The Queen of Nations:
A Shipwreck with Influence

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The Shipwreck

The *Queen of Nations*, under the command of Captain Samuel Bache, made the last of its voyages to Australia in early 1881. Part of the cargo consisted of thousands of bottles of spirits and wine. It was later reported that both the captain and first mate became "hopelessly drunk" for most of the voyage.

Before dawn on May 31, 1881, and only a couple of hundred kilometres south of Sydney Harbour, Captain Bache mistook a slag heap fire on Mount Keira off Wollongong for the light on Port Jackson's south head. Accordingly, he turned the ship toward shore in the belief that he was entering Sydney Harbour and literally drove through the surf onto Corrimal Beach, just to the north of Wollongong.

The *Queen of Nations* began to break up nearly two weeks later.

Location

The *Queen of Nations* shipwreck is on the New South Wales coast, south of Sydney and four kilometres north of Wollongong. The site lies approximately 70 metres off Corrimal Beach opposite the outlet of Towradgi Creek. When exposed, the remains cover an area of approximately 60x15 metres in a water depth of 3-5 metres, within and just past the surf zone.

Periodically, violent storms uncover parts of the wreck. On one of these occasions, in 1976, the wreckage was regarded by the local council as nothing but a swimming hazard. Considerable quantities of timber were dragged out of the water by bulldozers. Most of this was chopped up and burned or used as landfill. The lower hull and its contents were either still buried in sand or could not be effectively removed. As the sand cover returned to normal levels, any exposed remains were reburied and once again forgotten.

The lower hull still remained intact from stem to stern and retained a considerable quantity of cargo and other artefacts. These were exposed in 1991 by another storm-induced scouring at Corrimal Beach. Almost the entire site was exposed. Bottles of spirits and preserved food, baby's bottles, railway iron, tins of lead paint, crates of rubber galoshes and even a variety of cemetery headstones were revealed.

One of the major changes between the exposure in 1976 and 1991 had been the establishment of an Underwater Cultural Heritage Program in the Department of Planning's Heritage Branch. (The Heritage became a separate agency, the New South Wales Heritage Office, in 1996.) When the remains were discovered by divers from the Public Works Department, staff in the Heritage Branch were notified and

Figure 1: *Queen of Nations* bow (D Nutley 1991)

Figure 2: Wheel on *Queen of Nations* wreck site (D Nutley 1991)

an inspection and survey was commenced within a couple of days and completed a week later.

Unfortunately, word quickly got out and the vulnerability of the Queen of Nations to looting quickly became apparent. Between the first day of survey and a second visit a week later, the site was subjected to concerted looting. Hammers, dredge hoses and knives were used, often by people using only snorkelling equipment, to pry open wooden crates and to break up concretions. In the process, numerous ceramics, glass and wooden items were smashed and washed out to

sea. This included sealed bottles of preserved pickles and Hennessey's Cognac – still within their original packing crates. The pickled vegetables were in almost mint condition.

This was a devastating loss of information and highlighted a gaping hole in the legislative protection for historic shipwrecks at that time.

Commonwealth legislation was already in place to protect historic shipwrecks, but declaration was on a ship-by-ship basis. Until such a declaration was made, there was provision under the Act to prevent destructive interference with the wreck site. In order to protect the *Queen of Nations*, a submission needed to be prepared, signed off by a Australian Minister and listed in the Government Gazette. The submission required the completion of a site survey, research into the history of the vessel and an assessment of the significance of the site. The legislation that had jurisdiction over this site was national, the Historic Shipwrecks Act of 1976. This legislation is largely administered under delegation to appropriate authorities in each State or Territory. In New South Wales at that time it was the Director of Planning.

In addition to conducting the survey and report preparation, the submission for Gazettal under the Historic Shipwrecks Act required signing off by a number of levels of management. At the State level this consisted of the Manager of the Heritage Branch, the Division Head, the Assistant Director and the Director. Once that was completed, the submission was then sent to the appropriate government department in the National Capital, Canberra, passed through their departmental

hierarchy and finally made its way to the Minister. In this case, a gazettal process that often took months was completed in   just two weeks. The *Queen of Nations* was a gazetted as a Historic Shipwreck on 7 February 1992 under Section 5 of the Historic Shipwrecks Act. The listing applies to the shipwreck and all relics associated with the shipwreck.

In spite of these efforts, it was not sufficient to save much of the fragile cargo which had survived 110 years under the sea.

The experience with the *Queen of Nations* highlighted the need for automatic, or 'blanket' protection. The ability for this already existed in Section 5 of the Historic Shipwrecks Act but required agreement by all State, Territory and national Delegates in order for it to be enacted. Previous efforts to call up this section of the Act had failed, but the *Queen of Nations* episode placed this issue in a glaring spotlight. As a result of heavy lobbying by New South Wales and other State officials, 'blanket protection' was enacted in 1993. Now, any Australian shipwreck older than 75 years is automatically protected, and it is illegal to remove artefacts or disturb them in any way.

On the positive side, the tragic experience of the Queen of Nations played an important roll in the protection of Australia's underwater cultural heritage. It also, in part, contributed to Australia's strong stand on this issue during the formulation of the UNESCO Convention for the protection of the underwater cultural heritage. It is perhaps one of the most important components of that Convention.

Figure 3: Marble cross, part of cargo near ship's stern (D Nutley 1991)

The difference between 75 years for the Historic Shipwrecks Act and the 100 years in the UNESCO convention is neither here nor there. It is the immediacy that automatic protection provides after the lapse of a given period of time. This statutory protection from human interference that sites have from the moment they are found is of the utmost importance. It removes a window of opportunity for those bent on short term site exploitation and allows the immediate application of conservation principles that preserve long-term values of underwater cultural heritage as a source of information and as a truly international heritage.

Information Sources

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Shipwreck Atlas of New South Wales, (3rd edition) 1996, New South Wales Heritage Office, Parramatta

Nutley, D & Smith, T, 1992, Queen of Nations (1861-1881): Conservation Management Plan, Heritage Branch, Department of Planning, Sydney, NSW, Australia

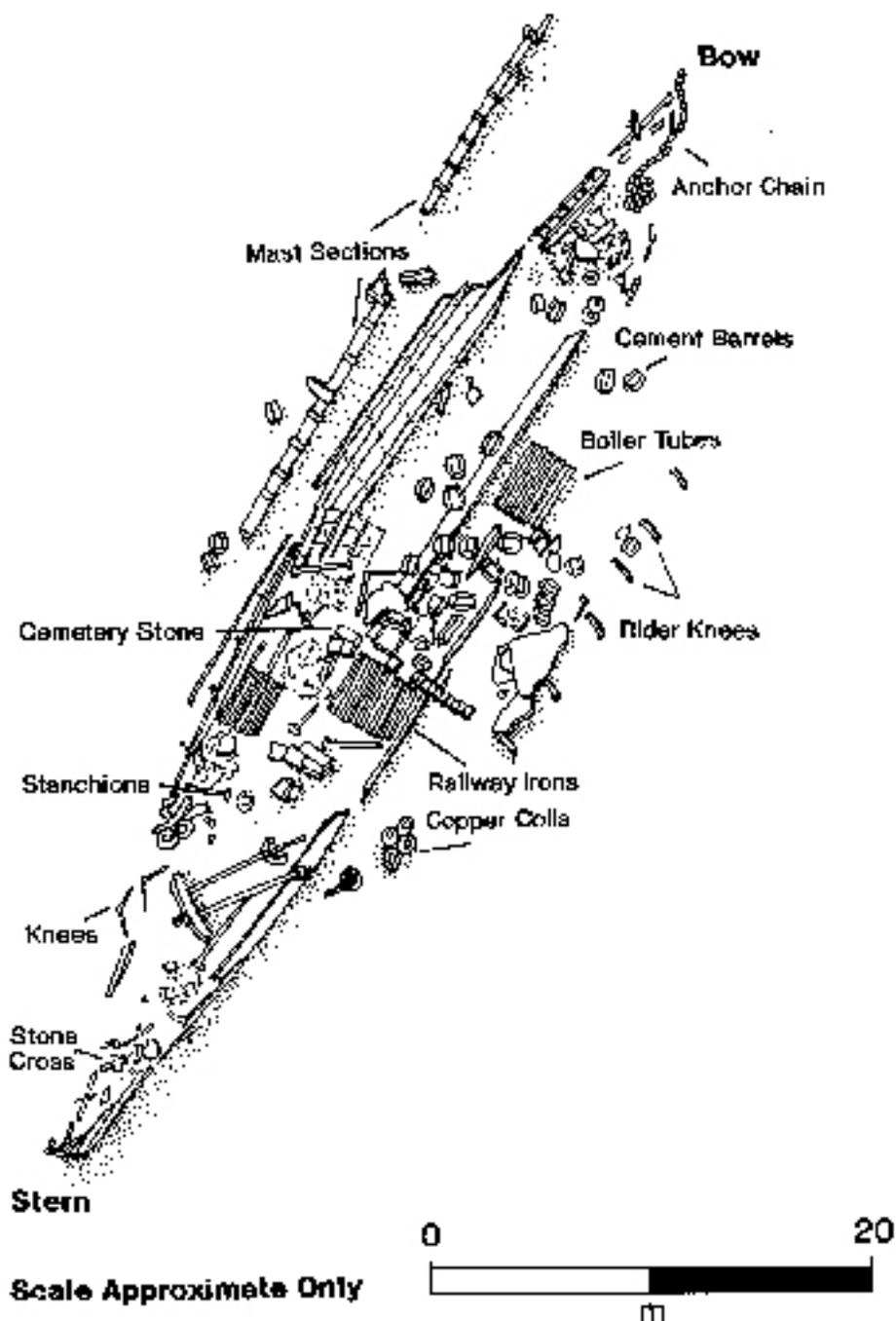Saunders, R, 1999, "Queen of Nations: A Drunken Tragedy," manuscript prepared for the NSW Heritage Office

Figure 4: Site plan, 1991 (Drawn by Tim Smith)