

## **An Adelaide Gaol Execution**

**William Page** - *by Trevor Peart*

### **Executed 28 October 1875**

It was 2 August 1875 when searchers discovered the body of Mary Buchan in a shallow grave near the town of Mt Gambier.

An inquest before a JP and a 15 man jury was opened the following day at the Mt Gambier courthouse. The first task of the inquest was to adjourn to the hospital and view the body which had been moved there for medical examination by the Assistant Colonial Surgeon, James Jackson. The body was in an advanced state of decomposition and the head displayed signs of having been bludgeoned with a blunt instrument but the cause of death was determined to be strangulation.

Elizabeth Byrnes, Mary Buchan's sister, told the inquest that nineteen year old Mary was last seen three weeks earlier in the company of local man William Page alias Walker. He had proposed and given her a ring but Mary returned it after discovering Page was already married and had recently been convicted of wife desertion.

At 2pm Inspector Hunt applied for an adjournment to enable the person suspected of murder to be present. A large group of people had assembled at the courthouse when the inquest reconvened. As the 22 year old manacled prisoner was transferred from the police cells to the court he was greeted with a chorus of yells.

Page declined to question Dr James or Elizabeth Byrnes when their evidence was read again. Dr James continued by describing the wounds to Mary's head and confirmed that they could have been inflicted by a whip handle which had been found near the body.

A local butcher told the inquest he had loaned Page a stockwhip with a timber handle loaded with pewter. Page told him he had removed the handle for repairs but it had since been stolen.

Several other witnesses were called, each of whom gave a damning testimony. A laundress at the boarding house where Page was staying told of how she questioned Page over blood on his clothing. He'd dismissed it by saying he had a nosebleed.

A police sergeant told the inquest he questioned Page when Mary first went missing. Page told him he'd provided her with a horse and she had gone to Ballarat to join her father. The last time he saw her was as she rode through the town.

A labourer, James Crowe, testified that Page had asked to borrow his shovel shortly after Mary's disappearance. Page had returned it after about 30 minutes saying he had buried some bottles and rubbish.

The inquest jury retired for a few minutes before returning the verdict – "That Mary Julia Buchan met her death by strangulation and the Jury are unanimously of the opinion that the said Mary Julia Buchan was wilfully murdered by the prisoner William Page alias Walker." Wild applause broke out in the body of the court as the verdict was delivered but Page showed no emotion.

William Page appeared before Mr Justice Stow at the Mt Gambier Circuit Court on 7 October 1875 on the charge of murder. When asked to plead he at once answered,

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“Guilty.” The judge seemed stunned and asked him to repeat his plea. Page again responded that he was guilty. He was asked if he understood the full effect of his plea and replied in the affirmative. Justice Stow again asked him if pleaded guilty and once again Page confirmed that he was guilty. His honour then told Page that from the depositions before him he believed no other result could have been arrived at even if there had been a full trial. Mr Justice Stow then passed the mandatory sentence and ruled that Page be sentenced to death by hanging.

While in Mt Gambier Gaol, Page wrote a full confession to his crimes and had them witnessed by his spiritual advisor Rev. Caldwell. Page maintained that the murder was not premeditated but carried out on impulse when Mary returned the engagement ring.

The sentence was carried out at 8am on 28 October 1875 at Mt Gambier Gaol. Rev. Caldwell and four police troopers accompanied Page to the scaffold where the hangman was waiting. The prisoner was pale but showed no signs of nervousness as he stood on the trapdoor awaiting his fate. The noose was adjusted and as the bolt was drawn William Page paid the penalty for his crime with his life.

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