

### 3: GEORGE MULHALL

**GEORGE MULHALL** was the first recognised Champion Sculler of Port Jackson. The date of Mulhall's earliest championship match is unclear though one report gives 1850. Mulhall is several times described in sporting articles of the time as 'our Don' or 'our former champion'. At any rate, he rowed several matches to defend his title, whenever it may first have been bestowed.



[PJ\_IMG08: George Mulhall. From the *Sydney Mail* 4 December 1886]  
*Caption: George Mulhall, Champion Sculler of Port Jackson*

An 1886 issue of *The Sydney Mail* provides a portrait, and a brief biographical paragraph which tells us that Mulhall was born in Sydney in 1811, but fails to mention that he was the son of an Irish convict. Mulhall was one of three brothers (and a half-brother). All were watermen, and outstanding oarsmen, Thomas Mulhall in particular, though Patrick Mulhall was not far behind in ability. The *Mail* claims that Mulhall retired from rowing around 1855, but his name appears in regatta events as late as 1860, and in a private match of 1862. The *Mail* also tells us that Mulhall was 6 feet 2 inches in height (188 cm), weighed 14 stones (89 kg), and was 'a very fair sample of an old colonist'. Another recollection from 1904 also avoids the convict connection:

One of the pioneers of the oar was George Mulhall, who was born in Hunter-street, Sydney, in 1806, but removed with his family when very young to Brisbane Water. He grew up a grand stamp of man, about 6 feet 1 inch in height, a raw-boned, wiry young fellow, who scaled about 12 stones in condition, but condition was seldom absent in one who led such a healthy, muscle-producing life as farming, wood cutting, and fishing. It is worthy of note, too, that so many of our subsequent champions - Beach, Kemp, Searle, Stanbury, M'Lean - all came from the country. Mulhall, it is said by one who knew him, never drank a glass of ale or spirits. He believed in lots of hard work for a race - tree-chopping, rowing, and walking, with plenty of solid food. He came to Sydney as a waterman subsequently, and was champion in the [eighteen] forties in light and heavy boats.

'I have known George Mulhall,' (nearly fifty years ago, writes one who knew him), 'with a crew of fishermen, all his own mates, row twelve miles from the north of Sydney to row in the regatta at Sydney the same day in the Whaleboat Race, which was a great event in those days, when we would have the crews of 14 or 15 whale ships start in a race. I have seen him win after rowing that distance, and beat the picked crew of an American whaler. The [American] vessel carried a broom at the masthead; that is to say, they swept the sea, and had never been beaten, until they came to Sydney. It would have been very hard to get a crew in any part of the world to beat them with the same appliances they utilised in those days, with ash oars, and all the whaling gear in the boat.'

That whaleboat race was in the 1830s, when Mulhall was a sinewy nineteen years old. The boat was a six-oared gig, the *Paddy from Cork*, imported by Captain Arthur Devlin, and winner of a great many races with the same crew. On that occasion, they claimed the Championship of Port Jackson, which shows how early the idea of a local 'championship' was abroad. George Mulhall raced often as a crew member and later as coxswain in whaleboats, as well as in partnership with his brother Thomas in pair-oar matches. Mulhall sometimes took the tiller in a yachting event, but it is his prowess as a solo oarsman that we examine in the present account.

#### WATERMAN

Mulhall became a waterman, one of Sydney's fleet of unruly self-employed boatmen who plied Port Jackson. From the late 1840s until the late 1860s, he was licensed to operate from the Circular Wharf, as Sydney's familiar 'Quay' was first known. Like so many watermen, Mulhall was no stranger to a fight, whether at the oars, in the press, or sometimes quite literally at fisticuffs. In November 1860:

George Mulhall, and Patrick Mulhall, were charged by Thomas Dawson, with assaulting him on the 8th instant. Mr Driver [was the] solicitor for the defendants. Complainant is a shipping clerk ... The defendants are father and son. 'On Thursday morning last I was placing some paddles against the waterman's hut on the Circular Quay when the elder defendant came up to me and asked why I had interfered with his son. Whilst I was talking to him, the younger defendant came up and struck me. There was a struggle, and I received a black eye in it. A few days before I interfered to prevent the younger defendant and another person from fighting. On that day I boxed Patrick Mulhall's ears for calling me "a thing".'

George was discharged, but the sixteen year old Patrick was fined 20 shillings with 7 shillings costs. There had been a more sordid case, involving the Mulhall brothers, back in March 1835. George and Patrick along with several other men were implicated in the alleged abduction and rape of a young woman which took place on board a boat lying at the Market Wharf. The girl changed her story several times during the examination at Sydney's Water Police Court, and only one man was charged; the others, including the Mulhalls, were released for lack of evidence. The incident serves to show how murky a crew were some of Sydney's watermen, and that the wharves and jetties of Port Jackson were no place to loiter after dark. The Market Wharf in Darling Harbour had an especially bad reputation.



[PJ\_IMG09: Circular Quay in 1874. Source: *Illustrated Sydney News*, 2 May, 1874 .]

*Caption: Sydney's Circular Quay, at the head of Sydney Cove, c. 1874  
Watermen and waiting passengers are shown at the Queen's Wharf Steps, left foreground.  
Nearby is a waterman's hut.*

On the whole, George Mulhall was a respectable citizen, as his later career proved. In May 1835, Mulhall married Mary Anne Smith, perhaps as a matter of urgency, at St Mary's Cathedral. Both were described as 'natives of the Colony'. Mary bore George eight children, the first of them arriving that same year. Only four survived their father. Two sons at least became outstanding Port Jackson oarsmen.

Mulhall's earliest rowing challenge appears in the year 1836. In February, George and brother Thomas announced themselves open to row against any two persons in the colony who were 'not Australians', for ten pounds. A match could be made at the 'Three Tuns', a sporting hotel on the corner of Pitt and King Streets. Why 'no Australians'? Was the local rowing talent at the time too poor to be worth a match? Or too good? Were the Mulhalls hoping to 'take some off' a visiting crew? Presumably, they were offering themselves for a pair-oar match, but there appear to have been no takers. George Mulhall next makes the public prints in 1839, when he rowed against one 'Mossman's Jack' from Dawes Point to Clark Island and back for a stake of ten pounds. The match began at 7.00 am, and George, 'the native', won with ease.<sup>1</sup> Mulhall rowed the same course a few days later against a waterman named Haydon, and won the same stake again. In both cases, his opponents were not 'natives'. Local sporting reportage was still wobbly; Mulhall is here spelt 'Marwel'.

Early on Tuesday morning, a rowing match came off between a Sydney waterman called Harry Haydon, and a native named George Marwel, for £10 aside. They started from Dawes Point, proceeding round Clarke's Island, and back; but on reaching Garden Island the waterman's courage began to fail, and he gave up the contest, leaving the native victorious without a struggle.

At this point, George Mulhall's name disappears from the colony's rowing news. His father, former convict Patrick Mulhall, had taken up a 50-acre grant at Brisbane Water, on the promontory now known as Wagstaff Point, land promised Mulhall by Governor Macquarie in 1821. In 1841, the Mulhall family moved there to begin farming, and for a time it was known as Mulhall's Point. George found employment as a pilot on Brisbane Water, and it is here that several of his children were born – and died in infancy, as so often happened. At the age of 2½, a son was burned to death, his clothing having caught fire, another dreadfully common circumstance. A daughter had died in the year of their first settlement. Old Patrick did not last much longer, expiring in 1846, though the Mulhalls were still farming cattle there in 1858. In 1844, Mulhall sent a petition to the New South Wales Parliament seeking compensation for the loss of his position as pilot at Brisbane Water, abolished by the Executive Council. This was presumably done as

<sup>1</sup> 'Mossman's Jack' may have been the previous champion John Brennan.

a cost-cutting measure during the Depression of 1843. Whether he was successful with his petition is unknown, but in 1845 George Mulhall was back at Port Jackson, working at the trade of waterman. He makes his reappearance on the rowing scene at the Anniversary Regatta of 1845, easily winning the Watermen's Race.

The conduct displayed during the Waterman's Races was not always above reproach; there seems to have been a lack of true sportsmanship, and Mulhall was not the least of the offenders. Perhaps there were some professional scores to settle, payback for patrons hijacked or queues jumped at wharfs.<sup>2</sup> Fouls were common; boats were deliberately damaged, or sculls broken. A rival might catch hold of another's scull and prevent him rowing, or row into his path and 'steal his water'. He might arrange for squads of barrackers to row behind and shout abuse. It was not unknown for half the field of entrants to row a short distance, then give up and return, if the competition seemed too stiff. Almost every race was followed by protests, many of them rancorous. Shaking hands with the winner and declaring him the better man was a thing almost unknown.



[PJ\_IMG10 Departure of W.C. Wentworth. Ill. *Syd. News* 25 Mar 1854]  
*Caption: Port Jackson watermen worked at all hours, on all occasions, and in all weathers.*

Mulhall's rowing prowess was universally known and feared, even resented. At a meeting held in January 1853 to plan the coming Anniversary Regatta, the committee was concerned that there were no entries for the Watermen's Race. 'Many of the watermen object to enter in this race unless the three Mulhalls, who are supposed to be the crack pullers of the colony, were excluded. They contend that it would be only throwing their entrance [fee] away to attempt to compete with those men, and therefore they ask the committee to make an exception in their favour.' Later regattas added an additional event for watermen who had never won a prize, but they are a poor lot who will not compete lest they lose. A better class of Australian sportsmen in time arose.

Mulhall's expertise as a waterman was known to the general public as well. On 18 November 1848, he was hired by a passenger to travel, along with his skiff, in the Melbourne-bound steamer *Juno* as far as the Moruya River. Mulhall there rowed the passenger ashore, and they planned their return voyage to Sydney the following week per steamer *Shamrock*. But on the appointed morning, *Shamrock* did not appear. The passenger returned overland, and Mulhall 'being well acquainted with the coast' set off on something of a small-boat marathon, reported in the Shipping News column of *The Herald*. 'The same evening he arrived at Bateman's Bay where he stopped for the night, starting again early the following morning, he by evening reached Ulladulla, left there on Wednesday morning, and arrived at Shoalhaven the same night. Here he was detained two days, in consequence of heavy gales, but on Saturday morning made another start, and contrived to reach Port Aiken<sup>3</sup> by 9 pm. ; left there early on Sunday morning and arrive [at Port Jackson] about mid-day, thus accomplishing a distance of 180 miles by sailing and pulling, in an open watermen's boat, which we may remark was built by Howard, and is 21 feet in length.' There were giants in the earth in those days.

John Brennan, the reigning Port Jackson champion, matched Mulhall on Michaelmas Day, 29 September 1845 at a celebration held in Rushcutters Bay. Mr Dodery of the White Conduit Hotel offered Sydney's lower orders mirth and revelry: tart-eating, greasy-pig catching, greasy-pole climbing, and a boat-race with a prize of £5. The Rushcutters Bay race was not described in the press, but whatever the circumstances Mulhall refused to accept defeat, and issued a challenge, which Brennan rudely declined with the words 'send a better man.' A third party tried to back this re-match, but there was no response from Brennan. Was he fearful of Mulhall's challenge to his Port Jackson supremacy? Meet again they did, this time at the Anniversary Regatta of 1846, when Mulhall at the oars of the *Sylph* beat Brennan pulling the *Centipede*. At this stage of colonial rowing history, it was customary to give the names of the winning boats, sometimes not even naming the puller, since the boats often belonged to others. Regatta committees provided skiffs, presumed equal, and competitors had their choice. On this occasion, all the boats were 'built expressly' for the event; perhaps the builders hoped later to sell or lease these new craft to watermen or other competitors. There was a dispute following this race, quarrels being par for the course. Brennan claimed he ought to be the winner; he had misunderstood the instructions and rowed the wrong way around Goat Island, but two days later the Regatta committee awarded the palm to Mulhall, which cannot have increased the liking between these two Port Jackson cracks.

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<sup>2</sup> A practice long condemned by the colony's cab-drivers and known as 'duck-shoving'.

<sup>3</sup> *Port Aiken* = Port Hacking.

Brennan got his revenge next Anniversary Regatta. After a sharp contest, Mulhall came in second, fouled by another entrant's boat. 'A deal of party feeling was evinced by this match,' said the *Herald*, 'the whole of the watermen plying from different stairs, whilst Currie, Brennan, and Mulhall were men who had each won prizes. It was a spirited race, but all soon gave up the contest with the exception of Brennan and Mulhall.' The remarks about 'party feeling' go far to explain the aggression shown during some of the Watermen's Races. The contests seemed to be 'wharf versus wharf', but feelings ran much deeper than mere team spirit. Came the Regatta of 1848, Mulhall was in vindictive mood. Both boats 'fouled and dodged' throughout the course, and one of Brennan's sculls broke. The race was followed by violent disputation and protest, but the prize went to Mulhall. John Brennan refused a re-match with Mulhall ('in consequence of your unmanly, cowardly behaviour') and vanished from the Sydney sculling scene. Mulhall on the other hand was starting his run for the Port Jackson Championship.

#### CHAMPION

From 1849 to early 1853, Mulhall emerges the victor in every race he enters, and somewhere in this period, he is proclaimed Port Jackson's Champion Sculler. It may have been this embarrassing occasion in February 1850 that marked the event:

THE VICTORIA THEATRE has offered unusual attractions during the week, barring the wreck of the nautical drama of FALSE COLORS on Monday. The entertainments on Tuesday evening were under the patronage of the Regatta Committee, on which occasion the 'Prize Skiff' was lowered from the flies, and presented by Mr Manager Griffiths in a neat dress, and ad-dress, to the fortunate winner. Mr George Mulhall, who stood bowing amidst his prize, hat in hand, evidently wishing his craft might sink with him beneath the gaze of the hundreds of merry eyes smiling at his 'first appearance on any stage' but a ship-stage.

Mulhall, if red-faced on this occasion, was otherwise more than confident of his powers in a boat. He responded to an 1852 challenge from watermen Tom Roberts and Maurice Bullivant with great swagger, offering to row against them over any distance, Roberts and Bullivant as a pair-oar crew, and himself solo; or else, he would beat them both, in individual contests, one after the other. If such an extraordinary match came off, it was not reported. Perhaps the pair were daunted by Mulhall's 'booming'.

#### EX-CHAMPION

Mulhall kept his championship for less than three years; he finally met his match in young Thomas McGrath, barely 20 years old, at the North Shore Regatta of May 1853. McGrath won the belt, with a silver cup to testify to it, and 30 sovereigns, but Mulhall, now a sturdy 42 years old, was not about to hand over the laurels without a fight. He immediately challenged McGrath to a private match, which came off on 25 July, and the description published in *Bell's Life* reveals how far boat-racing had risen in popularity in the colony.

Great excitement was caused in the aquatic, and even *terra firmatic* circles, by the expected contest between two rivals of great fame in the manly exercise of sculling. The amount of the stake, £50, was considered only a minor matter between both friends and principals, as the honour of the championship of the harbour was at issue on the result of the match. The contending men, George Mulhall and Thomas McGrath, had previously met at the Regatta so ably got up and spiritedly carried out by Mr Dind of the North Shore - McGrath being then an easy winner, owing to Mulhall having pulled out of his course. The friends of both parties, not satisfied with this result, wished to see them settle the affair oar to oar and the match we are now discussing was accordingly made. It was to have been pulled some days previously, but Mulhall was taken with influenza, and, feeling unable to the task, offered to lose his forfeit. This McGrath generously refused, and the struggle was deferred till last Monday, at noon. The day was all that could be wished for in boating: smooth water, and pleasant overhead. Long before 12 o'clock the fort, battery, and every point that could command a view of the race, was crowded with spectators, the interest being greater than could have been expected amongst landsmen generally. G[eorge] Thornton, Esq., J.P., was appointed starter, and previously to giving the word, was requested also to act as umpire. At the signal, McGrath took a lead of nearly two boats' lengths; but at Dawes Battery Mulhall overtook him. Here, unfortunately, they fouled, but started again. Under the [steamer] *Chusan*,<sup>4</sup> when Mulhall was three parts of a length ahead, they fouled again, Mulhall's boat being stove in on the quarter, apparently by the stem of McGrath's boat, though some say by his scull. At any rate, Mulhall was unable to proceed, and threw up his paddles, McGrath pulling round the course alone. A dispute, of course, arose; both parties claiming the stakes. Mr Thornton having been only appointed umpire at the last moment, and there being no mention in the written agreement of either umpires or referee, wisely refused to give his decision unless both men agreed, in writing, to stand by it. This neither was willing to do; and the long-talked-of match ended in a draw - i.e. a *bubble*. It is to be hoped that they will meet again, and in manly friendship, instead of wrangling; but we would advise them, and all parties making matches of any description, to always have a distinct black and white agreement that cannot be got away from any attempt at a *win*, *tie*, or a *barney*. For any straightforward affair, if principals or backers choose to come to *Bell's Life* office, we shall be happy to draw up correct articles.

McGrath and Mulhall next met at the Balmain Regatta of November 1853. They vied in the Second Race, for All-comers, and Mulhall was beaten by 300 yards. 'There can now be no doubt that in light skiffs no one in Sydney can compete with McGrath, and it is equally certain that in watermen's boats very few can pull with him', said the *Herald*. It was suggested that Mulhall took it easy, saving his strength for the Fifth Race, for watermen, which he won. 'The Fifth Race was looked upon as the great event of the day, and a vast deal of bets depended on its issue, as a trial of skill between the two best scullers in the harbour. Some angry disputes arose

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<sup>4</sup> *Under the steamer*: That is, they passed close by. The 750 ton P&O *Chusan* was the first steamer to carry mails between Sydney and London, arriving in Port Jackson on 3 August 1852 after a journey of only 80 days, nearly halving the usual time of the journey. Armed with cannon to repel pirates in the China Sea, *Chusan* was a cynosure in Sydney Harbour; the citizens held a ball in her honour.

between parties interested on behalf of the men respectively, and some disgraceful language was applied towards Mulhall by a rival waterman, named [James] Richards, who persisted in his blackguard conduct throughout the race, to the great annoyance of everyone within hearing, and regardless of the injunctions of the committee to the contrary. McGrath maintained a good lead for about half the distance, but became very weak, and soon gave place to his opponent, who won with apparent ease. Time, 41 minutes.' It is only fair to add that the 'blackguard' James Richards was also Thomas McGrath's coach. But a dispute had arisen about certain fouling incidents during the Second Race. Letters on the subject were published. The first was from George Mulhall, who attended a committee meeting, bringing three witnesses to attest the fouling. His boat being stove<sup>5</sup> was proof sufficient, declared Mulhall. Nonetheless, the committee awarded McGrath the prize, 'in the teeth of evidence,' complained Mulhall, and Mulhall added, 'I was informed by one of the committee, before starting, that if I were fouled I was to pull the race, and the prize would be awarded to me. The decision ran counter to the promise. I should have been satisfied if the committee had decided the match should be pulled again. It is my opinion that in any other part of the world I should have had Fair Play.'

Mr J.C. White on behalf of the regatta committee, replied 'Mulhall ... made up his mind to be fouled before he started, and consequently applied to one of the committee to ascertain what he should do in such a case. And as the decision of the committee ran counter to the promise of the individual member alluded to by him, he feels aggrieved. The matter requires no further comment.' The fouling incident was observed by a great many spectators, and many paragraphs of editorial condemnation resulted, damning the incident and demanding fair play. *Empire* concluded its comments with a clap of editorial thunder:

If our regattas are to become national, and to meet the countenance and support of the most influential people in the community, they must be conducted on English principles, and not be suffered to degenerate into mere displays of rowdyism, disgraceful to all concerned. We hear complaints from various quarters, that the proceedings at the late Regatta should have been marred by such blackguardism, and we can only express a strong hope that for the future, the same imputation may never rest upon the proceedings. It is necessary ever to aim at a high standard, and in our sports - as in our labours - to remember, that belonging as we do to the English nation, we should ever strive to maintain the high character the people of that country possess, and never to lose through partisan blindness, a sight of justice, fair-play, and moderation.



[PJ\_IMG11: the Balmain Regatta of 1853. Source: *Illustrated Sydney News*, 10 December, 1853.]

**Caption:** *Balmain Regatta 1853; the race between the yachts Ivanhoe, Frolic, and Eclipse. A variety of oared craft carry spectators, journalists, and race officials.*

Fair play, like moderation, was an optional extra at sculling matches. At the Anniversary Day Regatta of 1854, McGrath confirmed his championship status, quickly outpacing George and brother Thomas Mulhall, and Andrew McGuire, then fighting it out with Henry Green for a decisive win. There was no protest from any of these rowers, and Thomas McGrath was loudly cheered. The *Illustrated Sydney News* thought Mulhall too heavy for a light skiff, and that his superior strength and bottom (i.e. stamina) rather operated against him in such a small craft. 'Mulhall must still rank first man in the colony in a watermen's boat,' concluded the *News*, but at the North Shore Regatta of 24 May that year, trouble again arose. Once again it was a Champion Race, once again the prize was a silver trophy and 30 sovereigns, and once more Thomas McGrath was trying conclusions, not only against George and Thomas Mulhall, but against three Green brothers, Henry, George, and young Richard Augustus Willoughby. (Young Richard within the next decade was to give the world something to talk about.) The other two contenders were James Rice, and James Richards, and this match marked the beginning of the end for George Mulhall's chances of regaining his championship. *Empire* expressed its disapprobation at the conduct of those persons who so far forgot themselves as to insult by hootings and yellings the losing man, George Mulhall, both throughout the race and after its termination. 'Though fairly beaten by his opponent, McGrath, it does not follow that he should be despised and insulted; if the partisans of particular persons will disregard the principles of "Fair Play," they should at least respect the old man for what he has been, and remember that it is an "unequal task when Youth contends with Age."'

Mulhall is now styled the 'old man', the 'has-been', and with a valedictory phrase from Homer's *Odyssey* is shoved over the horizon. But he was by no means ready to hang up his sculls. As in the previous year, Mulhall immediately issued a challenge to McGrath for the Port Jackson Championship. The match came off on 10 July 1854. 'McGrath took the lead at starting, and having secured his distance, took it quite easily, but still steadily maintaining his position, and at Shark Island was 1 minute 5 seconds ahead. Although Mulhall made very severe exertions, he continued to lose ground, and the race was won by three minutes and a half at least. The

<sup>5</sup> *stove (verb)* = holed by another boat ramming it.

winner was received by the loud plaudits of his friends; but we are sorry to say that, on proffering his hand to his unsuccessful antagonist, it was refused with a surliness which bespoke a feeling which ought not to mingle in manly contests like these.' After this match, *Bell's Life* was more than ready to put Mulhall out to grass.

Whilst congratulating the oft-proved conqueror on his skill, endurance, and merited success, we cannot but bestow our regrets on the defeated veteran. For years he was the acknowledged champion of Port Jackson, and looked up to by his fellows as a 'Triton amongst minnows.' His late repeated ill-luck must therefore be very galling, and we certainly blame his friends,<sup>6</sup> for again bringing him [to race] only to 'heap coals on his head.' They meant it kindly, no doubt, and it showed their confidence in the old favourite; but youth must conquer age [...] He has gained and won all the honours in his own day that his young successor now carries, and should retire with the content inspired by what he has been.

Mulhall did not cease his sculling career quite so easily as that. Indefatigable, or perhaps merely dogged, he rowed again and again, in the Anniversary and at other regattas, and made private matches, with now and then a victory, though never again winning the Championship. At the Anniversary Day Regatta, 1862, Mulhall rowed in the Waterman's Race, and raised a dispute. The match was rowed over again on March 1, and with nothing to lose, and perhaps something to prove, Mulhall made further difficulties.

On Saturday last, the preliminaries being arranged, the men consenting to pull again started for the red buoy, when some dispute arose as to allowing George Mulhall to pull in the same boat he used at the Regatta; especially as the other three had got fresh boats allotted to them. The difficulty was got over by Mulhall determining to pull whether approved of or not; and so they came to the scratch at twenty-two minutes past the appointed time, four o'clock. Mr Thornton succeeded in effecting a good start, and away went the boats with wind and tide in their favour direct to Goat Island, and as they rounded the point the following was the order: Mulhall slightly ahead, closely followed by Dunnett, Ives and Connelly well up. In this order they again made their appearance, the distance between the first and second boats being increased a little, and between them and the third boat very much, Connelly very far behind ... Mulhall was pulling with perfect ease, being evidently confident of winning; he merely kept a few boats' lengths ahead, while Dunnett and Ives changed places as they passed the *Tiptree*, on their road to Pinchgut. Ives's victory, however, was of very short duration, for when the boats appeared, coming round that island, Dunnett was farther ahead than ever; and from this point there was no race. Mulhall not being looked upon as a competitor by the others, the fact of his boat being first was not regarded by Dunnett as any odds ... We understand that Mulhall has given notice of his intention to claim the stakes and, should they not be given to him, he intends suing for the recovery of the amount, so the matter has again ended in dispute.

Mulhall's threat seems not to have been serious. The Woolloomooloo Bay Regatta held on Boxing Day 1863 was George Mulhall's final reported sculling match, for All-comers in watermen's skiffs, in which he came last. 'Mulhall ... was loudly cheered, but the plucky old man has lost the physical vigour he once enjoyed, and has no chance with the aquatic athletes of the present day,' said the *Herald*. George was 52, long in the tooth for an athlete in any era, though not an extraordinary age for a waterman. From the 1840s, Port Jackson steam ferries, swift and comfortable and charging just fourpence per journey, put a large dent in watermen's incomes. Still, Mulhall continued to operate as a Port Jackson waterman for some years, in partnership with his brother and sons. He was an accredited boatman for the *Empire's* Maritime News department, authorised to ferry their reporters out to newly arrived vessels in quest of copy. Mulhall was among those who rowed around Sydney Harbour and its coves in search of survivors from the catastrophic wreck of the *Dunbar* in 1857. In 1859, he donated a specimen of a rare fish to the Australian Museum, no doubt caught on one of his excursions around Port Jackson, and beyond; Mulhall often took a waterman's skiff outside Sydney Heads, even as far as Broken Bay.

#### LIGHT-HOUSE KEEPER

In 1867, after several years of dithering and debate over costs and necessity, the Government of NSW established two temporary lights on the southern promontory of Broken Bay for the guidance of shipping, described as 'Stewart's Lights' after their Parliamentary sponsor. The promontory was then known as 'Barrenjuey'. In 1868, George Mulhall was appointed Light-Keeper, and barely six years later, the government provided a cottage for George and his family. The 'Stewart Lights' were not satisfactory, and were finally replaced in 1881 with a fine stone lighthouse and associated outbuildings.

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<sup>6</sup> *friends* = backers who financed the match by providing the stakes



[PJ\_IMG12: Barrenjoey Lighthouse. Source: Town and Country Journal, 6 August 1881.]

*Caption: The stone lighthouse and keeper's cottage,  
constructed on the Barrenjoey promontory in 1881.*

George Mulhall was appointed Superintendent of the new lighthouse, although his son George had been Assistant Superintendent for over a decade, and probably carried out most of the duties. George Mulhall lived for only another four years, dying on 25 June 1885, at the age of 74. Mary survived him by just two years. Mulhall is buried within the lighthouse grounds on Barrenjoey. A plaque fixed to his grave describes Mulhall as the first official light-keeper on this site, but makes no mention of his rowing championships. The inscription on his tombstone is a conventional cautionary graveyard stanza, with a sly and perhaps unintentional allusion to Mulhall's trade as a waterman for hire.

*All ye that come my grave to see,  
Prepare in time to follow me,  
Repent at once without delay,  
For I in haste was called away.*

Mulhall was called away, but not entirely forgotten. This letter appeared in 1902:

I am a constant reader of the *Evening News*, and take a great interest in anything *re* the old times. In Saturday's paper you give an account, copied from one of the Sydney papers in the early fifties. I must certainly say the account is not correct. I was at the regatta, and saw the skiff race run. The course was from the flagship, round Pinchgut, and back to the ship. The race was won by George Mulhall. I was at the Victoria Theatre when the presentation was made. Mulhall was lowered down in the boat on to the stage. The house was crowded, and he was cheered heartily. They expected to hear him say something, but were disappointed. The manager of the theatre (Mr Griffiths) came forward, and said they must excuse Mulhall, as he was a better rower than speaker, and said something about native simplicity. One of the fellows in the pit yelled out, 'You should hear him on the Circular Quay when he is bargaining for a fare; you would not think there was much simplicity about him then.' — Yours, etc., GEEBUNG.

