

The Glaring Truth Patrick Harb

In wet clothes at Balmain Police station he gave his name as Stuart Wilson Christopher Briggs of Summer Hill before confessing to the shooting murders of his girlfriend and her grandmother in their terrace at Petersham on the evening of December 14, 1898.

“I was jealous, I was. I knew my sheila was seeing another man. I remember hitting her in the face with the back of my hand three days before when she refused to run away with me. Today I bought a box of cartridges for my revolver. I wrote everything down in a letter. Maggie had it coming to her. Margaret wouldn't let me see her, so I shot the old woman too. I ran off, tossed my weapon in the lane way and jumped into the water off the wharf at Annandale hoping to drown myself. I just wanted to die. But this fella pulled me out and now I'm here. I know I'm done like a dinner so do with me what you will.”

Little did I know that private detective Robert Nelson happened to be on duty at the wharf earlier in the evening and it was he who pulled me to safety. Full of regret I'd confessed to him what I'd done. Nelson had no choice but to escort me to the station.

I was held in the prison cell awaiting trial. The only visitor I had was my mother, Sarah. Despite how I'd disappointed her often in my adult life, she felt compelled to stand by me, unlike my father and nine brothers and sisters who wanted nothing more to do with me. I didn't blame them. I was the bad egg in the family, unable to hold down a job, drinking heavily and often looking for a fight. Living the life of a hooligan had now truly run its course.

At my Supreme Central Criminal Court trial on 17 February, in desperation, I pleaded not guilty to murder on the grounds of insanity. However, the jury decided otherwise and Mr Justice Cohen convicted me of the murders of Maggie Binud Dutt and her grandmother Mrs Margaret Miller and sentenced me to death by hanging – a death I knew I truly deserved.

Four days later, I was transported from the holding cell at Balmain Police Station to Darlinghurst Gaol. My photograph was taken by the warder and my personal details were added to my Description Book. Darlinghurst Goal was now my home until the hang man deemed otherwise. As I was led away in handcuffs and shackles to serve my solitary confinement in the condemned cell, I passed many cells on the ground floor that housed prisoners behind the sliding white steel grill doors. As I shuffled past, male prisoners were rattling these doors, with arms outstretched through the gaps of the bars chanting “we are all innocent here” while other inmates laughed in a mocking fashion. I did not look at these men but kept my gaze fixed ahead. The warder then led me up the stairs to the second floor of the goal where another warder dressed in a black uniform and cap, stood.

Prisoners who were sentenced to be hanged were held in the condemned cell of the goal. I was unshackled and once shoved inside, I noticed that this cell had an inner grill wall with a gate, creating an alcove in the cell for the warder to sit on 24 hour watch. The cell was sparse with a floor mattress and a pan for toileting. The cell itself was small, dark, musty and the stench of urine was overpowering. For six long weeks the only portion of the outside world that was visible to me from my cell was a small patch in the sky lit up by one bright star.

During my time in solitary confinement, my basic meals, (if that's what you called them), were brought to the cell. I was allowed one hour per day outside of my cell for exercise and to empty my pan. During my time in gaol, I was visited once a week by the Presbyterian chaplain my mother had organised. I looked forward to these visits immensely and expressed my remorse for what I had done and came to accept that death, although imminent, was not to be feared. It is true that I spent most of my solitary confinement in prayer. This 24 year old six foot unemployed man from Sydney no longer felt like a shag on a rock. I was finally at peace with myself. I had but a few hours left on this earth.

At 9am as earlier advised by the warders, handcuffed and shackled, I was led out of my cell by the sheriff for the final time. My day of execution had arrived. Although I never spoke publicly about my crime, I was truly remorseful for my actions. As I walked towards the scaffold I felt my legs go weak at the knees and flashes of my past, of happier times, appeared before me. The noose was placed around my neck and I was ready to meet my maker.

On April 5 1899, the public hangman Robert Howard, sent his 57th case into eternity when he performed the last offices of the law.