crop’ on Chinaman’s Ridge which has exfoliations up to 400 mm thick (Heyworth 1987:1). Replacement stones for restoration work were sourced from this outcrop in 1999 (Figure 6) (Russell 1999:5). Heyworth (1987:1,2) notes that ‘some considerable effort in construction’ had been made, but when it was constructed was unknown. Heyworth (1987) was obviously unaware of the building’s Paddon and Co. origins, and MacGillivray’s newspaper accounts of the 1860-1861 *bêche-de-mer* station that clearly state that the stone building was started in August 1860 and completed the following year (Heyworth 1987:2; MacGillivray 1862c, 1862h).

In 1984, ruins of the building included ‘portions of two walls with an interconnecting corner’ that stood 2.1 m high, which Heyworth believed was the ‘original height of the top

wall-plate as mortar has been smoothed on the top’ (Heyworth 1987:1). The surviving walls were of random rubble in four distinct courses, with average wall thicknesses from 45 cm to 44 cm and 35 cm to 30 cm (Heyworth 1987:1; Russell 1999:1). The first of the four courses rises 305 mm (1 foot) from the floor footing, while the remaining three courses are each 610 mm (2 feet) high (Russell 1999:1). The absence of tooling (chisel) marks on the stones suggests they were ‘hammer dressed to size and shape’ (Russell 1999:5). The mortar was made from beach sand and burnt coral and shell, with coral and shell fragments up to 25 mm recognisable in the mortar (Heyworth 1987:1; Russell 1999:4).

Excavation revealed that the foundation walls were ‘set on a stepped footing of stone and mortar’ varying from 80 cm to 90 cm wide. However, in area E the footings of the outer walls remain but the foundation walls are missing (see Figure 5) (Heyworth 1987:1). Heyworth (1987:3) speculates that the two outer walls of area E were possibly never built; or that the footings in area E supported timber posts, and that area E was used as a verandah. A verandah here is plausible because the long side of area E faces Watson’s Bay. A ‘considerable quantity of clay foreign to the main site soil [sand]’ was also found in area E (Heyworth 1987:2). Mary makes few references in her 1881 diary to the rooms she lived in at Lizard Island. However, she does mention the sourcing of clay and laying of two clay floors: one for a bedroom in March 1881 and the other for a dining room in August 1881 (Armstrong 1998:31, 32, 74). Although speculation, the bedroom floor was possibly for a bedroom in the timber cottage laid in readiness for the impending birth of Thomas Ferrier in June 1881. The ‘considerable quantity of clay’ found in area E of the stone building might be providing a clue as to the location of the dining room floor Mary alludes to (Armstrong 1998:74). Area E would have been a fitting location for a communal, semi-open dining room capable of accommodating the 12–19 people stationed at the Watson and Fuller station during 1881 (Armstrong 1998:60; *Capricornian* 12 November 1881:1).

Heyworth’s 1984 excavation of the building’s foundations revealed some late nineteenth century artefacts that included glass bottle fragments, a glass jar fragment, ‘miscellaneous pottery fragments’ including glazed pottery, part of a clay pipe, part of a small, curved mattock blade, ‘a small fragment of partially burnt coal or coke’, and fragments of cone and spider shells (Heyworth 1987:2). Mary refers to collecting these types of shells in her 1881 diary (Armstrong 1998:26). However, while the artefact assemblage suggested usage of the stone building by the Watsons, Heyworth (1987:4) found no irrefutable proof that it was the ‘Watson’s cottage’, meaning their place of residence, and concluded that: ‘From the available evidence, it is not possible to state that these remains are those of the cottage constructed by Captain Watson and Mrs Watson in the 1880s’. As mentioned earlier, Heyworth (1987:3) assumed that the Watsons had built the stone building, being unaware of the stone building’s earlier association with the Paddon and Co. station (1860-1861). Likewise, Russell’s (1999) report on the stabilisation of ruins at Watson’s Cottage contains no historical summary: provenance is not questioned in the report.

Several artefacts were found during the 1999 conservation project, such as glass fragments, a shoulder fragment from a large salt-glazed stoneware vessel, and a fragment of earthenware with a blue and white transfer print (Waterson et al. 2013:601). Although not stated, the 1999 conservation

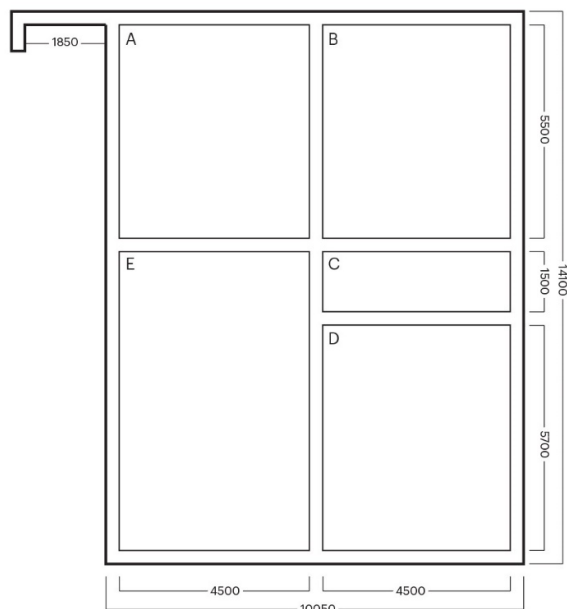


Figure 3. Remaining walls of the stone building at Lizard Island, 1973 (National Archives of Australia Item ID11494798).



Figure 4. Remnants of the stone building in 2024 (Courtesy Terry Swann 2024).

A: Floor plan



B: Axonometric view

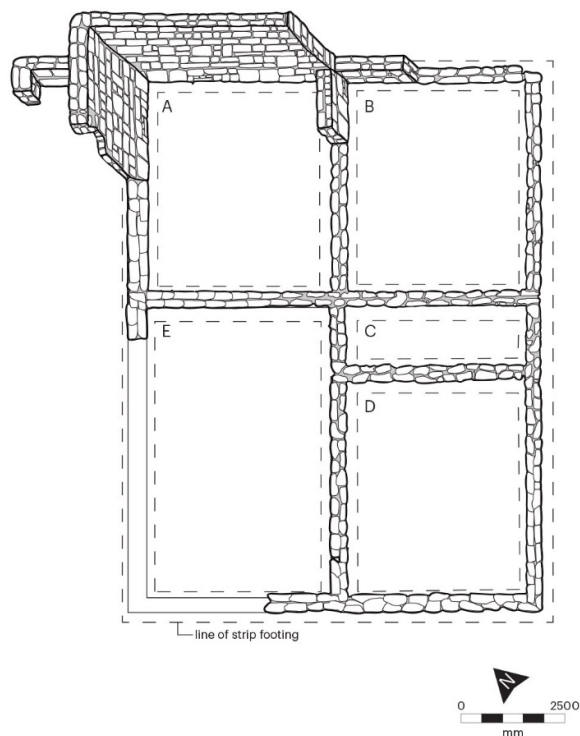


Figure 5. Floor plan and axonometric view of the stone building (after Heyworth 1987: Appendix A). Areas A and E lie on the northwest side of the building parallel to Watson's Bay. Measurements in mm.



Figure 6. Chinaman's Ridge in the left of the photograph and the remaining walls of the stone building and wall foundations 1999 (Russell 1999:8).



Figure 7. Current Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service interpretive sign on Lizard Island (Photograph: Sean Ulm 2012).

work is believed to be referring to the on-site survey work undertaken by Waghorn et al. (1999) which is probably the source of further observations of artefacts and archaeological features noted by Waterson et al. (2013:602-603).

These include artefact scatters, the largest of which is described as a possible dumpsite on the 'banks of an inlet creek to the southeast of the stone ruin' where glass bottle fragments 'of uniform color [sic] and morphology' were found (Waterson et al. 2013:602). Other artefact scatters, 'located in clearings within the dune grass', revealed clay pipe stems, fragments of 'thick, dark glass' and 'applied-lip bottle necks' of probable nineteenth century origin (Waterson et al. 2013:602). Two clay smoking pipes, and a large, handmade copper nail have been found by members of the public. Waterson et al. (2013:602) state that the copper nail 'potentially [provides] the first physical evidence of historical timber construction in the Bay [Watson's Bay]'. Copper nails were used in nineteenth century boat construction, which potentially links the copper nail to the *bêche-de-mer* fishing activities on the island. It could be a remnant of one of the Watson's boats; for instance, the cutter *Isabella*, which was 'smashed to pieces' on Lizard Island in February 1881 (Armstrong 1998:19). Alternatively, it might be a remnant from when the *Julia Percy* was grounded, so that her bottom could be cleaned and leaks filled, in 1861 (MacGillivray 1862h). Or it might be a relic from H.M.S. *Rattlesnake*'s two weeks-long visit to Lizard Island in 1848 when several boats were hauled up for repairs (Brierly 1848; MacGillivray 1852:106).

Waterson et al. (2013:603) also mention two concentrations of stone found in 1999. One concentration was found over 25 m from the stone ruin and measured approximately 6 m x 3 m. The other was found over 15 m from the ruin with mortar like the mortar on the extant ruin. A more detailed description of their locations is not given. At both sites the stones showed signs of being worked (Waterson et al. 2013:603). Waterson et al. (2013:603) speculate that

these areas of stone concentrations are either the remnants of work sites from the construction phase of the building, try-pots, or locations where materials from the collapsed building were collected. However, they are most likely the remnants of try-pot sites because MacGillivray (1862h) states that 'besides the moveable ones [try-pots] two more try-pots were set up in stone and mortar'.

Stones from the collapsed walls have not been observed or commented on by previous investigations (e.g. Heyworth 1989; Russell 1999; Waterson et al. 2013). Their absence suggests that they are either buried in the sand below the level of the building's foundations excavated and exposed by Heyworth (1999), or they have been retrieved as ballast for passing vessels or taken as souvenirs. Captain Sinclair's July 1875 visit to Jigurrur records that he collected 50 tons of ballast for the *Claude Hamilton*, but what type of ballast is not specified (Brisbane Courier 26 July 1875:2). Stones from Lizard Island's stone building would have been a tempting choice for a ship needing ballast as the stones were readily available and easy to transport. They may also have been taken as souvenirs. For instance, a stone from the ruined building is in the Cooktown Museum as part of the Museum's Mary Watson display.

Discussion

This paper's examination of the multiple observations through time of the ruined stone building at Lizard Island helps clarify questions of the building's origin and function. MacGillivray (1861a, 1862a, 1862c, 1862h) provides the building's 1860 origins, while the recorded observations of the building in 1863, 1871, 1872, 1878, and 1879 confirm the building's existence before the establishment of the Watson and Fuller *bêche-de-mer* station. Therefore, contrary to previous accounts, the building was not built by Robert Watson; instead, the existing, partially ruined stone building was rebuilt in 1879-1880 for use by the Watson and Fuller *bêche-de-mer* station.

Establishing the building's function has been less straightforward. Roberts' (1989) remarks that the remaining stone walls of the building he observed in 1937 were Mrs Watson's hut have formed the basis for the ruin's enduring twentieth century association with Mary Watson's cottage. However, by the time of Roberts' visit, the timber buildings of the Watson and Fuller station had disappeared leaving the stone building, the only remaining European structure in Watson's Bay, to be mistakenly interpreted as the Watson's cottage. The strongest evidence that the stone building was not the Watsons' home comes from George Morrison during his visit to Lizard Island in 1883 when Fuller was still operating the *bêche-de-mer* station and residing in the former home of the Watsons, which Morrison clearly states was not the stone building (Age 15 December 1883:13). Yet, the naming of the ruin as 'Watson's Cottage' has endured which reflects the power of stories and meaning attaching to place; especially, if the story involves a woman in danger on the frontier of nineteenth century Australia (Figure 7). Embedded within this association is the perspective of the Dinggaal people who see the ruin as representative of the detrimental effects colonisation has had on their traditional lives.

Reappraisal of the origin and function of the stone ruin not only clarifies the building's history and use but it also contextualises the building's role on the maritime frontier and the *bêche-de-mer* industry during the nineteenth century more broadly. By demonstrating the Paddon and Co. provenance, another chapter in the ruin's past is opened that deserves highlighting because it provides an early example of a large multicultural workforce engaged in the *bêche-de-mer* industry, and for being the precursor to other marine resource stations established later in the Torres Strait, including those of Captain Banner and Captain Edwards.

Conclusion

The extant ruined stone building at Watson's Bay is symbolic of nineteenth century colonial impacts on Indigenous peoples and their lands and seas – a symbolism defined by the events of 1881 which led to the deaths of a young woman, her infant son and a Chinese employee on a distant island shore of the northeast Australian sea frontier. Given the drama of those events, it is not surprising that the extant stone building at Lizard Island, the island's only structural survivor of nineteenth century European occupation, has been appropriated by twentieth century writers as the home of the Watson family. However, historical and archaeological research shows that it was more likely the station's smoke house and storeroom for the processed *bêche-de-mer* – not Mary Watson's Cottage. Instead, the Watsons resided in a timber hut, which was one of the at least six buildings of the Watson and Fuller *bêche-de-mer* station. As such, this research highlights the true provenance of the ruined building, that of the Paddon and Co. *bêche-de-mer* station of 1860–1861, while not diminishing the symbolism accrued through its palimpsest narrative.

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