

An Adelaide Gaol Execution

Alexander Newland Lee (The Rhynie Tragedy)

Executed 15 July 1920

Around 2.00am on 1 April 1920, Dr Edward Bartlett received a call to attend the home of Alexander Newland Lee and his family at Rhynie in the mid-north.

When the doctor, accompanied by Constable Woodhead, arrived shortly afterwards they discovered the body of Mrs Muriel Lee in the front bedroom lying face down on the bed. The doctor examined the body and estimated she had been dead for two or three hours. In the sitting room they found two children sleeping. Dr Bartlett woke them and found the pair in good health but in the back bedroom they discovered three more children aged 6, 5 and 3 lying dead. Their symptoms all showed signs of poisoning.

An examination of the shelves and cupboards in the kitchen didn't reveal any signs of poison but Lee pointed to a jug on the table and said to the constable, "I believe my wife has taken some of this milk with poison. I have also taken some of it in a cup." He went on to say that it had given him stomach pains, a sore mouth and he felt shaky and very rigid in the limbs. The doctor examined Lee but found everything to be normal.

Several samples taken from the bodies of the four deceased and from items in the house were sent to the Government Analyst. Upon examination, the stomach samples from each of the victims were found to contain traces of strychnine. A search of the garden found a broken bottle in a pile of rubbish. Although it smelled of kerosene it tested positive for the poison, strychnine.

Alexander Newland Lee denied any knowledge of the poisonings but the evidence was sufficient for him to be committed for trial on a charge of murder.

An inquest at Riverton was told by Ida Vera Scholz, a single woman, that she knew Lee. Her father kept the Willows Hospital at Light's Pass. Lee had been a patient there for about five weeks, from February 3 to March 9, and she then became friendly with him. She had met him on four or five different occasions in the evening, and on several occasions Lee told her that he loved her and they were lovers. On one occasion Lee said: "My wife won't live long; she is not strong. I have not lived happily with her for the past two or three years."

Several times he said: "Will you marry me if my wife dies?" The last time was on March 30. He added "My wife has threatened to poison herself and three children or run away.

When the eldest child, 9 year old Amelia, took the stand she told the inquest that she saw her father take a small brown bottle from his pocket on the fateful evening and put a few drops into her brother's mouth. When she asked him what was the matter with her brother the reply was that he was only "trying to be sick and can't." Then her other brother began to cry and the

An Adelaide Gaol Execution

father went back and said "You will be better in a minute."

The trial took place in Adelaide during mid June 1920. There was great interest in the case and large crowds occupied the public gallery. Evidence was given at the trial that Muriel and Alexander Lee had been married for nine years but Mrs Lee had an unhappy life. She had a large family of children to care for, her husband was out of work and he was also unfaithful to her. Muriel Lee had also threatened to do away with herself and her children. There was some speculation that Alexander may not have been the father of the last two children (twins) to be born. Their father may have been Len, Alex's brother, who had been living with them for some time. During the trial Lee stated that he was 'not responsible for her condition'.

Lee had been droving in the north of the state but returned home on Wednesday 31 March 1920. Whilst away he had enquired about where he could obtain strychnine to poison rabbits. A statement made to the police officer when escorting Lee to Adelaide on the train was given to the court. It blamed Muriel for the deaths stating that she had given the poison to the children and taken some herself before confessing to Lee and asking him to keep it secret while her mother was still living.

Lee made a long statement to the jury in which he explained the contradictions between his statement and what he had told the detectives after the tragedy.

He said "Some time after the death of my wife and children Dr. Bartlett, with Constable Woodhead, arrived. Realising that what had happened was the result of my relationship with Miss Scholz I determined to deny the truth, and put forward the suggestion of accidental poisoning, and that is my reason for the untrue statements which I first made. Upon reflection I realised that to suppress the truth was impossible, and I realised that suspicion would fall upon me, and so I told the truth, namely, that my wife had killed the children and herself. Even then I could not persuade myself to admit my shameful relations with Miss Scholz. What I have stated now is true in every detail, and I most solemnly declare to you that I am innocent of this awful charge."

The jury retired for 90 minutes before returning a guilty verdict.

In his summing up, Mr Justice Poole told the jury that the evidence against Lee was circumstantial. He reminded them not to draw any inference from the fact that Lee did not take the witness box but to bear in mind that his statement had not been the subject of cross examination.

At the conclusion of the trial Lee appeared unmoved as the jury announced the guilty verdict although when the judge asked if he had anything to say before sentence was passed he replied, "you had some expert hands at falsehoods brought before you. I was placed in a position which I was not able to prove to you, but still you can deal with me in this world, but you cannot handle my dealings in the next."

Judge Poole announced that he was completely satisfied with the accuracy of the verdict and advised Lee to remove from his mind any hope of alteration of

An Adelaide Gaol Execution

the sentence.

It only remained for the sentence of death to be passed. Lee was still wearing the defiant look which he assumed when making his last statement when the judge ordered, "Let the prisoner be removed." Lee picked up his hat and was escorted from the court to a condemned cell at Adelaide Gaol.

An appeal was made to Executive Council but on Monday 12 July the death sentence was confirmed.

Thursday 15 July 1920 had been set for the date of the execution.

Efforts were made to have the hanging postponed until after the departure of the Prince of Wales [later King Edward VIII], who was on a royal visit, but the law required it should take place 28 after the sentence.

On the day prior to his hanging Lee was visited by his parents and other family members at Adelaide Gaol. Alexander Newland Lee ate a hearty breakfast and spent the last half hour of his life in prayer with the Rev. W H Hanlon in the New Building. He made no confession of any kind but maintained his belief in Christianity and protested his innocence to the end.

While the executioners, father and son team P & AN Giles, were preparing for his doom he winked at one of the officials and then walked unflinchingly to the gallows.

The Rev. Hanlon had been attending to Lee's spiritual needs on a daily basis during the previous few weeks but on 15 July 1920 he had the misfortune to attend Lee's execution on his birthday.

Muriel and the children were buried in Riverton Cemetery on Good Friday 1920 but Muriel's married name does not appear on the headstone."

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