

The Execution of Thomas Dowd

A LURID AND SENSATIONALIZED account. Compare this with the muted and factualized pieces on the execution of Roland Hutchings in 1942, a difference summed up eloquently by Frederick Worrell at the end of that section. A story popular at the time but without factual basis was that Dowd was himself innocent, but took the heat for Mrs. Ward, his lover. ~

Pilot

Oct. 3, 1878

The New River Tragedy!

Thomas Dowd and Mrs. Eliza Ward Arrested for the Murder of Thomas E. Ward. And committed to the Jail in St. Andrews.

Charlotte County, it is to be regretted, has now its murder-tragedy to record. The "Shediac Tragedy" which created such excitement throughout the Province, and which is destined to create yet more, does not now stand out as the only murder-tragedy in New Brunswick.

The New River Tragedy exceeds in atrocity the Shediac tragedy inasmuch as a wife is implicated in the murder of her husband!

The wife of the murdered man, and her paramour, Thomas Dowd, have received the verdict of "willful murder" by a Coroner's Jury, after a lengthened, patient, and careful investigation of circumstances and the testimony of witnesses, Thomas Dowd as principal, and Eliza Ward as accomplice.

The contradictory statement of the accused parties themselves are deemed sufficient to fix the suspicion, if not the certainty of the crime of murder, upon them. That the awful deed - a cold-blooded, premeditated murder - has been perpetrated in New River, in this County, within the past few weeks, there is not the shadow of a doubt.

The residence where the murdered man lived, is the well-known "McGowan House," located a few rods west of the New River Bridge. It overlooks the rapid New River stream and was at one

time a favourite "Inn by the Wayside". It is on the main road leading from St. George to Saint John, and distant from the Lepreaux Mills and Village, about 3 ½ miles.

It appears from testimony adduced before the Coroner's Jury that an improper and illicit intimacy sprang up between Dowd and Ward's wife, which bad beginning has, it is feared, culminated in the murder of the unfortunate husband.

The evidence of several witnesses went to prove that Ward left the house early in the morning to cut grass on the meadow a short distance up the river; and that Dowd went out a short time also, in the same direction. Also, that Ward never returned; while Dowd came back to the house about 10 o'clock the same morning, went to the pantry and took a "lunch." And, that Dowd and Mrs. Ward were both seen returning during the same day towards the house from the direction of the meadow.

A young man of Lepreaux, a few days ago, being in search of his cows in the vicinity of the meadow, noticed by the unusual movements of his little dog that something more than common was nigh; instituted a search, discovering the toe of a man's boot projecting out from bush and moss. Further examination discovered the body of a man, giving forth offensive effluvia of decomposition. The body was subsequently identified as that of Thomas E. Ward.

Suspicion soon pointed to Thomas Dowd as the murderer, and he was promptly arrested at Musquash - several miles distant from the scene of the murder. The wife of Ward in giving her testimony, made such and so many conflicting statements as led also to her arrest as an accomplice.

An inquest under Coroner Reynolds of Lepreaux after a protracted investigation concluded their services by rendering a verdict of willful murder against Thomas Dowd, as principal, and against Eliza Ward as accomplice. On Sunday afternoon, Sept. 29th *ultimo*, two teams from Lepreaux drove into St. Andrews, and in the first was seated Thomas Dowd - in the second team sat Mrs. Ward and her daughter, with a young child about 7 months old. Dowd and Mrs. Ward entered the prison doors of the County Jail as prisoners, and Annie Ward, the daughter, a young unmarried girl of 17 years of age (with her illegitimate child) as witness in the case.

The Editor of the *Bay Pilot* on Tuesday morning visited the prisoners in their respective rooms. Thomas Dowd was first interviewed. In personal appearance he is small of stature - with but very little muscular development. His complexion is quite dark - black hair, and wearing it thickly around his mouth and on his chin. His eyes are dark, rather small, and seemingly restless. His features, take them in all, are not comely. His voice is clear and his utterance low, but distinct and rather pleasing. The whole physique of the man is against either strength or courage.

In answer to a few questions, he gave his age as over 40 years; was born in the city of St. John, where his father was killed when he was quite a child. Has been living at and about Lepreaux for the last 30 years. Worked for Mr. Christopher Robinson, when Alexander Gibson, Esq., owned the Lepreaux Mills. Was never married.

Had lived with the murdered man Ward, since the 5th of April last. Had a contract from Mr. Joshua Knight last winter to get out railway sleepers for Mr. Ross of St. Andrews. Declared his innocence of the crime of which he is accused and seemed anxious to know when his trial would come on, and wanted to know if he could get a lawyer to defend him. For one in his situation, he appeared cheerful and expressed a desire to get some newspapers to read - "to wear away the time," as he expressed it.

Mrs. Eliza Ward's room was next visited; and we found her sitting by a window busily employed in sewing; while Annie, the daughter, sat also near the window nursing her babe - the poor little creature all unconscious of the wretched condition of its mother and grandmother, trying to be playful as all babies do.

Mrs. Ward gave her maiden name as Eliza Summerton. Born at Digdeguash, Parish of St. Patrick, 43 years of age. Moved to Lepreaux in November 1877.

In person, Mrs. Ward is small - thin-featured, light complexion, but rather sallow. Her forehead is the best-looking part of her face or head - indicative of intellectuality; but lost, for want of culture. She is very free to talk, and only for a moment or so, hesitated, and seemed reluctant to answer, when questioned as to her husband's age - she soon rallied however, and talked as fast and freely as if presiding at the "McGowan House." She said she had always worked hard for a living; had sold liquor last winter, as - "she had a good 'slew' of

Boarders.” Such were her own words, and we would not attempt to mar them by change of phraseology or of diction. She said her husband had always been kind to her, and she “called god to witness her innocence of doing anything to hurt him.” At this stage of her conversation, her lips trembled, a tear welled up to the eye, and her whole frame seemed to shake with agitation.

Turning from the mother to the daughter, we found her much more reticent. She “believed her father had been murdered” - “had no doubt of it” - then, spoke of her child, of its “being unwell” - when the interview ended by both mother and daughter expressing desire to get some papers to read - the mother particularly desiring to get a Saint John paper, “to see what it said,” which request, received a promise of compliance.

The *Bay Pilot* will give full particulars of the trial when it takes place, and our readers may look forward to its columns for a plain, unvarnished report of the trial of The New River Tragedy, as it progresses, from beginning to end.

Pilot

Nov. 14, 1878

The Opening of the Court

The opening of the present sitting of the Circuit Court in St. Andrews, on Tuesday 12th inst., Judge Weldon presiding, brings with it unusual interest.

After the disposal of certain civil causes, they themselves of no trifling import, particulars of which we purpose publishing, the criminal cases now on the docket will be taken up.

From the variety of legal talent in court, both plaintiffs and defendants, accused and accusers, may expect all the aid, comfort, and assistance that long practice at the bar and legal acumen can afford. The trial of greatest interest will be The New River Tragedy.

That Thomas E. Ward was willfully murdered near his residence at New River in the month of September last, admits of no doubt. Suspicion founded on certain circumstances pointed strongly to Thomas Dowd, a boarder in Ward’s family, as the person who committed the deed and which led to his arrest. Subsequently,

additional circumstances pointed to the murdered man's wife as an accomplice in the perpetration of the bloody crime, and she too, was accordingly arrested.

The daughter of the murdered man was now looked to as an important witness, and repugnant as it might seem to put a daughter on the witness stand where the mother was an implicated party, yet stern justice demanded it, and Annie Ward has also been held in custody to give testimony as to what she knows concerning the terrible deed of blood. Now, while the trial of the accused is progressing, it is our intention to give to the public a faithful report of the proceedings in Court. To put before the public the evidence as correctly as possible; without a single word calculated to prejudice the public mind either one way or the other. To remember that fellow human beings are on trial in a matter to them of life or death; and that that all-important matter is in the hands of Counsel, Judge and jury. There let it be, until Thomas Dowd and Eliza Ward - both or either of them, is condemned or acquitted.

Pilot

Nov. 21, 1878

The Verdict

Tuesday, Nov. 19, 1878, will be remembered for many long years in Charlotte County as an eventful day. The day was a stormy one; fitful gusts of angry wind howling around the corners in mournful cadences; as accompaniments, the streets presenting the one same view of snow-slush to aid, if possible, the disagreeableness of the day. It seemed a day in fit keeping with the gloomy and sad events here recorded. The forenoon at the courthouse had been devoted to Judge Weldon summing up all the evidence before the court to go to the jury for their final decision, thereby to enable them the more righteously to adjudicate on the innocence or guilt of Thomas Dowd and Eliza Ann Ward for the awful crime of murder.

The jury having received the Judge's charge, retired, and scarce twenty minutes elapsed ere they returned into court. It was a solemn moment when the jurors entered the court room and jury box, took their seats and answered to their names. It was yet more solemn when their lips opened to pronounce the verdict, and that was - "guilty."

The Death Sentence

At two o'clock in the afternoon, the court room was literally jammed with anxious people from town and country. The Judge took his seat, the Attorney General and G. S. Grimmer, Esq., in their legal gowns, entered, Mr. Grimmer, as Clerk of the Court, standing at his desk. This gentleman then addressed himself to the prisoners that if they had anything to say why the sentence of death should not be pronounced upon them they had now the opportunity. Both prisoners standing up, Dowd first, Mrs. Ward afterwards, declared their innocence of the crime, the female prisoner appealing to God as witness of her innocence. The Attorney General then stood up and called on his Honor the Judge to pronounce the Sentence. The prisoners, Thomas Ward and Eliza Ann Ward having then been directed to stand up to receive sentence, His Honor, the Judge, evidently deeply impressed by the solemn duty devolving upon him, in tremulous voice addressed the prisoners.

His Honor addressing himself to Dowd, referred to the evidence on which he was convicted by a jury of his country. From all the circumstances, no person of human reason could come to any other conclusion. His Honor briefly but feelingly alluded to the days of the prisoner's youthful innocence, when he would have shuddered at the thought of being capable of committing such a crime as murder. But neglect of religious duties and associating with evil, led him on step by step to the commission of the awful crime of which he now stood convicted. Turning from Dowd His Honor then addressed Eliza Ann Ward, the female prisoner. Referred to her marriage vows, and that she had assisted in the murder of the man whom she had solemnly pledged and vowed to love and cherish. That no doubt existed of her complicity in that murder by assisting Thomas Dowd to drag the murdered body of her husband to the spot in the gully where it was found. Nothing, therefore, remained for him to do but to perform the remaining part of his duty according to law - hoping and trusting that both the prisoners would make use of the time given them to repent of their great crime, and under the ministration of religion seek the mercy and forgiveness of God.

The sentence was then pronounced, that he Thomas Dowd and Eliza Ann Ward be taken to the jail whence they came, and from thence on Tuesday, the 14th day of January next to the jail precincts in the town of Saint Andrews, and "there to be hung by the neck until dead and may god have mercy on your souls," uttered the venerable judge who was much affected, even to tears. The moist eyes of the Hon. Attorney General and the sad, serious look of G. S. Grimmer, Esq., both prosecuting officers for the town on this important trial, plainly evinced that the sympathetic feelings were deeply stirred in both of those learned and legal gentlemen.

The condemned man and woman were then remanded to prison to await the period of the execution. Dowd appeared nervous, but did not evidence that trepidation, or feeling, at the terrible sentence that might have been expected. Mrs. Ward seemed for once to have some feeling; and as she left the dock for the prison, held her handkerchief to her face, and wept.

Confession of Thomas Dowd

On Wednesday morning, 20th November, about 10 o'clock, the condemned prisoner, Thomas Dowd, made the following confession in the jail to the jailer: "I killed Ward in the valley where his remains were found. I killed him with McCarthy's narrow axe. Ward was on his way home with axe and pitchfork. When we met, we had some words; he made at me with the fork. I clinched the axe and killed him; I then took him by the legs and dragged him to where his remains were found. Mrs. Ward never saw him after he left the house, 'till she saw him dead in the woods; nor anyone else but myself."

Pilot

Dec. 12, 1878

The Death Sentence

The public are already aware that Thomas Dowd and Mrs. E. Ward are now in St. Andrews jail under sentence of death for the murder of Thomas Ward; and that the execution is fixed for the 14th of January, 1879. Petitions are in circulation for signatures praying that the sentence may be commuted. No more opportune time could well be for the prayer of such petitions to be granted. Our new Governor General, having just passed the threshold of his advent into the

Dominion, will very probably be an additional inducement for the exercise of Executive clemency. It would be sad to chronicle so early in the New Year a hanging scene. No doubt, His Excellency will do as "seemeth him good," in the matter.

Pilot

Jan. 16, 1879

Execution of Thomas Dowd

The Charlotte County New River Tragedy has at last been finally disposed of by the execution of Thomas Dowd and the sentence for the incarceration of Mrs. Ward in the Provincial Penitentiary for several years.

The Tragic Drama

Tuesday morning, the 14th day of January opened up the tragic drama of the Execution of the unfortunate Thomas Dowd. The High Sheriff, with his usual desire to carry out the duties of his official position with strict fidelity to the injunctions, the letter and the spirit of the law, took every necessary and available precaution to fulfill the stern demands of the death sentence in accordance with the law. The grounds adjacent to the Jail were guarded by a posse of men, in order to keep hundreds of would-be spectators from witnessing the dread spectacle of the hanging of a fellow creature. The High Sheriff, in keeping with his duty, admitted the members of the press, and a certain number of others, to whom it is his prerogative to give admission - all others were excluded. The Hour fixed for the execution, was 8 o'clock in the morning; and long before that hour, the streets of St. Andrews presented an unusually life-like scene. People hurrying to and fro, as tho' stirred into action by some powerful agency - it was "Dowd is to be hung!"

His Appearance

At about 17 minutes past 8 o'clock, Thomas Dowd came downstairs preceded by the Rev. Father Doyle, Parish Priest, of St. George. The condemned man wore dark pants and vest, with white shirt and no coat. He walked through the hall and out of the back door to the

stand where he was to die, bearing a lighted candle in a candlestick in his hand, the Reverend Clergyman walking by his side and bearing a crucifix.

Scene at the Gallows

On coming to the plank-stand both Father Doyle and Dowd knelt on its outer edge with their backs to the spectators facing the jail windows. The priest, with open book, reading the solemn prayers and services - Dowd, the meanwhile, "crossing" himself, according to the religious usage of the Roman Catholic Church, and, when the Rev. Father held the crucifix to his (Dowd's) lips, he kissed it reverently five times, in accordance with the number of the "five bleeding wounds" which Jesus received for sinners! This was a most affecting scene! And, as if to heighten it, Mrs. Ward, his fellow-prisoner, was seen standing at a basement window, near the back-door, gazing at Dowd, and weeping bitterly!

On the priest and Dowd rising from their knees - the priest whispered a few words to him, and then retired a few paces; when the jailer, Mr. Mark Hall, placed him under the end of the long plank in which was fixed an iron ring; and into which the rope was secured with the fatal "knot" prepared. The jailer now secured his arms and feet, with leather straps when the unfortunate man, with almost a deathly gaze, looked upon the few, but solemn faces of his fellow-creatures there before him for the last time.

He Speaks

The last words of Thomas Dowd. "I am much obliged to the Sheriff and Mr. Hall and his family. They have showed me every kindness and gratified my every wish. I feel very kindly to the people of St. Andrews. I wish you all well. God bless you all."

The Fatal Knot

Immediately following Dowd's dying expressions, the jailer passed the rope over his head, fixed the "knot" in its place; and adjusted the black cap on his head, covering face and eyes! In a moment The rope secured inside an upper window of the jail, was cut; and, Dowd,

was jerked upwards some three feet from the platform - when, to all appearance death was instantaneous. A slight twitching of the body, principally between the shoulders, was nearly all that was perceptible; and the impression generally was that the unfortunate Dowd suffered the extreme penalty of the law with but little more than momentary suffering. The arrangements made by the Sheriff were admirable and all the persons acting under his directions performed their respective duties properly and well.

Taking down the Corpse

After the lapse of about 15 minutes, the body was lowered and Dr. Gove felt the wrist, and opening the shirt bosoms (outside and inside shirts) laid his ear against the left breast for a few seconds; also, lifted the cap from the face, and looking upon the features pronounced him "dead."

Thus expiated Thomas Dowd, his crime of murder; and, as far as human expiation goes, justice is satisfied. And, it is only merciful to hope that the manifest sincere repentance of Dowd was accepted by the God of infinite mercy and that although the body has been consigned to a deep, dark grave, the "spirit has returned to the God who gave it."

May the sad, awful death-drama enacted in St. Andrews on this the 14th day of January, A. D. 1879, be a serious and salutary warning to all young men and boys to shun the ways of evil and to live soberly and righteously, the only safety from sin and its awful consequence.

Removal of the Body

Shortly after the execution, the body being deposited in the coffin, it was conveyed to the R. C. Church where a requiem high mass was performed and the remains subsequently interred in the Catholic Cemetery.

Additional Remarks

By direction of the Sheriff, a guard of twelve men under Capt. E. S. Polleys, in uniform, armed with muskets and fixed bayonets, were detailed around the jail grounds to keep them from intrusion by spectators. The people, however, were remarkably orderly and the utmost decorum prevailed.

Some 40 persons had gained access to the roof of the Hospital which stands in close proximity to the jail, overlooking the "Yard" where Dowd was hung, and they had every facility to witness the operations.

The coffin was on the ground, but concealed from the sight of him who was so soon to be its occupant. Previous to the execution, Mrs. Hall, the Jailer's wife, on visiting Dowd, said "Tommy, I hope you are prepared, you are about to pay a debt we'll have to pay sooner or later." (Mrs. Hall was weeping.) He replied "Yes, but do not fret, it is nothing, goodbye, God bless you! I hope we will meet in Heaven."

Just before 8 o'clock, Dowd signed a petition, witnessed by Father Doyle, to the Governor General, praying for the further commutation of Mrs. Ward's sentence of seven years in the Provincial penitentiary as she was entirely innocent of any participation in the murder or the knowledge of it. If this be so, and who would dare question the authenticity of a dying man's confession, then this Mrs. Ward, with all her manifest faults, should be permitted to go out again in the world free. But bearing with her the intolerable stigma of having her name so closely associated with the murder of her husband, she must ever feel, like Cain, that her punishment is greater than she can bear.