

Chapter 2

“John Radclive”: “Riding High” During the First Decade, 1890-1900.

In the twenty-year period from the beginning of 1890 through to the end of 1909 there were 110 hangings in Canada,¹ and about 80 of them were performed by a man calling himself John Radclive, who would become the first “official” hangman for Canada. While he called himself Radclive, the newspapers over the years called him Thomas or John Radcliffe. While we will use the name Radclive, his real name, as we will eventually outline, was Daniel James Ratley, or as it sometimes was spelt, Rattley.

Pfeifer and Leyton-Brown provide summaries of the murders and trials of all the individuals who were executed from 1867 to 1923.² However, we are focused on the hangman, and not the hanged. Radclive’s first hanging in Canada, as far as we can determine, was the hanging of Thomas Kane in Toronto on February 12, 1890.

Instead of the English method of dropping the victim through a trap door, another rival method of hanging was sometimes being used in this period. The victim would simply stand on a platform and the rope that would be attached to the victim’s neck ran through a series of pulleys at the top of the scaffold and attached to the other end of the rope was a heavy weight lifted off the ground. When the cord or pin holding up the weight was cut or pulled, the weight would drop and the victim would be jerked up

¹ For a list of all the executions in Canada see <https://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/canada.html>.

² Jeffrey Pfeifer and Ken Leyton-Brown, *Death by Rope: 1867-1923* (Regina: Vanity Press, 2007).

into the air making the rebound downwards, supposedly dislocating the neck in the process.

The origin of this experiment of jerking up the victim rather than dropping the victim has been traced back to 1831 when pirate Charles Gibbs was hanged on Ellis Island and federal officials tried something new using combined weights of 560 pounds to jerk the victim in the air.³ This system was subsequently used in New York before the use of the electric chair and was also used in about a quarter of the hangings in the American frontier.⁴ For example, in 1842 in New York, John Colt was scheduled to be executed on such a gallows, but committed suicide first.⁵ Until the introduction of the electric chair in New Jersey in 1906, executioner James Van Hise used some version of this counterweight system for many years, often leading to spectacular bungles.⁶ Called the “upright jerker” it was also used in Connecticut and other states as late as the 1930s.⁷ Meant to be more efficient and humane than the old drop system, it was in fact a failure, and most hangings utilizing this sort of gallows resulted in strangulations, sometimes with the victim still conscious and in great distress for a period of time.

At the high profile hanging of Birchall in 1890, various newspapers had a crude sketch of the jerker gallows used by Radclive in that case as follows:⁸

³ Stuart Banner, *The Death Penalty: An American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) at 171.

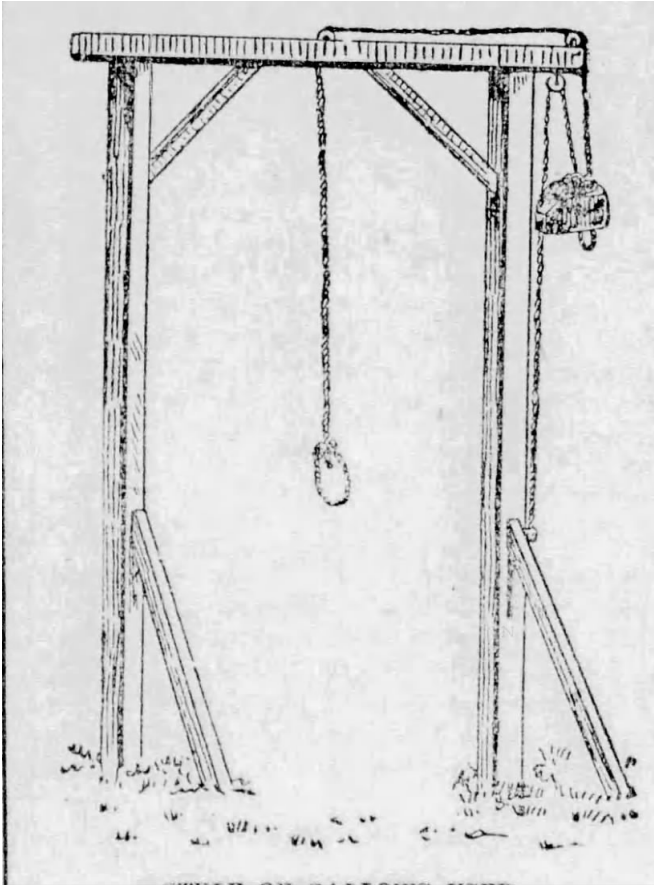
⁴ Jeremy Agnew, *Crime, Justice and Retribution in the American West 1850-1900* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2017) at 221.

⁵ See, Harold Schechter, *Killer Colt: Murder, Disgrace, and the Making of an American Legend* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010) at 278-279 for description of gallows.

⁶ For example, “Patent Gallows Fiasco,” *Eastern Evening News*, Dec. 23, 1905, at 3.

⁷ Stuart Banner, *Supra*, note 3 and Wikipedia entry for “upright jerker.”

⁸ This from *Manitoba Free Press*, Nov. 20, 1890, at 12.



Radcliffe had nothing to do with the invention of this apparatus. A primitive form of this counterweight system was used in Canada as early as the hanging of John Munro in New Brunswick in 1870, and as would usually be the case with the counterweight system, the hanging was bungled.⁹ The same can be said for the execution of Hughes in 1883 in Saint John, New

⁹ “Execution of John Munroe,” *St. John’s Morning Freeman*, Feb. 17, 1870, at 2.

Brunswick.¹⁰ It was used again for the hanging of Robert Neil in Toronto in late February of 1888.¹¹

While the Neil execution was deemed successful, the same could not be said for the hanging of Harvey in Guelph in November of 1889 on the same scaffold that had been used in the Neil hanging.¹² The sheriff selected a man from Toronto (not Radclive) to perform the hanging and it was a horrible bungle. As reported:

The weight which lifted the body was not heavy enough and the scaffold not high enough to give sufficient rebound to break the neck and the struggles and contortions of the victim were frightful as he slowly strangled to death... The knot had slipped and had caught in front of the ear and the gurgling sounds of Harvey could be heard even outside the jail walls and many of those who witnessed the execution left the place as soon as they possibly could.¹³

Another report noted that, “the sight of the yet live man as he hung with his eyes bulging out, his nostrils swollen and gasping for breath until death came slowly to put an end to his sufferings, was enough to touch the hardest heart.”¹⁴ A different report pointed out another aspect of the bungle:

Harvey’s hands were loose... and these worked convulsively. The ankles were not pinioned, as they should have been, and the legs were drawn up and out as far as the higher strap would allow in fearful style. Groans as those of a wild animal in dire distress came from the choking wretch...¹⁵

It was reported that Harvey strangled for twenty-five minutes before death put an end to his struggles.¹⁶ In a chapter dealing with this case, the author quotes the *Globe*, “He died like a stoic, but was hanged like a dog.”¹⁷ The hangman was said to be a young “George

¹⁰ *Supra* note 2 at 53.

¹¹ “Law’s Supreme Penalty,” *Lindsay Watchman*, March 1, 1888, at 2.

¹² “The Doomed Harvey,” *Ottawa Citizen*, Nov. 28, 1889, at 1.

¹³ “Harvey,” *Ottawa Journal*, Nov. 29, 1889, at 1.

¹⁴ “Execution of Harvey,” *Vancouver World*, Nov. 30, 1889, at 1.

¹⁵ *Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 2, 1889, at 4.

¹⁶ “Most Gruesome Job,” *Medicine Hat News*, March 16, 1911, at 4.

¹⁷ Edward Butts, *Murder: 12 True Stories of Homicide in Canada* (Toronto:

Smith,” a farmhand just trying to make \$50 to support his family. The inquest jury recommended that the government appoint an official hangman who presumably would not bungle cases.¹⁸ There had already been various editorials written over the last decade calling for the appointment of a public executioner, who would presumably be skilled at the job.¹⁹

It is in this context that Radcliffe started as a hangman in Canada, using the “jerk up” scaffolds in Toronto on Kane in February 1890.²⁰ Radcliffe had no familiarity with this system and did not want to use it. Archival evidence reveals that when the Attorney-General of Ontario asked Sheriff Mowat as to whether the new jerk up system was better, Mowatt replied that, “The man Radcliffe, who executed Kane, was very anxious to use the old plan, but I would not let him and after the execution he told me that he would never use any other, if he had his will.”²¹ While some newspapers reported that the hangman in the Kane case was skillful,²² others reported that once again the new method was a failure as Kane’s neck was not broken and the knot had slipped to the back of the head and the body convulsions were long and severe.²³ The jail doctor, however, asserted that while the victim had died of strangulation, he had lost all sensation after the jerk, and the masked hangman, an Englishman who had allegedly been

Dundurn Press, 2011) at Ch. 4, “The Harvey Murders,” at 51-70, quote at 69.

¹⁸ *Ottawa Citizen*, Nov. 30, 1889, at 6.

¹⁹ “A New Government Office,” *Kingston Whig*, Jan. 14, 1879, at 2; “Bungled Hangings,” *Kingston Whig*, July 1, 1882, at 3; “Bungled,” *Kingston Whig*, June 11, 1884, at 2.

²⁰ “Neck Stretched,” *Tribune*, Feb. 12, 1890, at 1.

²¹ Mode of Hanging, AG Central Registry, RG 4-32 (1891) file 631, Ontario Archives.

²² “His Neck is Stretched,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, Feb. 12, 1890; “Sprung into Space,” *Manitoba Free Press*, Feb. 13, 1890, at 1.

²³ “Kane Choked to Death” *Owen Sound Times*, Feb. 13, 1890, at 8; “Kane Choked to Death: The Jerking Process Said to be a Failure,” *Kingston Whig*, Feb. 12, 1890, at 4.

in the country for four years, asserted that he would apply to be the professional hangman if the government created the position.²⁴

Radclive was then hired to hang Henry Smith in London, Ontario, using the same jerk up method, on June 14, 1890. While he had worn a mask at the Kane execution, Radclive now made no attempt to disguise his identity.²⁵ Again, the execution was not optimal, as the victim was not standing where he ought to have been placed and he swung sideways instead of receiving the full force of the jerk.²⁶ Nevertheless, it was reported that the neck was broken and there were no convulsions of the body. Supposedly during the Smith case, Radclive, claiming that he had previously hanged 18 people, “exhibited commendable skill, and had made improvements to the reverse hanging process.”²⁷

A few days later, Radclive, used the same method to hang Peter Davis in Belleville, Ontario. This time the neck of the victim was not broken and “considerable struggling ensued, with convulsive heaving of the chest, and swaying of the body, and life was not pronounced extinct for 21 minutes.”²⁸ Nevertheless, Radclive, dressed in a Prince Albert, smoking a cigar,²⁹ proudly displayed the gallows to multitudes of people.³⁰ He later claimed that Davis’s neck was particularly muscular, but he had given the 350 pound weight an added drop length and also had a 6 foot slack in the rope, and despite all the reports to the contrary, he now falsely claimed that he had broken Davis’s neck.³¹

Every so often a particular execution received extraordinary publicity as was the case of Birchall in Woodstock, Ontario, in November of 1890. Once again Radclive offered his services to the

²⁴ “The Toronto Hanging,” *Montreal Gazette*, Feb. 13, 1890, at 8.

²⁵ “Smith,” *Kingston News*, June 14, 1890, at 1.

²⁶ “Hanged for Murder,” *Manitoba Free Press*, June 16, 1890, at 2.

²⁷ “Smith,” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 19, 1890, at 1.

²⁸ “Fruit of the Gallows,” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 21, 1890, at 1.

²⁹ “Re Davis,” *Kingston Whig*, Nov. 20, 1890, at 3.

³⁰ *Ottawa Citizen*, June 20, 1890, at 1.

³¹ “Interview with the Hangman,” reprinted in *Manitoba Free Press*, Nov. 6, 1890, at 6.

sheriff, writing that, “I feel much pleasure in offering my services to do it.” The “much pleasure” phrase sounded “horribly heartless” to at least one reporter.³² In an interview several weeks before hanging Birchall, Radclive explained the fine art of judging not only the weight and muscularity of the man, but also his disposition as a factor in the calculations. He claimed that he got \$50 for each hanging plus expenses. He also alleged that he had at one time admiringly watched 13 kneeling Chinese men swiftly beheaded by an executioner using a sword, and then Radclive callously remarked, “I thought to myself I should like to have the job at a dollar a head. A fellow could have made money.”³³

Seeking to be appointed executioner for Canada, Radclive made no attempt to conceal his identity and was interviewed by the *Toronto World* the day before travelling to Woodstock.³⁴ He claimed that his real identity was “Thomas Ratley,” the steward at the Sunnyside Yacht Club in Toronto in the Parkdale area. The interview took place in the clubhouse. He had already resigned his position due to the opposition of two members of the Board of Directors of the club, but he was hoping for reinstatement. He claimed his wife and children lived with him at the clubhouse and that he had used a half dozen names in the past, but Ratley was the correct one. A man with a narcissistic streak, proud of his hanging competence, he provided a picture of himself to the interviewer:³⁵

³² “Birchall,” *Brantford Expositor*, Oct. 3, 1890, at 4.

³³ “Interview,” as reprinted in *Manitoba Weekly Free Press*, Nov. 6, 1890, at 6; *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 17, 1890, at 3.

³⁴ “Birchall’s Hangman,” as reprinted in *Owen Sound Times*, Nov. 13, 1890, at 3; *Hamilton Spectator*, Nov. 13, 1890, at 5; *Moncton Transcript*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 2. Parts of the interview reproduced in *Winnipeg Tribune*, Nov. 13, 1890, at 1; *Brantford Expositor*, Nov. 14, 1890, at 4.

³⁵ This from the *Owen Sound Times*, Nov. 13, 1890, at 3.



The newspaper noted that Ratley was applying to be appointed public executioner, and that Premier Oliver Mowat was willing to use his influence to support his appointment. The reporter did not mention that the sheriff of Toronto was Fred Mowat, son of the premier of Ontario, and it was Fred Mowat who apparently had first hired him to hang Thomas Kane in Toronto on Feb. 12, 1890. Ratley admitted that he was the hangman for Smith in London, Ontario, and Davis in Belleville, Ontario, before his planned hanging of Birchall in Woodstock. Ratley asserted that he would never hide behind a mask, since he had nothing to hide as a proud instrument of the law. As the conversation with the reporter continued, Ratley now claimed that he had officiated at 18 executions, and he showed the 36-foot rope, pre-stretched, that he

planned to use on the Birchall jerk up gallows. Ratley asserted that he would sell the rope at a dollar a foot to relic hunters and the clothing of the condemned man plus a foot of rope would be sold to Madame Tussaud’s wax museum in London, England. In a book on the Birchall case, the author noted that at a dollar a foot, Ratley stood to make \$432, and the agreement with Madame Tussaud was worth another \$200.³⁶

It will be our contention throughout this book that all interviews with the various hangmen, given their character as liars, must be taken with large doses of scepticism. We do not know which statements are true and which are false. It was later reported that he had been the steward of the Club for only three weeks or so and that while he had submitted his resignation, he believed he should be allowed to continue despite his role as hangman.³⁷ This was not to be, as we will note.

The next day after the interview Radcliffe boarded the train from Toronto to Woodstock to inspect and test the scaffold and meet with the prisoner. Radcliffe eventually got drunk in the evening and “threatened to clear out the whole jail,” but appeared to be no worse for wear on the morning of the hanging.³⁸ When he arrived drunk at the jail with a dozen reporters in tow to spend the night, he was refused admittance at first by the guard, and then, “he had grown so angry at being kept out of the jail that he threatened to return to Toronto and leave the job to an amateur... The guards were glad when he stretched himself on the sofa and fell asleep with an unfinished cigar in his hand.”³⁹ Before going to bed he responded to various questions from journalists, including the morality of being a hangman. He replied, “What rot, why I think no more of hanging a murderer than I would of making away with a vicious dog.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Rebecca Gowers, *The Swamp of Death: A True Tale of Victorian Lies and Murder* (Penguin, 2004) at 353.

³⁷ “The Executioner,” *Ottawa Journal*, Nov. 14, 1890, at 1.

³⁸ “Hanged.” *Hamilton Spectator*, Nov. 14, 1890, at 1.

³⁹ “Birchall’s End,” *Owen Sound Times*, Nov. 14, 1890, at 1.

⁴⁰ “A Maudlin Hangman,” *Philadelphia Times*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 1.

The hanging itself, in front of over two hundred journalists and spectators allowed into the prison yard, went reasonably well. After the jerk and descent, Radclive at some point held the ankles of the man to prevent further convulsions, and the medical men proclaimed that while the neck was not broken, the victim was unconscious after the jerk and felt no pain. The provincial inspector of prisons was in attendance and was satisfied that Radclive had done a good job and should be appointed public executioner.⁴¹ However, the non-Canadian newspapers were more prone to pronounce the hanging a bungle. The weight of the counterweight was not sufficient said an English newspaper.⁴² The *Davenport Times* reported that the “hands clasped and unclasped convulsively, the nails entering the flesh and causing the blood to flow; the legs drew up and straightened out. There was every indication that the man was being slowly strangled.”⁴³ The *Philadelphia Times* stated:

...but the hangman had put him on the wrong side of the rope, which caught him in the back o the head, preventing the noose from tightening properly. The body swayed to and fro until Radcliffe took hold of it and steadied it. Part of the left cheek was exposed under the black mask and was seen to grow livid and dark under the rush of blood. “He is choking,” cried the spectators, and the softer hearted turned away. The pinioned form was writhing and the chest vainly searched for the air that was never to be breathed by it again. Fifty-one convulsions were counted before the tortured form was stilled.⁴⁴

In seeking to be appointed public executioner, Radclive was his own worst enemy. In what would become a persistent theme in the twenty years of his career, Radclive made an ass of himself everywhere he went. The reporter for the *Hamilton Spectator* suggested that Attorney General Mowat should not support

⁴¹ “Hanged,” *Hamilton Spectator*, Nov. 14, 1890, at 1, and Nov. 20, 1890, at 1; *Ottawa Citizen*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 1.

⁴² *Huddersfield Chronicle*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 8.

⁴³ “Birchall,” *Davenport Times*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 1; also, *Green-Bay Press-Gazette*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 1.

⁴⁴ “Birchall,” *Philadelphia Times*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 1.

Radclive as public executioner, given his disgusting braggadocio.⁴⁵
As reported in this paper:

In the first place, he threw himself in the way of all the reporters and was very desirous of being interviewed. Then he had a habit of walking into a saloon and dropping a remark about the jerk he intended to give Birchall. This invariably created a sensation... He paraded the streets all day yesterday...and after taking a look at Birchall, came down to the saloons again and told some of the most valuable of his professional secrets to all concerned. Deputy Sheriff Perry found him late in the evening and advised him to spend the rest of the night in the jail... He told everybody who would listen to him that he had a hangman's knot of his own which was better than anything yet discovered... At the jail this morning this knot turned out to be the old-time hangman's knot... Being released from the prison grounds, after life was pronounced extinct, the hangman... sought the companionship of two individuals who had paraded the streets with him on the previous evening and renewed his public exhibition. A crowd of country people... followed him through the streets, but the notoriety rather seemed to please him.⁴⁶

At the end of the hanging, as Radclive departed by train, an American reporter heard him bragging about the certainty of becoming the public hangman and saw him gleefully displaying the cash he had just earned.⁴⁷ When he returned to Toronto immediately after the hanging, he went straight to the Sunnyside Yacht Club to tell everyone there about his exploits. That evening at the weekly dance at the club, Radclive played cards and told everyone how he had "treated the subject."⁴⁸ Management had fired him, but he still had a few days before the Thursday deadline to leave his position.⁴⁹ Years later a reporter noted that Radclive had an extraordinary and intense interest in the ladies when he was employed at the Sunnyside Boat Club, especially those who wore a

⁴⁵ "Echoes of the Execution," *Hamilton Spectator*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Buffalo Commercial*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 10.

⁴⁸ "What Ratley Says," *Ottawa Journal*, Nov. 17, 1890, at 4.

⁴⁹ "From the Telegraph." *Ottawa Citizen*, Nov. 17, 1890, at 1; *Montreal Star*, Nov. 15, 1890, at 1; "The hangman at home," *Clinton New Era*, Nov. 21, 1890, at 4.

revealing low neckline.⁵⁰ An editorial in the *Kingston Whig* suggested that no virtuous or respectable citizen would perform the office of hangman, and particularly loathsome was the obtaining by Radclive of the clothing of the victim for public display.⁵¹

The sheriff in Sherbrooke, Quebec, hired Radclive to hang Blanchard on December 12, 1890. The hanging was declared a bungle as the man slowly strangled to death on the jerk up gallows.⁵² Radclive had also agreed to be the hangman for Arthur Day in Welland, Ontario, on December 18. He arrived and then much to the shock, dismay and disgust of the sheriff he stated that his assistant would perform the execution, since he had to go back by train to Sherbrooke for a hanging on December 19, 1890.⁵³ The hanging of Day on a jerk up gallows by the assistant from Toronto was badly bungled. During the convulsive struggles it was reported that, "He was dying hard, frightfully hard. From his throat came a deep, hoarse gurgle, gasping groans that filled the spectators with horror. It was now seen that the hangman had adjusted the rope in an unskillful manner. Instead of being placed under the left ear, the knot came under the chin... The victim slowly strangled to death."⁵⁴ One newspaper called the assistant, Joseph Moor.⁵⁵ Another said he was a "small, seedy looking individual who answers to the name Bill."⁵⁶ According to one book he was called Bill Moore.⁵⁷ Another newspaper said his name was Bell.⁵⁸

Meanwhile back in Sherbrooke, Radclive hanged Lamontagne on December 19, 1890, using the same jerk up gallows he had used a week before on Blanchard. Again, the result was not a broken neck, but rather a strangulation with the same twitching and

⁵⁰ "The Public Hangman," *Ottawa Journal*, Jan. 7, 1899, at 6.

⁵¹ "Against the Hanging," *Kingston Weekly Whig*, Nov 20, 1890, at 4.

⁵² "Choked on the Scaffold," *Montreal Gazette*, Dec. 13, 1890, at 6.

⁵³ "Re Day," *Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 18, 1890, at 1.

⁵⁴ "Re Day," *Buffalo Morning Express*, Dec. 19, 1890, at 1

⁵⁵ *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, Dec. 19, 1890, at 2.

⁵⁶ Re Day, *Hamilton Spectator*, Dec. 25, 1890, at 1.

⁵⁷ *Supra* note 2.

⁵⁸ "Dispatches," *Victoria Times*, Dec. 19, 1890, at 1.

gurgling from the victim.⁵⁹ It was reported, however, that the doctor thought the victim was unconscious after the jerk.

While Radcliffe had hanged six of the nine people executed in 1890, the following year in 1891 there were only three executions, one in British Columbia and two in Ontario. The execution in B.C. involved the conventional drop system by an unknown hangman, but Radcliffe use the jerk gallows again to hang another man named Kane in Belleville, Ontario, on May 21, 1891. Kane evidently suffered great torture before the strangulation led to his death and “his groans were painful to hear.”⁶⁰

At the next hanging at L’Original, Ontario, in June of 1891, Radcliffe again used the jerk gallows and again the neck was not broken and “the lengthy struggle with death was much commented on,”⁶¹ although many newspapers suggested that Radcliffe had done a good job this time, given the thickness of the victim’s neck.⁶² However Radcliffe, “while the body was still hanging shocked the bystanders by talking in the most cold blooded manner of the various men he had hanged.”⁶³ A few days earlier when he arrived in town, “a crowd of young men of the village gathered around him while he talked most freely of this and other executions.” When the proprietor of the hotel discovered who he was, he was asked to leave for some other hotel.⁶⁴

It is ironic that Radcliffe would be hired for the position of public hangman; a position created partly out of the clamour over the botched hanging of Harvey, when arguably Radcliffe had himself botched many of the hangings he had been involved in.

⁵⁹ Re Lamontagne, *Ottawa Journal*, Dec. 19, 1890, at 1; *Hamilton Spectator*, Dec. 19, 1890, at 1.

⁶⁰ “The Execution,” *Hamilton Spectator*, May 21, 1891, at 1 and May 28, 1891, at 1; *Brantford Expositor*, May 22, 1891, at 8; *Ottawa Journal*, May 21, at 4; *Montreal Star*, May 22, 1891, at 3.

⁶¹ “End of LaRoque,” *Montreal Star*, June 5, 1891, at 6.

⁶² “Hanged,” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 4, 1891, at 1; *Winnipeg Tribune*, June 4, 1891, at 1; “Monster Executed,” *St. John Telegraph*, June 5, 1891, at 3; *Kingston News*, June 4, 1891, at 4; *Manitoba Free Press*, June 5, 1891, at 5.

⁶³ “Laroque Hanged,” *Ottawa journal*, June 4, 1891, at 4.

⁶⁴ “Laroque’s Doom,” *Ottawa Journal*, June 3, 1891, at 1.

Yet Radclive continued to brag for the rest of his life that he had never bungled a single hanging.

The federal cabinet passed an Order-In-Council on January 11, 1892, creating the position of official executioner and appointing J. R. Radclive of 132 Lisgar Street, Toronto, to the position at a salary of \$700 per year. The Minister of Justice was induced to do so on the behest of the Attorney-General of Ontario, but the Order clearly stated that Radclive would, “hold himself available for all capital cases that might arise in any part of Canada.” One of the conditions to the appointment was that Radclive, “is to be paid by the local authorities only his reasonable travelling expenses... the salary above stated compensating him for his financial services.”⁶⁵

Using American inflation rates, (since Canadian rates did not start till 1914) we note that \$700 per year back in 1892 would be only about \$23,000 a year in 2025 terms. Thus, the job was not expected to be anything but part-time. While Radclive could now call himself the official hangman of Canada, the federal government was not in charge of hangings, which were a provincial responsibility, so Radclive had no monopoly on hangings in the provinces, although obviously he was considered the official hangman of Ontario, given the role that the province played in created the position. In addition, given that Alberta and Saskatchewan did not become provinces till 1904, Radclive would have been the official hangman for the Northwest Territories, under federal jurisdiction.

Curiously the creation of the position of official hangman received no press publicity as far as we know, but various provincial authorities were informed. For example, when the federal justice department informed British Columbia as to the appointment of Radclive, the message included the following, “It is a matter for the provincial government to determine whether or not Radclive’s services shall be engaged from time to time, but it is deemed in the interests of public order that his services should be available

⁶⁵ Order-In-Council, 1892-0033, online at National Archives of Canada, RG2, Privy Council Office.

whenever occasion arises...”⁶⁶ As far as I can determine, B.C. did not hire Radcliffe until 1899.

While Radcliffe initially offered his services as expenses only, he apparently thereafter continually violated the terms of his appointment by charging the sheriffs of various judicial districts, not only travel expenses, but also a hanging “gift” fee of \$50 or more, as reported in various newspapers.⁶⁷ For example, it was estimated that during the busy 1899 period Radcliffe would make about \$2000, before even adding the fees he received for rope and clothing souvenirs.⁶⁸ With inflation, the \$2000 amount would be about \$76,000 in today’s dollars, indicating that Radcliffe at that point was making a decent living.

After he had been appointed official hangman, Radcliffe appears to have relished his status as a celebrity. There were only two hangings in 1892, both in December. Radcliffe took the train all the way to Dorchester, New Brunswick, to hang Olsen on counterweight gallows on December 1, 1892. At every train stop, the word had somehow got out that the hangman was on the train, and crowds of people assembled to get a look at him. He was described at a stop in Moncton as about 5 feet, 7 inches in height, rather thick set with heavy sandy moustache, very thick neck and prominent veins in his face.⁶⁹ When he arrived in Dorchester, he pretended that he was motivated by humanitarianism. He told the press that “he first went into his occupation when he read that a condemned man was tortured for 14 minutes before he died. In reading this account he had turned to his wife and said, ‘I will offer to hang the next man and put a stop to this kind of torture.’”⁷⁰ Supposedly the hanging in Dorchester “went without a hitch.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ Letter to Attorney-General of British Columbia, GR-0429-Box 02-File 05, 1892, British Columbia Archives.

⁶⁷ *Windsor Star*, Dec. 14, 1894, at 1 and 3; “A Proud Hangman,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 24, 1899, at 10; *McPherson Republican*, Aug. 5, 1899, at 12.

⁶⁸ “Proud Hangman,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 24, 1899, at 10.

⁶⁹ “Arrival of Radcliffe,” *Moncton Transcript*, Nov. 29, 1892, at 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ “Hanged,” *Montreal Star*, Dec. 1, 1892, at 5.

Although the neck was not broken, the doctor proclaimed the victim was instantly unconscious.⁷²

Radclive then took the train back to Cornwall, Ontario, to hang Slavin on December 16, again using the jerk method. Several months earlier, the sheriff of Cornwall had tried to hire Radclive but could not find him. A Deputy Sheriff was sent to Toronto to hunt for him.⁷³ Several days later through a communication in the newspaper, it was announced that Radclive could be found at 128 Pearson Avenue in Toronto.⁷⁴ It would appear that after gaining the salary as official hangman, Radclive had moved from 132 Lisgar to a better location.

When Radclive arrived at Cornwall, it was reported that the police had to be called upon to keep the crowds away from the hotel where he was staying.⁷⁵ Another account noted that he “has been imbibing freely since his arrival and is going around the town exhibiting himself to the public. He seems to think if he bought a wire cage and placed himself therein and charged an admission of ten cents, the receipts would in a day amount to more than that which he is to receive for sending Slavin into another world. Judging from his actions, he would be better caged.”⁷⁶ In spite of the public nuisance he had made of himself, the hanging of Slavin seemed to go reasonably well.⁷⁷

While there was a double hanging in Nanaimo, B.C. in January 1893, Radclive was not the hangman, assuming he applied. Rather the unknown hangman, wearing a mask and dressed in prison clothes was described as “a young man of medium height with hands that were white as though they did no manual labor.”⁷⁸ Radclive did not hang anybody for a whole year until hired to hang Luckey in Brockville, Ontario, in December of 1893. As with all of

⁷² “Buck is Hanged,” *Moncton Transcript*, Dec. 1, 1892, at 1.

⁷³ “Executioner,” *Montreal Star*, Oct. 27, 1892, at 8.

⁷⁴ “Executioner,” *Montreal Star*, Oct. 29, 1892, at 8.

⁷⁵ *Ottawa Journal*, Dec. 16, 1892, at 5.

⁷⁶ “Slavin’s Last Days,” *Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 14, 1892, at 2.

⁷⁷ “Died Instantly,” *Montreal Star*, Dec. 16, 1892, at 1.

⁷⁸ “Double Execution,” *Vancouver News Advertiser*, Jan. 17, 1893, at 1.

the hangmen we will deal with, a list of hangings does not account for the number of times the hangman would travel to a particular location only to have the sentence commuted at the last moment. For example, Radcliffe had been hired to hang Veney in Sandwich, (Windsor), Ontario, in May 1893, but the sentence was commuted at the last minute.⁷⁹

When Radcliffe arrived in Brockville in December 1893, he was “until a late hour the centre of attraction for a large and curious crowd.”⁸⁰ The hanging of Luckey, on the counterweight gallows, again resulted in a strangulation, rather than a broken or dislocated neck,⁸¹ although most newspaper reports stated that the neck had been broken or dislocated and Luckey died instantly.⁸² The success of the hanging was overshadowed once again by Radcliffe’s outrageous behavior. As Radcliffe was leaving the hotel for the jail, he was met by three men who used very strong language calling him a murderer. Radcliffe went to the police and the men were apparently going to be arrested. However, Radcliffe left town after being induced not to prosecute the men whom he claimed insulted him.⁸³ The reason for the dropping of the charges was as follows:

At the time that Radcliffe complained to Chief Rose, it was the intention to bring the culprits to justice and have them fined heavily, but from the actions of Radcliffe after the execution and during the remainder of the day, the Chief became thoroughly disgusted with him, so much that he positively refused to have anything to do with the case, his own private opinion being that the strangers had used language none too strong in depicting just what kind of a specimen of the human race he was. In the barrooms in shirt sleeves, drunk as an owl, he boasted over the clean (?) job of the early morning and talked in a

⁷⁹ “Commutated,” *Hamilton Spectator*, May 15, 1893, at 6.

⁸⁰ “Luckey’s Last Day,” *Ottawa Journal*, Dec. 13, 1893, at 1.

⁸¹ “Luckey,” *Montreal Gazette*, Dec. 15, 1893, at 5; *Windsor Star*, Dec. 14, 1893, at 1.

⁸² “Luckey,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, Dec. 14, 1893, at 1; *Kingston News*, Dec. 14, 1893, at 1; *Hamilton Spectator*, Dec. 14, 1893, at 1; *Halifax Herald*, Dec. 14, 1893, at 4; *Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 15, 1893, at 1; *Manitoba Free Press*, Dec. 18, 1893, at 2.

⁸³ *Ottawa Journal*, Dec. 15, 1893, at 7.

manner that made the blood of some of his hearers turn cold. He was so paralyzed in the afternoon that he could not get away on the 2.05 train, and it was with much difficulty he boarded the 11:45 train for Toronto last night. It is hoped Brockville will never need his services again.⁸⁴

In 1894, there were four hangings, and two of them were in British Columbia, using the conventional drop gallows. Despite newspaper wire reports that Radclive was the executioner of Stroebel in Victoria on January 30, 1894,⁸⁵ newspapers that actually sent reporters to the execution made no mention of Radclive. Rather, the “unknown hangman, a quick moving undersized man, masked in black” did the job.⁸⁶ Another reported that, “He appeared very nervous. Sheriff McMillan had to signal him twice before he pulled the bolt.”⁸⁷ This sure does not sound like Radclive! The hanging was successful, although the drop might have been too long, given that “the rope cut his neck slightly, and blood trickled from the wound.”⁸⁸ The hangman’s identity, as we have discovered from archival evidence, was James Dupen, a tailor in Calgary who subsequently applied to be the official hangman for British Columbia in 1895.⁸⁹ He claimed he was in the English Navy for several decades. We have no reply but believe that Dupen was subsequently hired for several B.C. executions until Radclive was finally hired in 1899. The tailor, James Dupen, had a very large family and when he retired and died in Victoria in 1938 at age 87 the obituary in the Calgary newspaper suggested that he had been at some stage the tailor to the English monarchy!⁹⁰

⁸⁴ “Hangman Radcliffe,” *St. John Telegraph*, Dec. 20., 1893, at 2; Also, *Moncton Transcript*, Dec. 20, 1893, at 1.

⁸⁵ For example, *Windsor Star*, Jan. 31, 1894, at 3; *Kingston Whig*, Feb. 1, 1894, at 8; *Manitoba Free Press*, Jan. 30, 1894, at 1

⁸⁶ “Stroebel Hanged,” *Victoria Times*, January 30. 1894, at 8.

⁸⁷ “Stroebel,” *Nanaimo News*, Jan. 30, 1894, at 1.

⁸⁸ “Stroebel Hanged,” *Vancouver News-Advertiser*, Feb. 7, 1894, at 5.

⁸⁹ “Application,” B.C. Archives, GR-0429, Box 03, File 03, 1895.

⁹⁰ “Dupen,” *Calgary Albertan*, March 17, 1938, at 5.

The next execution in British Columbia was in August 1894 in New Westminster. Archival evidence indicates that Radcliffe applied for the job. Radcliffe wrote from Parkdale, Toronto, offering his services, stating, “I have been appointed by the Dominion Government for the office...You have only to pay my expenses...”⁹¹ However, several weeks later the Superintendent of the Provincial Police wrote that, “We don’t need to employ the Dominion Executioner.”⁹² Evidently, the B.C. authorities were content with their own hangman, or were reluctant to pay the expenses of Radcliffe travelling all the way across the country and back. The hangman at New Westminster was elaborately disguised with a sack over his head along with a stiff hat to conceal his height, and long rubber boots to conceal his gait, and hands blackened so as to conceal whether he was a working man or not. The hanging was successful as the victim’s neck was broken, but the hangman was very nervous, and he was trembling so badly that he had to be supported as he descended the scaffold.⁹³ Despite the elaborate disguise, the hangman’s identity became known. He was a 23-year-old butcher by trade and was simply trying to support his wife and family, and after the hanging was shunned by his companions and left with his family to go back to England.⁹⁴ The Sheriff of New Westminster later wrote that the hangman was paid the outrageous sum of \$150 and “his work was most unsatisfactory.”⁹⁵

The first hanging that Radcliffe performed using the conventional drop method was in Regina, then still part of the Northwest Territories, in May of 1894. He used a nine-foot drop and death “was instantaneous”⁹⁶ As usual, however, “There was

⁹¹ Typed letter from Radcliffe, July 24, 1894, GR-0429-Box 03-File 02, 1894, B.C. Archives.

⁹² Provincial Police to Deputy Attorney General, Aug. 14, 1894. *Ibid.*

⁹³ “Lynn Hangs,” *Vancouver News-Advertiser*, Aug. 29, 1894, at 1; *Vancouver Weekly World*, Aug. 30, 1894, at 6.

⁹⁴ “Lynn’s Hangman,” *Montreal Star*, Sept. 13, 1894, at 2.

⁹⁵ Letter from Sheriff to Attorney-General re hiring Dupin again. B.C. Archives, GR-0429 Box 04 File 04, 1899.

⁹⁶ “Hanged,” *Regina Leader-Post*, May 10, 1894, at 1; *Winnipeg Tribune*, May 11, 1894, at 4

much comment among the spectators about the callous bearing of the hangman in doing his revolting duty. The jail officials are especially indignant at his brutal conduct.”⁹⁷ We have no further detail as to what this behavior entailed, but years later when Radclive arrived back in Regina in January 1901, the local press reminded citizens that Radclive had been there in 1894 and, “after the execution he came into town, got drunk, and made himself obnoxious to many citizens.”⁹⁸ Before the hanging he admitted he was from the Parkdale area of Toronto and when not engaged in hanging he spent his time in “shooting, hunting, fishing, etc.”⁹⁹ We have no evidence that he ever had a regular job after being fired at the boating club. There was an earlier report in 1894 that Radclive was now being paid a retainer in Ontario of \$1,200 a year taken from the budget of all the sheriffs which Radclive would receive irrespective of the number of hangings.¹⁰⁰ Whether telling the truth or not, Radclive now denied this report.¹⁰¹

In Winnipeg, on the way back from the hanging in Regina, Radclive was supposedly now reluctant to give interviews to reporters. He stated. “They take too much liberty with me when writing their interviews... but my relatives see all these papers and strongly object to the personal references.”¹⁰² Radclive returned to Toronto bringing a portion of the Regina scaffold with him to store with his other “curiosities.”¹⁰³ His reluctance to speak to reporters was short lived.

Radclive travelled to Brampton, Ontario at the end of May 1894, to hang MacWherrell. Given that the victim was so light, compared to the drop weight of the jerk up gallows, Radclive called for the construction of a conventional drop gallows, with the lower part completely covered so no one could witness the body after the

⁹⁷ “ By Radcliffe’s Rope,” *Medicine Hat News*, May 10, 1894, at 1.

⁹⁸ *Regina Leader-Post*, Jan. 10, 1901, at 6.

⁹⁹ “The Lord High Executioner,” *Vancouver World*, May 26, 1894, at 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Kingston News*, April 11, 1894, at 2.

¹⁰¹ *Supra* note 99.

¹⁰² “The Man Who Kills,” *Manitoba Free Press*, May 14, 1894, at 7.

¹⁰³ “Had to Use the old Rope,” *Moncton Times-Transcript*, May 18, 1894, at 1.

fall.¹⁰⁴ At the last moment, MacWherrell’s hanging was postponed until after the trial of another man connected to the case, and Radcliffe returned to Toronto. Interestingly there was an earlier report that famous lawyer, T.C. Robinette, had asked for a new trial based on a report that MacWherrell at the relevant time had an alibi and was seen in Scholes’ Hotel in Parkdale, where “nearly everyone was drunk, including Radcliffe the hangman.” From this slim evidence, we may imply that Scholes’ Hotel was likely the common watering hole for Radcliffe in Toronto. MacWherrell’s hanging was rescheduled to the end of October. Again, Radcliffe travelled to Brampton but at the last minute the sentence was commuted to life in prison and Radcliffe returned to Toronto.¹⁰⁵

The second hanging Radcliffe completed in 1894 was Truskey in Sandwich (Windsor) Ontario in December 1894. Radcliffe used the jerk gallows again. While the weight was being sent from Toronto and the gallows were being built, he was interviewed by an American reporter. Radcliffe falsely claimed that he did not know how many people he had hanged, and added, “I do not hang them, the law does that.” He claimed he was born in England 29 years ago, another lie, and had travelled the world, leaving home at the age of 7.¹⁰⁶ He now familiar “humanitarian” story that he decided to offer his services after the terrible suffering involving the Harvey execution.

Before the hanging of Truskey, “Radcliffe spent the morning at Smith’s hotel, the centre of an admiring throng of the curious whom he kept in good humor by cracking jokes and buying drinks for them.”¹⁰⁷ He was interviewed by a local reporter who noted, “He... evidently likes to hear himself talk. Modesty is not one of his prominent characteristics; on the contrary he is a seeker of newspaper notoriety, and nothing suits him better than to be gazed at and talked about.”¹⁰⁸ The Truskey case received extraordinary

¹⁰⁴ “A Respite for MacWherrell,” *Kingston News*, May 30, 1894.

¹⁰⁵ “Justice Miscarries,” *Toronto Star*, Sept. 29, 1894, at 1.

¹⁰⁶ “Truskey,” *Detroit Free Press*, Dec. 13, 1894, at 8.

¹⁰⁷ “Truskey Swings,” *Windsor Star*, Dec. 14, 1894, at 1 and 3.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

publicity with huge numbers of spectators allowed to watch the hanging. When Radclive appeared at the morning of the hanging in the jail yard, with hundreds crowded around the scaffold, he promptly left in a “violent temper” when he saw that a camera had been set up at the gallows and he proclaimed that he would not proceed till it was removed. He left the hanging and returned to the hotel. Later the sheriff’s deputy was seen running around trying to find him, and when Radclive was found and returned, his appearance, “indicated that he had made use of the time. (drinking?) He had a cigar in his mouth and indicated plainly that he was running the show.”¹⁰⁹

The actual jerk up system seemed to work well on this occasion and allegedly Truskey’s neck was broken.¹¹⁰ In this case, Radclive had also devised a new harness system of pinioning the arms and hands in a way that would hide various convulsions.¹¹¹ The editorial writer for the local paper was scandalized by the circus that the hanging had turned into. Commenting on Radclive, he added:

And to all of this the utter heartlessness of the government butcher who had been posing among the saloons for a couple of days as an officer of the law and was now apparently revelling in the work of his bloody profession... with a brutal pomposity that was alone sufficient to make human blood run cold... the hangman lighting his cigar and shaking hands with old acquaintances and making his funny jokes and expatiating on his beautiful system to anyone who would listen...¹¹²

An unknown, fully disguised hangman, using the conventional drop hanged a man in January 1895, in New Westminster.¹¹³ We now know from archival records that the hangman was James Dupin, who charged \$50 plus expenses.¹¹⁴ The other three

¹⁰⁹ “Truskey Swings,” *Windsor Record*, Dec. 14, 1894, at 1

¹¹⁰ *Windsor Star*, Dec. 15, 1894, at 3.

¹¹¹ *Montreal Gazette*, Dec. 15, 1894, at 2.

¹¹² *Windsor Star*, Dec. 15, 1894, at 4.

¹¹³ “Executed,” *Victoria Times*, Jan. 17, 1895, at 1; “Hanged,” *Vancouver News Advertiser*, Jan. 18, 1895, at 5.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Sheriff to Attorney-General re hiring Dupin again. B.C. Archives, GR-0429 Box 04 File 04, 1899.

hangings for the year took place in Ontario with Radcliffe officiating. The first in Stratford at the end of May was again on the jerk up gallows,¹¹⁵ although all the newspaper wire reports suggested it was a drop.¹¹⁶ However, the papers actual containing details of the hanging, clearly described the scaffold as a jerk system with the victim lifted 9 feet in the air.¹¹⁷ Apparently the hanging went well, according to the physicians present.

However, at the double execution in June 1895 at St. Thomas, Radcliffe used the drop gallows for the first time in Ontario, because Radcliffe considered the men to be too small and light for the jerk. Parts of the drop gallows that were supposed to have been used in Brampton the year before, were shipped to St. Thomas.¹¹⁸ While the double hanging in St. Thomas went exceedingly well, with both necks broken,¹¹⁹ Radcliffe was again criticized for his demeanor and behaviour at this high-profile double hanging. The description of the hangings included the hangman posing proudly and giving speeches to the assembled crowd after pulling the trap and before the bodies were cut down, and it was noted that “he was suffering from an intolerable sample of swelled head.”¹²⁰ An American reported observing Radcliffe’s behavior in the days preceding the hanging reported:

Nothing would do him but to stop at the Grand Central hotel, and when he arrived there, he posed and used his mouth. He employed it in showing what an ass he could be without trying, and in how much whiskey he could drink at the expense of others. He spent most of his time in the barrooms, did this pet of the law, and he generally has his

¹¹⁵ Hanged, *Owen Sound Times*, June 6, 1895, at 2.

¹¹⁶ Chatelle, *Montreal Star*, May 31, 1895, at 1: Also same date, *Waterloo Record*; *Winnipeg Tribune*; *Hamilton Spectator*; *Ottawa Journal*; *Moncton Transcript*, and others.

¹¹⁷ “Hanged,” *Orangeville Sun*, June 6, 1895, at 2.

¹¹⁸ “Scaffold Shipped,” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 8, 1895, at 1.

¹¹⁹ “The Law’s Awful Vengeance,” *Montreal Star*, June 18, 1895, at 1; *Ottawa Journal*, June 18, 1895, at 1; *Winnipeg Tribune*, June 18, 1895, at 1.

¹²⁰ “Hanged,” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 18, 1895, at 1.

little wit floating around on a sea of booze at the mercy of his own inexhaustible supply of wind.¹²¹

The train returning to Toronto with Radclive onboard stopped at a station in Galt, Ontario, where a throng of curious people had a chance to look at him. “They described the man as being a rather good looking fellow, with evidence of having more than once tasted whiskey during the day. He told some of them that he was paid \$200 for putting the men to death.”¹²²

Radclive travelled to Beauharnois, Quebec, to hang Shortis on January 3, 1896, but the sentence was commuted at the last moment. There is a very good book on this case, including how the commutation process was manipulated by Shortis’s wealthy family.¹²³ Only one hanging took place in 1896, namely the hanging of Wheeler at Digby, Nova Scotia, in September. Radclive applied to the Sheriff to be the hangman, but the Sheriff wrote back asking about what the fees and expenses would be.¹²⁴ In the end, the municipality thought the expenses of bringing Radclive to Digby “were rather large” and decided to do without his services.¹²⁵ Thus Wheeler was hanged on a crude jerk up gallows within the jail building itself in the middle of the night by the Sheriff himself. Allegedly a 500-pound weight jerked Wheeler into the air and his neck was broken.¹²⁶

Execution dates did not always suit the hangman. Sullivan was scheduled to be hanged on March 12, 1897, in Dorchester, New Brunswick, while “Charcoal” was scheduled to be hanged in Fort Macleod, Northwest Territories, on March 16, 1897. Clearly, given

¹²¹ From the *Detroit News*, as reprinted in *Hamilton Spectator*, June 22, 1895, at 1.

¹²² “Report from Galt,” *Waterloo Record*, June 24, 1895, at 1.

¹²³ Martin L. Friedland, *The Case of Valentine Shortis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

¹²⁴ “Hangman Radcliffe,” *Moncton Transcript*, July 20, 1896, at 1.

¹²⁵ “Radcliffe Will Not Hang Wheeler,” *Moncton Times-Transcript*, Aug. 21, 1896, at 4.

¹²⁶ “Wheeler Hanged,” *Moncton Transcript*, Sept. 8, 1896, at 1; *Halifax Mail*, Sept. 8, 1896, a1

the uncertainty of train travel in this period, the hangman would not have time to travel across the country in time for the second hanging. Radcliffe chose the hanging in New Brunswick using a jerk up gallows,¹²⁷ while a “John Smith,” from Calgary,¹²⁸ using a traditional drop hanged Charcoal in Macleod. The Macleod execution was a success.¹²⁹

On the other hand, the New Brunswick hanging was bungled by Radcliffe, although you would not know it from most of the press accounts. Radcliffe arrived in Dorchester on March 9, and registered at the New Windsor Hotel leaving considerable time for admiring crowds to drink with him over the next days, and he seemed to be particularly interested in securing good relations with the local press. The reporters accompanied him everywhere, while he prepared the gallows and while he visited the prisoner in his cell. He told the reporters for the *Fredericton Gleaner*,¹³⁰ the *St. John Telegraph*¹³¹ and the *Moncton Transcript*¹³² the now familiar story of how he took the job out of humanitarian concerns after the botch of Harvey, and his first hanging was Kane and then he claimed that he had now hanged 30 to 40 people, everyone in Canada but for Wheeler. This was a bald-faced lie, of course, given that he had hung 16 people in Canada, out of the 26 hanged since 1890. He claimed he had never bungled a case and confirmed that the federal government paid him a retainer and that the local jurisdiction only had to pay his expenses, but supposedly his out-of-pocket expenses exceeded the amount claimed, so he was actually in the hole by doing the job. He did not mention the mandatory gift fee he demanded of the sheriff to hang someone. One suspects that if he was indeed in the hole, the cause would be the expense of his own drinking. It was later reported that his bill

¹²⁷ “Sullivan Hanged,” *Ottawa Citizen*, March 12, 1897, at 1

¹²⁸ Hangman was from Calgary according to *Calgary Herald*, Aug. 31, 1897, at 4.

¹²⁹ “Charcoal,” *Fort Macleod Gazette*, March 19, 1897, at 1.

¹³⁰ “Sullivan’s Last Day,” *Fredericton Gleaner*, March 11, 1897, at 5.

¹³¹ “Interview,” *St. John Telegraph-Journal*, March 12, 1897, at 3.

¹³² “Interview,” *Moncton Transcript*, March 12, 1897, at 1 and 4.

was \$65, which the sheriff had paid to him, and now the sheriff had difficulty getting the money back from the district, as some members of council thought the bill outrageous.¹³³

With the local press in his pocket, the accounts of the execution suggested that everything went without a hitch. The body shot into the air ten feet, “and in its descent struck one of the posts. Radcliffe promptly seized it by the legs and held it.”¹³⁴ While the body twitched a few times, death was supposedly instantaneous and Radclive proclaimed that it was a good clean job.¹³⁵ Indeed it was reported that he said, “the job was the cleanest one in the history of the country!”¹³⁶

A very different story finally came out written by the Chief of Police of Dorchester. He wrote that Radclive, surrounded by a huge crowd that he entertained in the bar, drank the night away before the hanging.¹³⁷ Many of the spectators at the hanging in the morning were intoxicated, and Radclive did not show up. After several delegations were sent to the hotel to rouse him, he showed up, “looking seedy and acting quesely.” Further delay was caused by Radclive appearing without all his equipment necessary for the hanging. When this was retrieved, it turned out that Radclive had tested the gallows, but he had left the job of attaching the ropes and weight to the morning of the hanging, and they were twisted and tangled. Assisted by some bystanders who were also intoxicated the various ropes on the gallows had to be untangled causing further delay. Then Radclive did not secure the noose tightly around the victim and the victim had not been placed under the center of the beam, so he went up swinging side to side breaking the force of the jerk. The badly adjusted rope came under the chin rather than the left ear and none of the rope even touched the

¹³³ *Moncton Times*, Jan. 10, 1898, at 1.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ “Paid the Penalty,” *Fredericton Gleaner*, March 12, 1897, at 1; “The Executed Man,” *Moncton Transcript*, March 13, 1897, at 1.

¹³⁶ “Sullivan Hanged,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, March 12, 1897, at 1.

¹³⁷ Account of the hanging by Charles Knapp, Chief of Police, *Halifax Herald*, March 19, 1897, at 5.

front neck as the victim breathed for some minutes. His neck was not broken. He eventually suffocating to death by hanging from the back of his neck. When the body was cut down, Radcliffe took the pin out of the necktie, and took the necktie, and the studs from the shirt and was about to remove the slippers whereupon the writer told him to put the items back, and an angry Radcliffe had an altercation with the Chief that ended when a deputy took the items, not allowing Radcliffe to have possession of them, to sell as relics.¹³⁸

This was the last time that Radcliffe used the jerk gallows. It was also Radcliffe’s only hanging in 1897. The third hanging of the year took place in Nelson, B.C. in August. Again, the drop gallows shipped from Kamloops were used, and the neck was reportedly broken.¹³⁹ The hangman was James Dupen, the Calgary tailor.¹⁴⁰

Radcliffe travelled to Cayuga, Ontario, in January 1898 to hang a woman. An American reporter noted:

He is too shrewd to indulge in useless bravado, but nevertheless he no doubt enjoys the sort of “fame” attaching to his position. This was evident when he sailed through the village smoking an immense pipe with a train of half-a-dozen admirers stringing behind him.¹⁴¹

After everything was prepared for the hanging, at the last moment the woman’s sentence was commuted, and a new trial was granted. Radcliffe had to return home. Most reports indicated that he was relieved at not having to hang a woman,¹⁴² although the American press suggested he “was the most dissatisfied individual in Cayuga when given the news of the commutation.”¹⁴³

In early February 1898, Radcliffe hanged an 18-year-old boy in Berlin, Ontario, using a drop gallows, completely enclosed so that

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ See, Vancouver News-Advertiser, Aug 25, 1897, at 1; Victoria Times, at 1; Vancouver World at 4.

¹⁴⁰ As noted by the Sheriff of New Westminster who wanted to hire Dupen in 1899 instead of Radcliffe. See B.C. Archives, GR-0429 Box 04 File 04. 1899.

¹⁴¹ *Buffalo Evening Times*, Jan. 20, 1898, at 15.

¹⁴² “New Trial Ordered,” *St. Catherines Standard*, Jan. 19, 1898, at 1; *Windsor Star*, at 1; *Ottawa Citizen*, at 8.

¹⁴³ New Trial,” *Buffalo Courier*, Jan. 19, 1898, at 1.

journalists were unable to see the body after the drop. This was one of those rare cases, where Radclive, perhaps on the insistence of the sheriff, or perhaps in a short-lived attempt at reform, was lodged in the jail rather than in a hotel as he supervised the construction of the scaffold. Apparently he did not seek notoriety in the bars, and stayed inside the jail and did not seek out journalists.¹⁴⁴ The governor of the jail stated that Radclive was “a decent fellow, jovial, and hardly what the general public would picture him.”¹⁴⁵ By all accounts, the hanging was successful with a drop of around 9 feet, and the boy’s neck was broken according to the physician.¹⁴⁶

While in Berlin, he was described as a pleasant-faced individual, with a flowing red moustache and small blue eyes.¹⁴⁷ He did not completely avoid the press as a local paper reported:

In answer to a question this morning put to Radcliffe, as to whether he had formerly been a sailor he said, “Yes, sir, I have, and had it not been for the death of my father I would probably still be one or have become food for the fishes.” He related that during the years he had followed the seaman’s life, he had been around Australia, China, Japan, and around Cape Horn, in a gale that threatened each moment to wreck the vessel... In answer as to what occupation he followed when not attending to executions he said, “Oh, I am secretary of the Young Women’s Christian Association at Toronto.”¹⁴⁸

This last statement was absurd, and we cannot believe anything Radclive said about himself, without verification.

The Assistant Attorney General of Quebec wrote to the Deputy Minister of Justice in February 1898 asking for the address of Radclive.¹⁴⁹ Notation on the file indicates that he had recently

¹⁴⁴ “Ready to Drop,” *Buffalo News*, Feb. 3, 1898, at 2.

¹⁴⁵ “Allison’s Last Day,” *St. Catherines Standard*, Feb. 3, 1898, at 1; *Buffalo Courier* at 1.

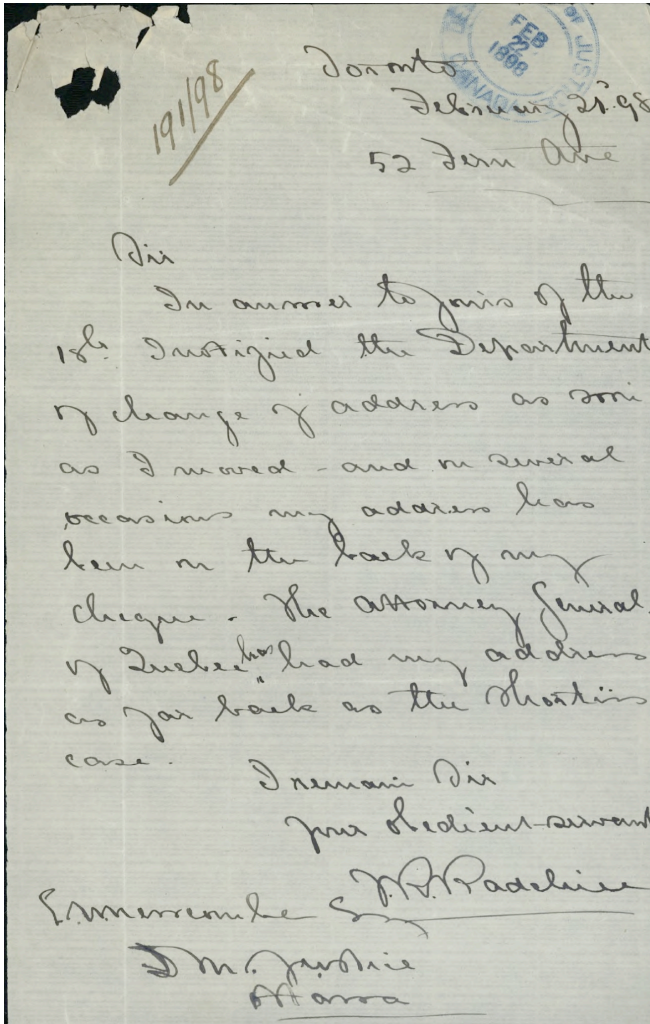
¹⁴⁶ “Hanged,” *Buffalo News*, Feb. 4, 1898, at 1; *Hamilton Spectator*, at 1; *Montreal Star*, at 9; *Victoria Times*, at 1; *Ottawa Citizen*, at 1.

¹⁴⁷ *Weekly News-Record*, Feb. 4, 1898, at 1.

¹⁴⁸ “Allison’s Last Day,” *Waterloo Region Record*, Feb. 3, 1898, at 1.

¹⁴⁹ National Archives, RG13-A-2, Volume 107, File 1898-191

moved from 210 Sorauren Avenue in Parkdale to 52 Fern Avenue in Parkdale. We have a sample of Radcliffe's writing:¹⁵⁰



The second hanging in 1898 was back in Nelson, B.C., where the drop system was used successfully, with the victim's neck

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

broken. The hangman was said to be a local Nelson man called “Holbrook,”¹⁵¹ but very likely it was the Calgary tailor again.

In May, Radclive travelled to Joliette, Quebec to supervise the building of a new drop gallows at the prison. The hanging went well in terms of breaking the neck of the victim, but the atmosphere was a circus, as over a thousand persons were allowed to climb to the roof of the jail and jail sheds and other vantage points to witness the execution. The crowd was jeering and laughing and Radclive launched a formal complaint, but we are not told with whom.¹⁵²

Over the course of the construction of the scaffold and the hanging, Radclive had stayed at the Rivard Hotel where he had entertained the numerous officials and journalists in the bar. The Montreal correspondent for an American newspaper subsequently wrote an admiring article about Canada’s hangman which was reprinted in various versions in Canadian newspapers.¹⁵³ Once again we are told that he had never botched any executions and was paid a salary by the federal government but also sold portions of the ropes and various articles to museums and speculators. He was reported as living at 52 Fern Avenue in Toronto with his wife and children “where his neighbors and all those acquainted with him have nothing but good to say about him.” One doubts that the journalist visited the neighbors, and this is likely Radclive’s self-presentation to the journalist. The journalist admitted that Radclive’s past was a complete mystery. However, at the Rivard Hotel, he had at one stage counted six lemons in a foreign language which the journalist assumed was Javanese, and this reinforced the opinion that he must have been a sailor at some stage. He had used the jerk gallows, “which invariably broke the neck,” but he eventually abandoned the counterweight hoist and switched

¹⁵¹ “Execution of Davis,” *Nelson Tribune*, April 23, 1898, at 1; “A Nelson Hanging,” *Van. Province*, April 22, 1898, at 1.

¹⁵² “Nulty is Dead,” *Montreal Star*, May 20, 1898, at 7; *Montreal Gazette*, May 21, at 1; “Life for Life,” *Ottawa Citizen*, May 20, at 1.

¹⁵³ “Hangman Radcliffe,” *Kingston Whig-Standard*, Nov. 28, 1898, at 6; *Montreal Star*, Dec. 31, 1898, at 15; *Ottawa Journal*, Jan. 7, 1899, at 6.

exclusively to the traditional drop method, “for reasons he cares not to explain.”

Nothing much of what Radcliffe said about himself could be trusted. Despite having hanged less than thirty people by the end of 1898, he bragged that he had hanged sixty.¹⁵⁴ Many of the stories that he told to reporters about the details of losing his job at the boat club, or about his past life, varied from report to report, and we might conclude that Radcliffe was a grand spinner of tales. Take this story for example:

“Death smells,” he said once. “Do you know my wife can tell it in an instant. I’ve tried it again and again. I take home two handkerchiefs from a hanging. One I had, the other was worn by the condemned. Mine is all right to my wife. But the other! ‘Take it away,’ she cries. ‘It smells of death.’ I’ve tried it by putting my handkerchief on the condemned before he dies and then she won’t touch it either. I can hide a piece of gallows’ rope in the house. If it never has been used, she won’t notice it. If it has been used, she can tell it in a minute. ‘I can smell death,’ she says, and I have to take it out.”¹⁵⁵

The third execution by Radcliffe in 1898 took place in September at Bracebridge, Ontario, using the drop method. After the circus of the last hanging, this one was strictly private with the sheriff barring even journalists from attendance. To his credit, “Radcliffe remained in seclusion as much as possible and rarely appeared on the street.”¹⁵⁶ The hanging went without a hitch and apparently there was no movement of the body after the drop.¹⁵⁷ After the hanging Radcliffe, smoking a cigar and carrying his valise, swaggered nonchalantly down the street followed by a rabble of men and boys.¹⁵⁸

As if to get rid of a lot of murderers before the end of the century, 1899 was an extraordinary year involving 14 executions. Radcliffe was the hangman for 10 of them. At a double hanging in St. Scholastique, Quebec, in March, Radcliffe was refused

¹⁵⁴ *Buffalo Morning Express*, Dec. 15, 1898, at 8.

¹⁵⁵ “Expert Executioner,” *Buffalo Morning Express*, Dec. 15, 1898, at 8.

¹⁵⁶ “Hanging of Hammond,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, Sept. 15, 1898, at 1.

¹⁵⁷ “Has Paid the Penalty,” *Hamilton Spectator*, Sept. 15, 1898, at 1.

¹⁵⁸ “His Life for His Crime,” *Niagara-on-the-Lake Times*, Sept. 23, 1898, at 3.

admission at any hotel in town when he arrived to supervise the construction of the gallows, and he had to travel each day back to Montreal.¹⁵⁹ No local carpenter would help him either, and the gallows had to be shipped in from Montreal.¹⁶⁰ On the night before the hangings, Radcliffe stayed over and slept in the jail.¹⁶¹

This was the first time Radcliffe had to hang a woman, and a massive unruly crowd assembled at the hanging both inside and outside the jail yard. The necks of both the woman and the man were broken and someone paid Radcliffe \$30 for the rope that hanged the woman.¹⁶² So far, Radcliffe had been very successful with the drop system. It was reported:

Radcliffe was highly complimented by the doctors and others on the success of the execution. All the arrangements worked to perfection. After the execution Radcliffe said: "I always have things so arranged that the persons being hanged will not suffer. They endure enough mental agony before execution without having to be tortured on the scaffold. The day of brutality in hangings is over. I'm sent here to do my work, and I'll do it well or not at all."¹⁶³

An editorial in the *Toronto Star* lambasted the French town for refusing food and lodging to the "excellent" hangman and then turning the hanging into a circus.¹⁶⁴

After the hanging, Radcliffe left on the train for Port Arthur, Ontario, for a hanging on March 17. Radcliffe again proved to be an excellent hangman with the drop system, breaking the neck of the victim.¹⁶⁵ The next hanging was on May 17, in London, Ontario, where the neck was dislocated, but not broken, although the victim was said to be unconscious by the end of the drop.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹ "Radcliffe Refused Accommodation," *Ottawa Citizen*, March 8, 1899, at 8.

¹⁶⁰ "Gallows Ready," *Montreal Star*, March 7, 1899, at 9.

¹⁶¹ "Two on the Gallows," *Bradford Witness*, March 15, 1899, at 2.

¹⁶² "Two Hanged," *Ottawa Citizen*, March 10, 1899, at 1 and 8.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* at 8.

¹⁶⁴ "City Comment," *Toronto Star*, March 11, 1899, at 4.

¹⁶⁵ "Prevost Hanged," *Winnipeg Tribune*, March 17, 1899, at 1; *Victoria Times*, at 1; *Montreal Gazette*, March 18, at 1.

¹⁶⁶ "Marion Brown Pays the Penalty," *Bradford Witness*, May 25, 1899, at 2.

The busy hangman then travelled to Winnipeg for a double hanging ten days later. Uncharacteristically he refused to speak to a Winnipeg reporter.¹⁶⁷ The double hanging was conducted without a hitch,¹⁶⁸ and Radcliffe took one of the coats as a relic. He stated he had performed about 70 executions, having performed some before the Birchall case.¹⁶⁹

He then jumped on the train to travel to Kamloops for a hanging on June 2. This would be his first hanging in British Columbia. Passengers on the train to Kamloops reported that Radcliffe was “all nerves” having hardly recovered from the mental effort of the double hanging in Winnipeg.¹⁷⁰ In Kamloops, using an 8-foot drop, Radcliffe broke the neck of the accused.¹⁷¹ While he may have performed well at the job, his reputation was not enhanced by his “outrages behavior” as reported in the *Kamloops Standard*:

The vulgar bragging and boastings around the barrooms during his stay in Kamloops was bad enough, but his conduct before the execution was unseemly to a degree. He bandied jokes and laughed and talked like a man waiting for the curtains to rise in a low music hall, to the disgust of the fifty or sixty persons present. But after Casimir was hanged, he went still further and behaved in a perfectly disgusting, not to say indecent manner.¹⁷²

We are not told just what was so indecent, the writer apparently thinking it too indecent to print.

Radcliffe was out of funds and the sheriff telegraphed to the Attorney General of British Columbia to send him money.¹⁷³ Thereafter, Radcliffe continued on to New Westminster to hang a man at the end of June. The sheriff of New Westminster did not want to hire Radcliffe, preferring to hire Dupan from Calgary

¹⁶⁷ “Hangman Arrives,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, May 22, 1899, at 1.

¹⁶⁸ “Galicians Hanged,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, May 27, 1899, at 1.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ “News,” *Victoria Globe*, June 1, 1899, at 2.

¹⁷¹ Dies Game,” *Van Province*,” June 2, 1899, at 5.

¹⁷² As reprinted in “Radcliffe,” *Van. World*, June 10, 1899, at 6.

¹⁷³ B.C. Archives, GR-0429 Box 04 File 05. 1899,

instead.¹⁷⁴ However, since Radclive arrived, he got the job. He arrived from Kamloops weeks before the hanging set for the end of the month and told a reporter that he was just looking at “what sort of town you had here anyhow.” He was not certain whether he would stay for the execution stating, “I want to get back to Toronto. My wife and three children are there.”¹⁷⁵ As we will note, this was probably a lie, as his wife and two daughters had already left him. This may also explain his lengthy stay in Vancouver by himself.

There was a hanging in Hamilton on June 23, and several false reports suggested that Radclive left B.C. to travel to Hamilton.¹⁷⁶ However, because Radclive remained in B.C.¹⁷⁷ a man calling himself “Thompson” from Toronto performed the drop in Hamilton, and this was performed just as well as if it had been Radclive doing it.¹⁷⁸ The hangman wore a “heavy false whisker.” He was said to be an Englishman who had previously hanged people in England.¹⁷⁹

Radclive remained in British Columbia for about a month until the hanging in New Westminster on June 30. It was reported that Radclive again performed the hanging without a hitch, dropping the slender victim, 10 and a half feet.¹⁸⁰ Radclive charged \$28 for his fare between Kamloops and back. He also charged board and lodging for 27 days in Vancouver at \$2 a day plus a hanging fee of \$50.¹⁸¹ Clearly the bulk of his travel expenses had been paid by the Kamloops sheriff.

¹⁷⁴ Sheriff of New Westminster to the Attorney General, B.C. Archives, GR-0429 Box 04 File 04. 1899

¹⁷⁵ “Hangman in Vancouver,” *Van. Province*, June 7, 1899, at 1.

¹⁷⁶ *Van World*, June 19, 1899, at 5; “Will Radcliffe Get Here?” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 21, 1899, at 1.

¹⁷⁷ *Kingston News*, June 19, 1899, at 8.

¹⁷⁸ “Hanged,” *Brandford Expositor*, June 23, 1899, at 1.

¹⁷⁹ “Parrot Died,” *Kingston News*, June 24, 1899, at 5.

¹⁸⁰ “Perrier Hanged,” *Van World*, June 30, 1899, at 1; *Van Province* at 1; *Victoria Times* at 8.

¹⁸¹ Bill, B.C. Archives, GR-0429 Box 05. File 01, 1899.

For most of the rest of the year, Radcliffe stayed home. There was a hanging in Newfoundland at the end of July, but Newfoundland would not become part of Canada for another half century, so we doubt that Radcliffe applied for the job. In any event, the hangman was disguised, probably a prisoner who was given some benefit to do the job. Supposedly the neck of the victim was dislocated with a six-foot drop.¹⁸² Radcliffe also did not travel to Dawson City in the Yukon for a triple hanging on August 4. The hanging was bungled as one of the men broke the cords on his hands and “prolonged his agony by catching the rope above his head.”¹⁸³

Instead of being at home in Toronto for Christmas, Radcliffe was in Brandon, Manitoba, on December 27, hanging another woman. The scaffold was completely boarded up so that no one could even see the rope while standing in the prison yard.¹⁸⁴ The very brave young lady seemed to be unconscious after the drop, and the execution was said to be “masterfully done.”¹⁸⁵ There is an interesting book on this whole affair.¹⁸⁶

In the first decade of his career in Canada, Radcliffe hanged 30 people, about half the number as compared to the frequent press reports of 60 or so. The switch from the upwards jerk to the traditional drop had been very successful for Radcliffe. He was reported to have an uncanny ability to look at a victim and estimate accurately the strength of the neck and the weight so as to give the person the correct drop. He had by now obtained considerable fame and at this stage did not have any obvious rivals for the job.

During his long stay in Vancouver a reporter for the *Detroit Journal* wrote an admiring article about him which was reprinted

¹⁸² “Hanged,” *Halifax Mail*, Aug. 1, 1899, at 4.

¹⁸³ “Dawson’s First Hanging,” *Van World*, Aug. 25, at 5. (Reprint from *Dawson Nugget*); Also see Ken S. Coates and William R. Morrison, *Strange Things Done: Murder in Yukon History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2004) at 29.

¹⁸⁴ “Hilda Blake is Hanged,” *Free Press Prairie Farmer*, Dec. 28, 1899, at 1.

¹⁸⁵ “The Penalty Paid,” *Brandon Sun*, Dec. 28, 1899, at 1.

¹⁸⁶ See Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell, *Walk Towards the Gallows: The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged 1899* (Toronto: Oxford U. Press, 2004).

throughout the United States.¹⁸⁷ The article was also reprinted in the *Ottawa Citizen*,¹⁸⁸ with a shorter version in several Vancouver newspapers.¹⁸⁹ Apparently the editorial writers in British Columbia had taken Radclive to task for his “unconscionable pride in his profession, and his genial composure and business-like insouciance.” But the reporter found his expertise and attitude exemplary, claiming that he had humanely broken every neck over his 15-year career, and was a good public servant. This was obviously false given that Radclive had been the hangman for 10 years and had certainly not broken every neck when using the jerk up gallows. Interestingly the article noted that Radcliffe was now charging \$50 for each hanging and \$75 for a double hanging in addition to expenses. We note that this was in violation of the retainer agreement with the federal government. The reporter estimated that Radclive was not well paid, given his expertise, but might have made \$2000 a year at this stage.

The article repeated the by now well known story of losing his position at the Sunnyside boating club. The one negative comment related to his likely flirtations with women while he held that position. The reporter noted, “...the other night I met a bibulous Sunnysider who made my hair stand on end by his description of Radcliffe’s uncanny glance whenever he saw a lady’s decollete.” Radclive lived in Parkdale and was listed in the directory as a wheelwright and the reporter surmised that his neighbors did not know he was a hangman. Radclive was a regular at “a hotel just at the west end of the King Street railway line” where he drank and told stories. Supposedly his home life was happy. “Radcliffe has all

¹⁸⁷ While we do not have the original, the article “A Proud Hangman,” appeared in well over 50 newspapers in the United States from June through October of 1899, according to Newspapers.com. See for example, *Kansas City Star*, June 25, 1899, at 15; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 1, at 12; *New York Times Union*, July 7, at 5 and many others. Then a new wave of articles later in *Kansas City Press*, July 28, at 3; *Wichita Star*, at 4; *McPherson Kansas Republican*, Aug. 5, at 12; and many others

¹⁸⁸ “Hangman Radcliffe Has Pride in His Profession,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 24, 1899, at 10.

¹⁸⁹ “Sketch of Radcliffe,” *Van. Province*, July 4, 1899, at 3; “A Gruesome Business,” *Van. World*, July 7, 1899, at 5

the domestic virtues. He loves his wife and children and takes pride in his bit of garden.” Once more the journalist was denied any mention of Radcliffe’s past. The Canadian version of the story had a picture of him without a beard while the American version seemed to portray him at an earlier period with a full beard:



This so-called “happy home” and “proud job” soon came to a crashing end during the second decade of Radcliffe’s career.