

Chapter 13

“John Ellis” #2: The Last Hangman – Identity Unknown

In the last chapter we noted that Branchaud was hired as the hangman in multiple provinces after John Ellis/Moore died in 1950. This included hangings in Ontario, the first of which was in Simcoe in December 1950.¹ However, as soon as John Ellis/Moore died, it was reported that a new hangman replacing him would also be called “John Ellis.”² However, we believe that a new “John Ellis” was not the hangman in Ontario for some considerable time. For example, at a hanging in London, Ontario in 1951, the press reported that “John Ellis” arrived from Western Canada.³ However, this would be Branchaud who had just hanged someone in Oakalla, B.C. a few days previously. The press would frequently report the hangman as “Arthur” or “John Ellis,” when the hangman was in fact Camille Branchaud.⁴ At a double hanging in Toronto in December 1952, the press reported the hangman as being from a small suburb of Montreal and weighing almost 300 pounds, clearly referring to Branchaud.⁵ A hanging in Hamilton, Ontario, was postponed in January 1953 because Branchaud was busy in British Columbia.⁶ Eventually the hanging took place on

¹ “McAuliffe Pays Penalty,” *Windsor Star* (15 December 1950) at 5.

² “Hangman Known as John Ellis Dies Suddenly,” *Victoria Times Colonist* (10 May 1950) at 1.

³ “Rowe Hears Death News,” *Windsor Star* (4 June 1951) at 7.

⁴ For example, “Davidoff Hanged,” *Vancouver Sun* (11 December 1950) at 1 and 2; “Gorcak Hanged,” *Edmonton Journal* (26 August 1951) at 1 and 12; “Cunningham,” *Vancouver News-Herald* (5 August 1952) at 1; “New Bars, Door, Locks, But Death Row Still 100 Paces to Gallows,” *Toronto Star* (30 September 1952) at 7.

⁵ “Thought They Were to Die at 8 A.M.,” *Toronto Star* (16 December 1952) at 1 and 3.

⁶ “Hangman Too Busy,” *Toronto Star* (12 January 1953) at 2.

February 3, and again the press wrongly reported the hangman as “John Ellis.”⁷

Nothing was said about the hangman in Port Arthur, Ontario, on April 28, 1953, or the identity of the hangman in four Ontario cases in 1954. However, we can infer that Branchaud was still the hangman in Ontario given the testimony of Sheriff Conover of Toronto at the Special Committee on Capital Punishment in May of 1954. He stated that there was only one hangman in Canada at this time, and “he was retained on a salary basis by the province of Quebec and conducted executions in other provinces for a fee.”⁸ Conover also stated, “The one professional hangman is not a young man and unless efforts are made to find a successor, Canada may find itself with a number of condemned men with no one trained to carry out the orders of the court. An attempt has been made to train two or three assistants to the lone executioner, but they gave up after one hanging.”⁹ Immediately after this report, a dozen persons applied to the federal Department of Justice seeking to be an assistant hangman.¹⁰ One official in the Department stated that none of them were fit for the job, and a Committee member responded that the applicants probably displayed “greed and sadism.”¹¹ Earlier when a bunch of people applied for the job of hangman in Alberta, the sheriff noted that they were “not the sort of people you would like to invite into your home.”¹²

I. HANGING CAREER WHILE MOST SENTENCES COMMUTED:

Nevertheless, one applicant in Ontario was successful when he applied to be hangman, presumably to the sheriff’s office in Toronto, the proper place for such applications, rather than the

⁷ “John Ellis Scheduled,” *Hamilton Spectator* (31 January 1953) at 7.

⁸ “Inject Drug Instead of Hanging,” *Toronto Star* (6 May 1954) at 33 and 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Dozen Canadians Seek Assistant Hangman Job,” *Ottawa Citizen* (21 May 1954) at 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Four Seek Job of Executioner,” *Edmonton Bulletin* (21 February 1950) at 2.

federal department of justice. By the time that Branchaud gave his evidence to the special committee on capital punishment in May of 1955, the newspapers reported that Canada now had two official hangmen. The first press report was in February when Mr. Brown, Chairman of the special committee stated that a second executioner for Canada was appointed recently in Ontario.¹³ Relying on this development, we believe that the new "John Ellis" probably performed the only execution in Ontario in 1955, which took place in Simcoe on March 2. Increasingly the death penalties during the 1950's were commuted, and this new "John Ellis" did not have a lot of work.

From 1955 to the last hanging in Ontario in 1962, there were only 11 hangings in Ontario over those seven years. There were two additional hangings during this time in New Brunswick, and we believe that at least one of them was performed by the last hangman in Canada. While executions were few in number due to the increasing use of the commutation power, people were still frequently sentenced to death and the hangman would be hired, and often travel in expectation of the hanging, only to have it commuted. For example, much fuss was made about how two men were scheduled to hang in B.C. on the same day as a man was scheduled to die in Winnipeg and another on the same day in Toronto.¹⁴ In the end only the Toronto hanging proceeded. We assume that the appointment of an official hangman for Ontario was made due to the demand created by death sentences, rather than the possibility that English Ontario did not want to be dependent on the French speaking high executioner of Quebec.

Little did anyone know that the last hanging in Canada would take place in Toronto on December 11, 1962, when Ronald Turpin and Arthur Lucas were hanged back to back. Nothing was mentioned in the press at the time, but decades later the Salvation Army Chaplain on the scene was quoted in a book on the case. His evidence was, "The hanging was bungled. Turpin died clean, but Lucas' head was torn right off. It was hanging just by the sinews of the neck. There was blood all over

¹³ "Committee Won't Hear Hangman," *Montreal Star* (15 February 1955) at 23.

¹⁴ "Canada Runs Short of Hangmen," *Vancouver Sun* (2 May 1956) at 2.

the floor. The hangman had miscalculated his weight.”¹⁵ However, as noted by author Robert Hoshowsky, another witness to the hanging was Detective Crawford who later talked to John Ellis and it was supposedly not the miscalculation of the weight that led to the decapitation but rather, “The hangman explained to Crawford that the most probable reason for Lucas almost being beheaded was because he had syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease that can affect the bones, joints, internal organs, heart and major blood vessels, such as those found in the neck.”¹⁶ This explanation might be a typical move by a psychopath to blame something or someone else for a failure.

II. DESCRIPTIONS AND INTERVIEWS:

During these Ontario hangings, the newspaper reports were largely absent of any clues as to “Ellis’s” identity. However, at a Toronto hanging in November 1956, the *Toronto Star* reported that the new hangman in Ontario was a short and stout man and a “former squadron leader of the RCAF, who is a mechanical engineer by profession and “doesn’t need the money.”¹⁷ There is a hint that this hanging might well have been bungled as 24 minutes passed before Fitton was pronounced dead.¹⁸ At a hanging in Sault St. Marie in 1958, the local paper called the hangman the official hangman of Canada, as if there was only one, and then claimed that his identity remained a carefully guarded secret.¹⁹ At a hanging in Haileybury in 1961 some reporter stated that the hangman was “a good looking man of about 35,” but one wonders where this information came from given that the press was not allowed to be present at executions. Perhaps, the description comes from some witness to the preparations, as Ellis spent a day ahead of the hanging “supervising and checking the scaffold and dropping

¹⁵ Robert J Hoshowsky, *The Last to Die: Ronald Turpin, Arthur Lucas, and the End of Capital Punishment in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007) at 180.

¹⁶ *Ibid* at 181-182.

¹⁷ “Numbed by Morphine,” *Toronto Star* (21 November 1956) at 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ “Montgomery Pays Penalty,” *Sault Star* (15 July 1958) at 1 and 2.

mechanism."²⁰ If Ellis at this stage was around 35, he would have been born around 1926.

As commutations of death sentences by the executive became routine, and various debates about the abolition of capital punishment took place, "John Ellis" was interviewed by Betty Kennedy for a radio broadcast on CFRB in January of 1965. Kennedy later stated that the interview "was one of the most chilling experiences of my life" as she sat side by side with Ellis in a private home.²¹ She described him as a completely normal looking "well-groomed, well-dressed businessman," but the complete lack of any emotion in his descriptions of killing people left her with the conclusion that "if I had not been in favor of the abolition of the death penalty before meeting John Ellis, I would certainly have become so after the horror of listening to him."²²

Summaries of the interview or highlights appeared in newspapers across Canada,²³ and in the United States,²⁴ and England.²⁵ The short form transcript of Ellis's remarks indicate that he was not well educated in the history of hanging. He claimed that "John Ellis" was the name given to hangmen in Europe centuries ago, rather than the actual name of a hangman in England who had committed suicide. He claimed that everyone was dead by the time they reached the end of the rope,

²⁰ "Report Feener Confessed," *North Bay Nugget* (13 June 1961) at 1 and 3.

²¹ "How the Hangman Feels," *Bowmanville Canadian Statesman* (17 March 1965) at 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For example, "I Help Justice," *Toronto Star* (29 January 1965) at 43; "Hangman Sees," *Hamilton Spectator* (29 January 1965) at 3; "Hangman Favors Death Penalty," *Edmonton Journal* (29 January 1965) at 15; "Hangman Against Abolition," *Calgary Albertan* (29 January 1965) at 9; "In Favor of Death Penalty," *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* (29 January 1965) at 8; "Hangman Favors Penalty," *Winnipeg Free Press* (1 February 1965) at 6; "Hangman Answers Ad," *Edmonton Journal* (19 February 1965) at 2.

²⁴ For example, "Death Penalty Backed by Canadian Hangman," *New York Times* (1 February 1965) at 4; "Hangman Suggests," *Chicago Tribune* (1 February 1965) at 3; "Hangman Speaks Out," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (1 February 1965) at 27; "Hangman Favors Capital Punishment," *Bangor Daily News* (1 February 1965) at 27; "Hangman Notes," *Austin American* (1 February 1965) at 3.

²⁵ "Hangman Says," *Liverpool Daily Post* (29 January 1965) at 5.

which was a bald-faced lie. He might have argued that, unless bungled, they were unconscious at this point, but not dead. His statements as to his qualifications may well be doubted. He claimed that he had learned the trade by observation and wartime experience “like being a commando or something similar in the service,” and also that he had studied anatomy for two years. He had applied for the job over ten years ago and had executed “probably 18” at this point.” This is six more than our estimate of around a dozen. His wife did not know he was a hangman, and this ignorance was made possible because he belonged to numerous organizations that allowed frequent travel as did his ordinary job outside of hanging. We may assume he would lie to his wife about the nature of his trips, to keep her in ignorance of his hangman role. He stated that only two people knew his real identity and they were sworn to secrecy. He also noted that the other “John Ellis” in Quebec was old and ill at this point. Ellis also claimed he was a regular church goer.

What was most newsworthy, however, was the callous attitude of Ellis. He was just completely disinterested emotionally in his killing of a woman or a man, and disinterested in whether they were guilty or not, because the judge and jury had decided that issue and he was just an instrument of justice. The most outrageous statement was Ellis’s claim that the death penalty deterred “born bums” from killing someone to secure a lifetime of nice food and shelter in jail. Good grief, if someone wanted to go to jail, they could simply pull out a toy gun while pretending to rob a bank, and they would get their wish to go to jail! What stupidity to think a person would kill someone as a means of securing food and housing in jail. These are his specific remarks:

Q. Can it be assumed that you favor retention of the death penalty?

A. Yes, I would. For the simple reason that there are so many people unemployed that just don’t want to work. I contend that if a man is a born bum, when capital punishment is abolished, all he has to do is shoot someone in the street and he is sentenced for life with three meals a day in a warm room and has a bed and that is more than what a bum wants.²⁶

As all death sentences continued to be commuted, and Canada in effect had abolition by commutation, while still going through the elaborate procedure of supposedly debating the merits of

²⁶ “Canada’s Hangman,” *Toronto Star* (29 January 1965) at 43.

commutation of each case at the cabinet level, the decision was made to limit capital sentences to murder of police or prison officials, rather than abolish capital punishment outright. Ellis was interviewed by the Canadian Press in an undisclosed location in January 1968 and called this move "all foolishness."²⁷ We presume the interviewer was Scott Button who gave the following account:

The hangman, who says he is reluctant to give interviews lives on the boarder of Ontario and another province. He would not say if the other province was Quebec or Manitoba. He is married and has children but would not say how many. His family is not aware that he "moonlights" as a hangman because his regular occupation requires travelling and serves as a cover-up. He wouldn't give his other occupation. He said he was born in Canada even though he spoke with a slight Scottish accent. He said he could not estimate the number of people he has hanged. He is paid by retainer, not by assignment. He was asked how much. "Did I ask you how much you are paid?" he snapped. He learned his trade from a "previous hangman" and has had thorough training in human anatomy. His victims die quickly and painlessly, he said. Sometimes the executioner and the condemned chat a little before getting down to business. "I talk with them about whatever they want to talk about. They must start the conversation." He will stay on the job "as long as it's required."²⁸

It was reported in 1968 that the only person who knew the identity of hangman Ellis was Sheriff Ambrose for the County of York in Toronto.²⁹ Ellis was still on a retainer in Ontario and available throughout Canada as the only remaining hangman. Given the routine nature of commutations, Quebec had the more sensible approach and had stopped giving a yearly retainer to Branchaud by at least 1964, although he was hired on a fee for service bases for executions that would likely be commuted anyway.³⁰ The last hanging in Quebec was Cote in Montreal on March 11, 1960, although a book that deals with the last hanging

²⁷ Scott Button, "Limits on Death Penalty 'All Foolishness'-Hangman," *Ottawa Journal* (13 January 1968) at 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Sheriff's Duties Clearly Defined," *Calgary Herald* (10 August 1968) at 30.

³⁰ "Quebec Hangman Not on Salary," *Montreal Star* (27 May 1964) at 41.

in each province embarrassingly has it wrong, and focuses on the second last hanging, as if it was the last.³¹

Sheriff Cioni of Edmonton had an upcoming execution (not yet commuted) and wrote to L. Bertrand on May 7, 1969, at the Sheriff's office in Montreal to have Branchaud as executioner, which was the usual procedure in Alberta. As noted in the last chapter, on May 8, 1969, Bertrand replied by telegram, "Regret to inform you Branchaud passed away. Suggest you contact Attorney General of Ontario in Toronto as they have a qualified replacement who has performed in the past, in that province."³² Sherriff Cioni contacted Sheriff Ambrose in Toronto on May 9, 1969, and eventually received the following letter from John Ellis, which serves as a sample of his handwriting:³³

³¹ See chapter on Henri Hector Legault in Alan Hustak, *They Were Hanged* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1987) at 79-94 [Hustak].

³² *R v Borg*, Alberta Archives, Sheriffs, Execution Files, GR 2002.0863 Box 1.

³³ *Ibid.*

To: Sheriff Ambrose
 Court House
 University Avenue
 Toronto 1, Ontario

Warden
 Noel
 June 19/69

Sheriff J. J. Lioni
 Sheriff Ambrose has
 been in contact with me in regard to
 services being required by me Mr. Ellis for
 the date July 23/69. On your telegram to
 him which I now have you indicated that
 the gallows will be erected by officials there.
 I hope they have built one before as
 there are certain spots which are a must
 and at least twelve feet (12') clearance
 below or under the trap.
 All mail will be addressed to above also
 a first class hotel will be arranged at your
 end, if there is no change in plans I
 would arrange to arrive Monday afternoon
 July 21/69 to inspect work done. The rate is
 \$20.00 per day, \$250.00 Service, Hotel and other
 fore expenses.

Yours truly
 J. Ellis

JUN 23 1969
 SHERIFF'S OFFICE
 EDMONTON, ALTA.

There was no envelope in the archives which might have given us a clue as to his residence. Notice that Ellis now charged a fee for hangings of \$250 plus \$20 per day plus all expenses. We do not have evidence of what Ellis charged if he travelled to an execution which was then commuted at the last minute. No doubt this would have happened on occasion before capital punishment was finally abolished in 1976. Until abolition, even the killers of police or prison guards continued to have their death sentences commuted during the 1970's.

The next interview with the out-of-work hangman was by Mark Bonokowski of the *Hamilton Spectator* in March of 1975.³⁴ The journalist went through Sheriff Ambrose to contact Ellis, and no doubt for a fee, Ellis agreed to meet Bonokowski at a hotel in Kingston, Ontario. The journalist wrote his article after

³⁴ Mark Bonokowski, "Travelling Salesman Moonlights- He's Also Our Public Hangman," *Hamilton Spectator* (29 March 1975) at 22.

the interview and asserted that Ellis was 54 years old, five feet eight inches tall, and heavy set. Again, the story was told about how his wife and children did not know his sideline because he was a travelling salesman. However, in this interview he claimed to be working out of Montreal. His body count was 14, which tallies more or less with our estimate, but is different from the 18 he claimed in the Kennedy interview in 1965. He claimed to have never bungled any of the 14 cases. As is usually the case with all our hangmen, one cannot trust any information they provide. Here Ellis asserted that he had witnessed hangings as an Australian army officer following the Nuremburg trials. Again, showing ignorance as to the history of capital punishment, he stated that “Ellis was one of Canada’s first hangmen... He was the man who developed the first gallows. One which worked in the reverse of today’s. A weight, equal to the man’s own weight, was placed on the trap door. When the weight fell, it yanked the condemned man up. When he came to a stop, his neck was broken.” The errors are numerous here. Radcliffe was not called Ellis, and he had nothing to do with the invention of the reverse gallows, and the description of such gallows is completely wrong in terms of the “trap door” and the “equal weight.”

According to the interview, John Ellis “began his apprenticeship in 1951 under the predecessor – a man then ailing from heart disease.” Ellis went on to explain how he got the job of hangman, for what it is worth:

Q. How does one become a hangman? And why?

A: Quite by accident... In 1951, I was a personal friend of the late sheriff, Col. J. D. Conover, and during a party he explained to me he was in a ‘very awkward position.’ He had to advertise for a hangman to replace the man who was sick. He told me he had to place an ad, and he didn’t quite know how to word it. I told him I had seen the procedure done. There really wasn’t much to it. You see a friend in a jam and you help him out. It’s that simple. So I took the job.³⁵

This is the first we have heard of Branchaud having heart disease as early as 1951, if indeed Ellis is referring to him. Ellis put on a hood and submitted to a photograph for the newspaper interview:³⁶

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*



About a year later in February 1976, on the eve of the Parliamentary debates that would finally abolish the death penalty, John Ellis, wearing the hood, was interviewed on the television program, *Take 30*, hosted by Mary Lou Finlay. The interviewer was Paul Soles, and the interview is now available on YouTube, as well as in the National Archives.³⁷ John Ellis, supporting capital punishment, asserted that the people should vote on the issue, rather than Members of Parliament, and that if the public decided the issue, hangings would take place. Those who were opposed had never witnessed hangings and if they had they would see how humane the process was. Ellis, holding a noose, asserted again that death was instantaneous. Then Ellis

³⁷ CBC, *Take 30* (25 February 1976), National Archives, VI 8201-0081 & VI 8004-0001 GAD OFD547, online: YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vIRtOaQdAA&list=WL&index=23> [accessed 17 August 2024].

made the ludicrous statement that “the heart will beat maybe 20, maybe 40 seconds, but no longer.” This is obviously false. Even in “good” hangings, where the neck is broken, the victim’s heart may beat for many minutes. When we read accounts that death was not proclaimed until 20 minutes or 40 minutes, we may imply that perhaps the condemned person was strangled to death, but routinely the accounts of hangings mention 6, 8, 10, 12 etc. minutes before death was pronounced. Rarely do you have death pronounced in terms of lack of heart beats in a few minutes after the drop. Never in a few seconds.

As Parliament was voting on abolition in June 1976, Sheriff Ambrose, was also interviewed, and confirmed that although Ellis, who lived in Ontario, had not hanged anyone for about 13 years, he had been paid a yearly retainer, which continued at the present.³⁸ Ellis was also interviewed by pay phone. He now claimed to be a 42-year-old Australian, married with three children, who was planning to write a book about the 15 executions he had performed.³⁹

III. BERMUDA

After capital punishment was abolished in Canada, John Ellis travelled to Bermuda to hang two black men on December 2, 1977. One of them had been convicted of politically motivated murders involving the assassination of the police commissioner in 1972 and the assassination of the governor of the island and his aide in 1973. The other man was convicted of murdering several white shop owners. The two men, Burrows and Tacklyn, were the last people to be executed anywhere under British rule, and the executions took place at the prison under heavy security with all access to the prison blocked within five miles.⁴⁰ No mention was made of the Canadian connection, with only a reference that the hangman had been “imported from

³⁸ “Ready to erect gallows,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (22 June 1976) at 62; “Hangman is ready if he’s needed again,” *Hamilton Spectator* (22 June 1976) at 4.

³⁹ “Canada’s executioner plans to write book telling how 15 died,” *Toronto Star* (23 June 1976) at 20.

⁴⁰ “Two Murderers Hanged in Bermuda,” *Hawaii Tribune-Herald* (2 December 1977) at 2.

overseas,"⁴¹ and "the government refused to say where he came from."⁴² There were riots and fire bombings all night preceding the hangings.⁴³ Despite a dusk-to-dawn curfew, the riots continued the night after the hangings, with 14 factories and stores burned, while tourists were confined to their hotels.⁴⁴ The riots continued for a third day after the hangings, and ultimately the deaths of several tourists and a hotel staff worker in an arson fire at a hotel were linked to the unrest.⁴⁵ The riots were basically over by the time British troops arrived to reinforce the local army and police forces.⁴⁶ It may have been calm, but the underlying racial issues between the majority blacks and the white settler society lay simmering under the surface.⁴⁷

The Canadian connection with all of this would have been suppressed but for the fact that Ellis had trouble when he flew back to Canada the same day after hanging the two men in the morning of December 2, 1977. The story as to his return did not appear in the newspapers till more than a month later. Ellis, said to be 57 years old, was stopped by Canadian immigration officers at the Toronto airport. Numerous papers reported:

RCMP Inspector Lorne Wagner said Ellis lacked papers identifying him as a Canadian citizen when he returned to Toronto and that Ellis then attempted to gain entry by telling immigration officers he was an undercover agent with the RCMP. However, the plot

⁴¹ "Riots Hit Bermuda," *Toronto Star* (2 December 1977) at 1 and 3; "Two Men Face Execution," *Boston Globe* (2 December 1977) at 2.

⁴² "Two Hanged in Bermuda," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (3 December 1977) 1 and 2, at 2.

⁴³ "Two Blacks Hanged in Bermuda," *Ottawa Journal* (2 December 1977) at 1 and 2.

⁴⁴ "Bermuda Tourists Dance as Blacks Torch Buildings," *Toronto Star* (3 December 1977) at 1 and 4; "Bermuda Declares Emergency," *Boston Globe* (3 December 1977) at 1 and 6; "Bermuda Blazes Erupt Despite Hanging Curfew," *Vancouver Sun* (3 December 1977) at 3.

⁴⁵ "Fatal Fire Linked to Arsonists," *Oregon Statesman* (5 January 1978) at 24; James McKey, "What the Riots Mean for Bermuda," *Baltimore Sun* (11 December 1977) at K2.

⁴⁶ "150 U.K. Troops Flown to Bermuda," *Toronto Star* (4 December 1977) at 1; "British Troops Land," *New York Times* (5 December 1977) at 1; "Quiet Returns," *Ottawa Citizen* (5 December 1977) at 1.

⁴⁷ George Esper, "Hangings Polarize Troubled Paradise," *Ottawa Journal* (6 December 1977) at 14; "Third of U.K. Troops Leave," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* (6 December 1977) at 16.

backfired when his name was run through a special RCMP security check. "We finally verified that he was a Canadian citizen," Wagner said in an interview. "Immigration was satisfied, and the man was allowed back into Canada. We couldn't lay charges for impersonating one of our men unless we were certain he was passing himself off in the role of a police officer. We couldn't confirm his exact words to the immigration officer.

In a phone interview.... Ellis said the Bermuda government reached him through RCMP channels in Ottawa... Ellis said an RCMP inspector met him last April in a Kingston, Ontario, hotel and arranged the passage to Bermuda. Included in the package was a special clearance number and the clandestine cover of an RCMP agent, he said. However, authorities in Ottawa said they knew nothing about the arrangement and Wagner said the scenario was "too much like James Bond" to bear any credence. Ottawa may have made the initial contact, but I can't see it going beyond that," Wagner said.⁴⁸

In the interview Ellis claimed that the hangings went off without a hitch. He also verified that he was still paid a retainer by the federal government even after the abolition of capital punishment. This, of course, was another lie, as it was the Ontario government, through Sheriff Ambrose, that kept him on a retainer. Ellis stated, "The government spends money everywhere else on nothing, why not me?" "Besides, I think you will find capital punishment coming back to Canada and coming back soon."⁴⁹

The *Toronto Star* reported that Sheriff Ambrose did not know about the hanging till later.⁵⁰

The idea that the hangings went off without a hitch was likely another lie. The *Washington Post* reported:

According to inmates and trustees, Burrows and Tacklyn had been unable for weeks to keep their food down. As a result, they said, when the hangman's trapdoor gave way beneath Burrows, his weight- now only 80 pounds- was not enough to make the noose snap his neck.

⁴⁸ "Canadian Hangman was Executioner in Bermuda," *Regina Leader-Post* (10 January 1978) at 1; *Kingston Whig-Standard* at 1; *Vancouver Sun* at A3; *Ottawa Journal* at 2; *Montreal Gazette* (11 January 1978) at 5; *Windsor Star* (11 January 1978) at 12; *Calgary Albertan* (11 January 1978) at 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ "Canadian Hangman did job in Bermuda," *Toronto Star* (10 January 1978) at 7.

He remained alive, dangling and wrenching about pathetically, for several minutes before losing consciousness, they said.⁵¹

IV. STILL ON RETAINER TILL 1985- 23 YEARS AFTER THE LAST HANGING AND 8 YEARS SINCE ABOLITION:

Ontario was still paying the hangman, even if it was a modest amount, long after abolition as confirmed by Ambrose in September of 1978. Ambrose justified this because capital punishment might be reinstated and if it did, "I'd sure hate to find someone else." Ambrose noted that Ellis was "getting pretty foxy" about being paid for interviews, and "making quite a thing of it."⁵²

Once again Kingston was the site for an interview with the hangman in January of 1979 for the *Montreal Gazette*.⁵³ Now Ellis claimed to be 58 years old, a former pilot with the Royal Australian Air Force, who came to Canada with his wife five years after the war ended. He was now the father of three grown children and earned his living by travelling across Ontario demonstrating and selling heavy machinery, bulldozers and cranes. In the interview he told yet another story about his conversation with a friend, the sheriff of Toronto:

"We were at a military banquet and the sheriff told me the hangman, a Montreal bricklayer, had had two heart attacks and was in serious physical condition," Ellis recalled sipping a rum and Coke. "He brought up the question of where would he find a person to carry on." I said, "Well, I think if I was to go with him as an apprentice, I would be willing to carry on the role of justice." ...Ellis said he attended three hangings with the former hangman... He also "took a course on anatomy, specifically on vertebrae and such things as nerves," he said.

Supposedly Ellis was still paid a reduced retainer of \$200 a month and he limped into a prison a couple of times a month, under the guise of being a prison inspector, and practiced

⁵¹ Courtland Milloy, "Deaths 'Hurry Independence,'" *Washington Post*, reprinted in *Vancouver Sun* (15 December 1977) at C5.

⁵² "He sits and waits," *Ottawa Citizen* (6 September 1978) at 1.

⁵³ Eddie Collister, "Hangman is paid \$200 every month," *Montreal Gazette* (13 January 1979) at 1 and 2.

hanging in the execution room with sandbags to stay in shape for the return of capital punishment. The limp was the result of his right leg being injured when a drunk rammed his vehicle. Ellis repeated his support for capital punishment and the idea that any bum could now kill you for purposes of getting a warm bed in jail. His body count was now 20, give or take one, in Canada, the United States, and Bermuda.

Even after Sheriff Ambrose died in 1980,⁵⁴ the sheriff's office continued to pay Ellis a monthly retainer and this was finally stopped after the provincial auditor's department revealed the anomaly in 1985.⁵⁵ It was scandalous that for more than 8 years after capital punishment was abolished, Ellis continued to be paid. For our purposes, however, this news indicates that Ellis was still alive in 1985.

Numerous articles about witnessing hangings were written in 1987 during the period when a free vote was taken in Parliament to reinstitute capital punishment. One article about the hanging of Lucas and Turpan stated that Ellis was now 53 years of age and retired and was a "snowbird" to Florida in the winter months.⁵⁶ No mention was made as to where the age and "snowbird" information came from.

In the magazine, *True Crime*, hardly a reliable source of information, Matthew Spicer, wrote an article in 2017 on the last hangings in Bermuda.⁵⁷ Here Ellis was presented as a short, stocky, somewhat overweight man, born in Australia in 1920, who ran a trailer park in Ontario, and had hanged 15 people. The trouble at the border story was repeated and the author now claimed that as late as 1987 the state of Delaware needed a hangman and called upon Ellis. However, "Mrs. Ellis answered the phone to say her husband was seriously ill after major brain surgery to remove a life-threatening aneurysm. Officialdom has since heard no more of John Ellis."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ "York Sheriff Dies," *Waterloo Region Record* (24 June 1980) at 37.

⁵⁵ "Hangman Makes a Killing," *Ottawa Citizen* (29 November 1985) at 1.

⁵⁶ Lindsay Scotten, "Double Hanging in Don Jail," *Toronto Star* (27 April 1987) at 18.

⁵⁷ "Two on the Gallows," *True Crime: Detective Monthly* (December 2017) at 38-40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid* at 40.

It is indeed likely that officials in Delaware hired, or tried to hire, John Ellis in 1987 to hang Billy Bailey, who chose to be hanged rather than have a lethal injection. However, after new gallows were built, and arrangements made for the execution, including the hiring of a hangman for \$1000, the Delaware Supreme Court postponed the hanging. Thereafter, after many legal proceedings, Bailey was finally hanged in 1996, with Warden Robert Snyder as the hangman. Bailey was the last person to be executed by hanging in the United States.⁵⁹ Back in 1987, it was reported that the same undisclosed man who agreed to do the hanging, also agreed to activate the system that administered a lethal injection if needed for other death row inmates when their time was up.⁶⁰

There are some other journalistic accounts about the possibility that Canadian hangman John Ellis was involved in the potential Delaware hanging. One writer stated that the hired hangman was, "a Canadian backwoodsman who could only be contacted through notes left on a tree stump by the local Mounties."⁶¹ When it was time for the state to look for a hangman again, Fred Silverman, the state's attorney general in 1991 "had heard rumors about a Canadian hangman who may or may not be available."⁶²

The state of Washington was also looking for a hangman when several death row inmates chose hanging over lethal injection, and initial mention was made of possibly hiring an experienced hangman from outside the United States.⁶³ The Director of State Prisons testifying before a legislative committee in 1989, allegedly stated, "I found only one person on this continent who has professional (hanging) experience, and he had

⁵⁹ www.deathdenaltyinfo.org; "Delaware Killer Executed," *L. A. Times* (26 January 1996) at 14.

⁶⁰ "Execution Chamber Almost Ready," *Wilmington NewsJournal* (17 November 1987) at 1 and 4.

⁶¹ Kurt Heine, "The Deliverance of Death in Delaware," *Philadelphia News* (16 August 1991) at 5.

⁶² Tom Tiede, "State of Delaware Lacks a Hangman," *Culpeper Star-Exponent* (1 March 1991) at 4.

⁶³ "Hired Hangman for Campbell to Remain Mystery," *Everett Herald* (24 March 1990) at 9; "Dodd Wants to Hang; State Has No Hangman," *Vancouver Columbian* (19 July 1990) at 5.

a nervous breakdown last year.”⁶⁴ So was he referring to our hangman? In the end, sexual psychopath child serial killer, Westley Dodd, was hanged in Walla Walla prison on January 5, 1993, the first hanging in the United States since 1965. The execution was performed by a team of prison employees, so we know that our hangman, assuming he was still alive, was not involved.⁶⁵ The following year, serial killer Charles Campbell was also hanged at Walla Walla, before Washington changed the law, so that only lethal injection was available for death penalties in the state.⁶⁶

V. IDENTITY?

Taking all of this information together, from a hangman quite capable of deception, as well as the likelihood of mistakes made by journalists, we are left with a lot of contradictions. He was born around 1920, 1926, or as late as 1934? He was born in Canada or Australia? He served in the RCAF or was it the Australian Air Force? He was a witness to hangings in Nuremburg? He was a mechanical engineer, travelling salesman, trailer park operator? He lived on the border between provinces, or Montreal, or Kingston? His body count was 18, 14, 15, 20? Was he an apprentice to Branchaud?

My inclination is to discount the Australian connection. After listening to the 1976 television interview, I came to the conclusion that there was no Australian accent. Ellis sounded like an ordinary English-speaking Canadian from Ontario.

One of the most interesting articles mentioning John Ellis was written back in 1979 by D. Gordon Mott, a forester living in Maine, who was originally from Dalhousie, New Brunswick, where a hanging took place.⁶⁷ His father was on the inquest jury that witnessed the hanging of sexual sadist Richard, the last

⁶⁴ “A good hangman may not exist anymore,” *Montana Standard* (21 January 1989) at 1.

⁶⁵ “Last hanging in America?” *The Olympian* (3 January 1993) at 1 and 4.

⁶⁶ “House Approves Lethal Injection,” *Bellingham Herald* (6 February 1996) at 6.

⁶⁷ D Gordon Mott, “Two Wrongs,” *Bangor Daily News* (16 February 1979) at 12 [Mott].

hanging in New Brunswick in December 1957.⁶⁸ A neighbor was the attending doctor, also present at the hanging. The author spoke to both his father and the doctor about the hanging ten days later. Based on this information, Mott wrote:

Near the appointed day, the hangman arrived in town. He turned out to be a World War II hero with a record of distinction in the two-man submarine raids in the Norwegian fjords and in commando raids and *was the son of the former hangman in Canada*. They were both known as "John Ellis"- evidently an old custom. He purchased his rope at the local hardware store, socialized at the legion, and had a retinue of young boys following him on the streets of the town.⁶⁹

Mott went on to argue that witnessing the hanging had a profound effect on his father, and that despite the lust for revenge that surrounded the town, the cold-blooded killing of offenders was another wrong that corrupts the hangman and the community.

What are we to make of this? Apparently both Australians and Canadians served in the British Royal Navy midget submarine program.⁷⁰ But it is much more likely that this was just another tall tale by the hangman, and a movie about the midget submarine program and the deployment in the Norwegian fjords was playing at local theatres at the time.⁷¹

However, as to the hearsay information that John Ellis claimed to be the son of a previous hangman, we might at least give some thought to this possibility. One of the sons of Arthur Ellis, namely Alexander Everett English, was born in 1903 and died at the age of 88 in Victoria in 1992, and his wife Annie Louise English died at the age of 93 in Victoria in 1998.⁷² Given the reported age of John Ellis #2, while varying from different reports, we may assume this son of Arthur Ellis was much too old to be John Ellis #2.

However, recall that hangman John Ellis No.1, namely John Bernard Moore and his wife Gertrude Pratt were listed in the

⁶⁸ Hustak, *supra* note 31 at 63-77.

⁶⁹ Mott, *supra* note 67.

⁷⁰ See for example, Ray Worledge, "Australians in Midget Submarines," online: <<https://navyhistory.au>> [<https://perma.cc/2S9A-9VGY>]

⁷¹ The movie was "Above Us The Waves," 1955. See <<https://www.imdb.com>> [<https://perma.cc/59L4-9ELX>].

⁷² BC Registration of Death Certificates.

1931 Census as having a newborn son, William Bernard Moore. Someone born in 1931 would not be old enough to have anything to do with World War II service. But then perhaps all of the accounts of army service in all the interviews with Ellis were just made up by Ellis? Most of the age estimates or statements placed the hangman as being born around 1920, but several have him as much younger and born as late as 1934. William B. Moore is a common name, and we have no information on the life of the son, William Bernard Moore, as to marriage or death or anything else, so it is possible that he became John Ellis No.2, but we have no proof.