

Chapter 2

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

In the twenty-year period from 1890 through 1909, there were 110 hangings in Canada.¹ Of those, 80 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 simply stood on a platform with a rope around their neck, which ran through a series of pulleys atop the scaffold. At the other end of the rope was a heavy weight, lifted off the ground. When the pin or cord holding the weight was released, the weight would drop, jerking the victim upward and then downward, 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

¹ For a list of all the executions in Canada see <https://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org> [https://perma.cc/M64W-UE98].

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

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 bumbles.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 Radcliffe in that case as follows:⁸

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

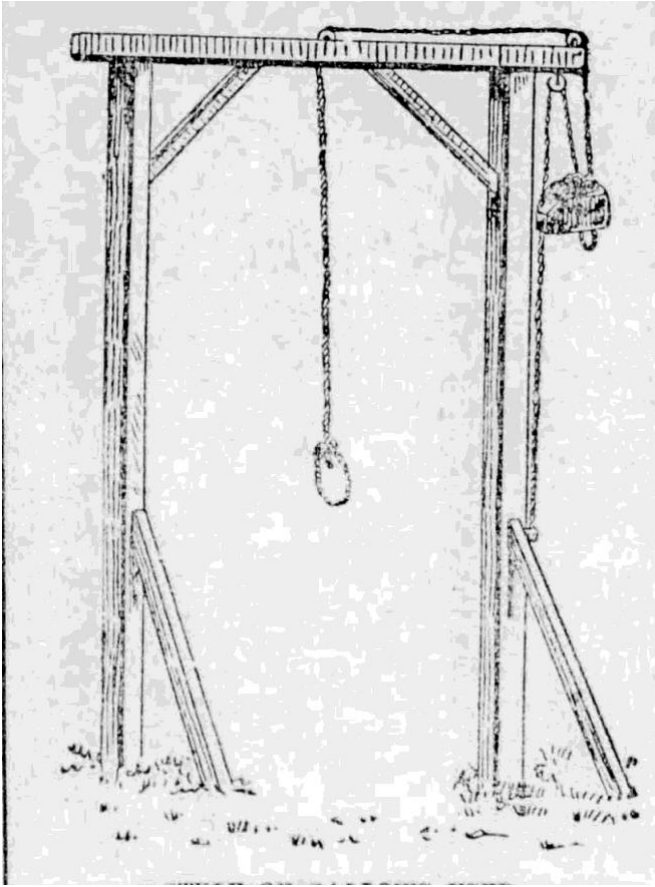
⁴ Jeremy Agnew, *Crime, Justice and Retribution in the American West- 1850-1900* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017) at 221.

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* (23 December 1905) at 3.

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

⁸ This from *Manitoba Free Press* (20 November 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 1870 in the hanging of John Munro in New Brunswick, and as would usually be the case with the counterweight system, the hanging was bungled.⁹ The same can be said for the 1883 execution of Hughes in Saint John, New

⁹ “Execution of John Munroe,” *St. John’s Morning Freeman* (17 February 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 1889, which took place on the same scaffold used for the Neil hanging.¹² The sheriff selected a man from Toronto (not Radcliffe) 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 Smith,” a farmhand just trying to make \$50 to support his family.

¹⁰ Banner, *supra* note 3 at 53.

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

¹² “The Doomed Harvey,” *Ottawa Citizen* (28 November 1889) at 1.

¹³ “Harvey,” *Ottawa Journal* (29 November 1889) at 1.

¹⁴ “Execution of Harvey,” *Vancouver World* (30 November 1889) at 1.

¹⁵ *Ottawa Citizen* (2 December 1889) at 4.

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

¹⁷ Edward Butts, *Murder: 12 True Stories of Homicide in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011) at Ch 4, “The Harvey Murders,” at 51-70, quote at 69.

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, Mowat 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 the new method was once again a failure, as Kane's neck was not broken, the knot had slipped to the back of his 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. The masked hangman, an Englishman who had allegedly been in the country for four years, stated that he would apply to be the professional hangman if the government created the position.²⁴

Radcliffe 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, Radcliffe now made no

¹⁸ *Ottawa Citizen* (30 November 1889) at 6.

¹⁹ "A New Government Office," *Kingston Whig* (14 January 1879) at 2; "Bungled Hangings," *Kingston Whig* (1 July 1882) at 3; "Bungled," *Kingston Whig* (11 June 1884) at 2.

²⁰ "Neck Stretched," *Tribune* (12 February 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* (12 February 1890); "Sprung into Space," *Manitoba Free Press* (13 February 1890) at 1.

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

²⁴ "The Toronto Hanging," *Montreal Gazette* (13 February 1890) at 8.

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 and smoking a cigar,²⁹ proudly displayed the gallows to multitudes of people.³⁰ He later claimed that Davis’s neck was particularly muscular, but that he had given the 350 pound weight an added drop length and also included a 6 foot slack in the rope. 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 with Birchall in Woodstock, Ontario, in November of 1890. Once again, Radclive offered his services to the sheriff, writing that, “I feel much pleasure in offering my services to do it.” The phrase “much pleasure” struck at least one reporter as “horribly heartless.”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 received \$50 for each hanging, plus expenses. He also alleged to have once admiringly watched an executioner swiftly behead 13

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

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

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

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

²⁹ “Re Davis,” *Kingston Whig* (20 November 1890) at 3.

³⁰ *Ottawa Citizen* (20 June 1890) at 1.

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

³² “Birchall,” *Brantford Expositor* (3 October 1890) at 4.

kneeling Chinese men with a sword, and then 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, Radcliffe 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

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

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

³⁵ This from the *Owen Sound Times* (13 November 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

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, Radcliffe at some point held the ankles of the man to prevent further convulsions, and the medical men

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

³⁷ "The Executioner," *Ottawa Journal* (14 November 1890) at 1.

³⁸ "Hanged." *Hamilton Spectator* (14 November 1890) at 1.

³⁹ "Birchall's End," *Owen Sound Times* (14 November 1890) at 1.

⁴⁰ "A Maudlin Hangman," *Philadelphia Times* (15 November 1890) at 1.

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 of 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 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

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

⁴² *Huddersfield Chronicle* (15 November 1890) at 8.

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

⁴⁴ “Birchall,” *Philadelphia Times* (15 November 1890) at 1.

⁴⁵ “Echoes of the Execution,” *Hamilton Spectator* (15 November 1890) at 1.

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 Radcliffe 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, Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe had an extraordinary and intense interest in the ladies when he was employed at the Sunnyside Boat Club, especially those who wore a 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 of the clothing of the victim for public display by Radcliffe.⁵¹

The sheriff in Sherbrooke, Quebec hired Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe had also agreed to be the hangman for Arthur Day in Welland, Ontario, on December 18. He arrived and then

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Buffalo Commercial* (15 November 1890) at 10.

⁴⁸ "What Ratley Says," *Ottawa Journal* (17 November 1890) at 4.

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

⁵⁰ "The Public Hangman," *Ottawa Journal* (7 January 1899) at 6.

⁵¹ "Against the Hanging," *Kingston Weekly Whig* (20 November 1890) at 4.

⁵² "Choked on the Scaffold," *Montreal Gazette* (13 December 1890) at 6.

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

While Radclive 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 Radclive used 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

⁵³ "Re Day," *Ottawa Citizen* (18 December 1890) at 1.

⁵⁴ "Re Day," *Buffalo Morning Express* (19 December 1890) at 1

⁵⁵ *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* (19 December 1890) at 2.

⁵⁶ Re Day, *Hamilton Spectator* (25 December 1890) at 1.

⁵⁷ Pfeifer & Leyton-Brown, *supra* note 2.

⁵⁸ "Dispatches," *Victoria Times* (19 December 1890) at 1.

⁵⁹ Re Lamontagne, *Ottawa Journal* (19 December 1890) at 1; *Hamilton Spectator* (19 December 1890) at 1.

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

At the next hanging in L’Original, Ontario, in June of 1891, Radcliffe again used the jerk gallows. Once 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. Yet Radcliffe 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. Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe, “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 Radcliffe could now

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

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

⁶³ “Laroque Hanged,” *Ottawa Journal* (4 June 1891) at 4.

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

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

call himself the official hangman of Canada, the federal government was not in charge of the hangings, as they were a provincial responsibility. As a result, Radclive had no monopoly on executions in the provinces. Nevertheless, he was considered the official hangman of Ontario, given the province's role in creating 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 whenever occasion arises..."⁶⁶ As far as I can determine, B.C. did not hire Radclive until 1899.

While Radclive 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, Radclive 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 Radclive at that point was making a decent living.

After he had been appointed official hangman, Radclive appears to have relished his status as a celebrity. There were only two hangings in 1892, both in December. Radclive 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,

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

⁶⁷ *Windsor Star* (14 December 1894) at 1 and 3; "A Proud Hangman," *Ottawa Citizen* (24 June 1899) at 10; *McPherson Republican* (5 August 1899) at 12.

⁶⁸ "Proud Hangman," *Ottawa Citizen* (24 June 1899) at 10.

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

Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe could be found at 128 Pearson Avenue in Toronto.⁷⁴ It would appear that after gaining the salary as official hangman, Radcliffe had moved from 132 Lisgar to a better location.

When Radcliffe 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

⁶⁹ "Arrival of Radcliffe," *Moncton Transcript* (29 November 1892) at 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ "Hanged," *Montreal Star* (1 December 1892) at 5.

⁷² "Buck is Hanged," *Moncton Transcript* (1 December 1892) at 1.

⁷³ "Executioner," *Montreal Star* (27 October 1892) at 8.

⁷⁴ "Executioner," *Montreal Star* (29 October 1892) at 8.

⁷⁵ *Ottawa Journal* (16 December 1892) at 5.

⁷⁶ "Slavin's Last Days," *Ottawa Citizen* (14 December 1892) at 2.

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 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, Radclive had been hired to hang Veney in Sandwich, (Windsor), Ontario, in May 1893, but the sentence was commuted at the last minute.⁷⁹

When Radclive 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 Radclive’s outrageous behavior. As Radclive was leaving the hotel for the jail, he was met by three men who used very strong language calling him a murderer. Radclive went to the police and the men were apparently going to be arrested. However, Radclive left town after being induced not to prosecute the men whom he claimed

⁷⁷ “Died Instantly,” *Montreal Star* (16 December 1892) at 1.

⁷⁸ “Double Execution,” *Vancouver News Advertiser* (17 January 1893) at 1.

⁷⁹ “Commuted,” *Hamilton Spectator* (15 May 1893) at 6.

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

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

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

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 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 Radcliffe was the executioner of Stroebel in Victoria on January 30, 1894,⁸⁵ newspapers that actually sent reporters to the execution made no mention of Radcliffe. 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 Radcliffe! 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

⁸³ *Ottawa Journal* (15 December 1893) at 7.

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

⁸⁵ For example, *Windsor Star* (31 January 1894) at 3; *Kingston Whig* (1 February 1894) at 8; *Manitoba Free Press* (30 January 1894) at 1

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

⁸⁷ “Stroebel,” *Nanaimo News* (30 January 1894) at 1.

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

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

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

The next execution in British Columbia was in August 1894 in New Westminster. Archival evidence indicates that Radclive applied for the job. Radclive 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 Radclive travelling all the way across the country and back. The hangman at New Westminster was elaborately disguised, wearing a sack over his head and a stiff hat to conceal his height, long rubber boots to hide his gait, and blackened hands 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. After the hanging, he 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

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

⁹¹ Typed letter from Radclive (24 July 1894) GR-0429-Box 03-File 02, 1894, BC Archives.

⁹² Provincial Police to Deputy Attorney General (14 August 1894); *ibid.*

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

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

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

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 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 Radcliffe arrived back in Regina in January 1901, the local press reminded citizens that Radcliffe 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 “shooting, hunting, fishing, etc.”⁹⁹ We have no evidence that he ever had a regular job after being fired from the boating club. There was an earlier report in 1894 that Radcliffe was now being paid a retainer in Ontario of \$1,200 a year, taken from the budget of all the sheriffs, which Radcliffe would receive irrespective of the number of hangings.¹⁰⁰ Whether telling the truth or not, Radcliffe now denied this report.¹⁰¹

In Winnipeg, on the way back from the hanging in Regina, Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe 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.

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

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

⁹⁸ *Regina Leader-Post* (10 January 1901) at 6.

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

¹⁰⁰ *Kingston News* (11 April 1894) at 2.

¹⁰¹ High Executioner, *supra* note 99.

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

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

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 fall.¹⁰⁴ At the last moment, MacWherrell's hanging was postponed until after the trial of another man connected to the case, and Radclive 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 Radclive in Toronto. MacWherrell's hanging was rescheduled to the end of October. Again, Radclive travelled to Brampton but at the last minute, the sentence was commuted to life in prison and Radclive returned to Toronto.¹⁰⁵

The second hanging Radclive completed in 1894 was Truskey in Sandwich (Windsor) Ontario in December 1894. Radclive 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. Radclive 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 repeated the 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

¹⁰⁴ "A Respite for MacWherrell," *Kingston News* (30 May 1894).

¹⁰⁵ "Justice Miscarries," *Toronto Star* (29 September 1894) at 1.

¹⁰⁶ "Truskey," *Detroit Free Press* (13 December 1894) at 8.

¹⁰⁷ "Truskey Swings," *Windsor Star* (14 December 1894) at 1 and 3.

at and talked about.”¹⁰⁸ The Truskey case received extraordinary publicity with huge numbers of spectators allowed to watch the hanging. When Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe 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 Truskey’s neck was allegedly broken.¹¹⁰ In this case, Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe, 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

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ “Truskey Swings,” *Windsor Record* (14 December 1894) at 1

¹¹⁰ *Windsor Star* (15 December 1894) at 3.

¹¹¹ *Montreal Gazette* (15 December 1894) at 2.

¹¹² *Windsor Star* (15 December 1894) at 4.

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

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

hangings for the year took place in Ontario, with Radclive 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 containing actual 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, Radclive used the drop gallows for the first time in Ontario, because Radclive 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 Radclive 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. It was noted that “he was suffering from an intolerable sample of swelled head.”¹²⁰ An American reported observing Radclive’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 little wit floating around on a sea of booze at the mercy of his own inexhaustible supply of wind.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ “Hanged,” *Owen Sound Times* (6 June 1895) at 2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The train returning to Toronto with Radcliffe 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

Radcliffe 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: the execution of Wheeler at Digby, Nova Scotia, in September. Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe 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 the uncertainty of train travel in this period, the hangman would not have time to travel across the country for the second hanging. Radcliffe chose to perform the hanging in New Brunswick, using a jerk up gallows,¹²⁷ while a “John Smith” from Calgary¹²⁸ carried

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

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

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

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

¹²⁶ “Wheeler Hanged,” *Moncton Transcript* (8 September 1896) at 1; *Halifax Mail* (8 September 1896) at 1.

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

¹²⁸ Hangman was from Calgary according to *Calgary Herald* (31 August 1897) at 4.

out Charcoal's execution in Macleod using a traditional drop. The Macleod execution was a success.¹²⁹

The New Brunswick hanging, on the other hand, was bungled by Radclive, though you would not know it from most of the press accounts. Radclive 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. 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 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 following the botched execution of Harvey. He claimed his first hanging was Kane and that he had now hanged 30 to 40 people, everyone in Canada except Wheeler. This was a bald-faced lie, of course, given that he had conducted only 16 of the 26 hangings carried out in Canada since 1890. He claimed he had never bungled a case and confirmed that the federal government paid him a retainer, while the local jurisdiction only had to pay his expenses. 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 the bill for his expenses was \$65, which the sheriff had paid to him. The sheriff then 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

¹²⁹ "Charcoal," *Fort Macleod Gazette* (19 March 1897) at 1.

¹³⁰ "Sullivan's Last Day," *Fredericton Gleaner* (11 March 1897) at 5.

¹³¹ "Interview," *St. John Telegraph-Journal* (12 March 1897) at 3.

¹³² "Interview," *Moncton Transcript* (12 March 1897) at 1 and 4.

¹³³ *Moncton Times* (10 January 1898) at 1.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

instantaneous, and Radcliffe 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 later emerged, written by the Chief of Police of Dorchester. He wrote that Radcliffe, surrounded by a huge crowd that he entertained in the bar, drank the night away before the hanging.¹³⁷ Many of the spectators who attended the execution the next morning were intoxicated, and Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe appearing without all his equipment necessary for the hanging. When the equipment was retrieved, it was discovered that although Radcliffe had tested the gallows, he had left the task of attaching the ropes and weight until the morning of the hanging. The ropes were twisted and had to be untangled – an effort assisted by some intoxicated bystanders, which caused further delay.

Radcliffe then failed to secure the noose tightly around the victim, who had not been placed under the center of the beam. As a result, 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 front of the neck as the victim continued to breathe for several minutes. His neck was not broken. He eventually suffocated to death by hanging from the back of his neck. When the body was cut down, Radcliffe removed the pin from the necktie, 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. An angry Radcliffe had an altercation with the Chief that ended when a deputy took the items, preventing Radcliffe from keeping them to sell as relics.¹³⁸

This was the last time that Radcliffe used the jerk gallows. It was also his only hanging in 1897. The third hanging of that year took place in Nelson, B.C., in August. Again, the drop gallows

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

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

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

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

shipped from Kamloops were used, and the neck was reportedly broken.¹³⁹ The hangman was James Dupen, the Calgary tailor.¹⁴⁰

In January 1898, Radclive travelled to Cayuga, Ontario, 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, the woman’s sentence was commuted at the last moment, and a new trial was granted. Radclive 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, Radclive hanged an 18-year-old boy in Berlin, Ontario, using a drop gallows that was completely enclosed, so that 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 in a short-lived attempt at reform, was lodged in the jail rather than a hotel as he supervised the construction of the scaffold. Apparently, he did not seek notoriety in the bars. He 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

¹³⁹ See, *Vancouver News-Advertiser* (25 August 1897) at 1; *Victoria Times* at 1; *Vancouver World* at 4.

¹⁴⁰ As noted by the Sheriff of New Westminster who wanted to hire Dupin in 1899 instead of Radclive. See BC Archives, GR-0429 Box 04 File 04. 1899.

¹⁴¹ *Buffalo Evening Times* (20 January 1898) at 15.

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

¹⁴³ “New Trial,” *Buffalo Courier* (19 January 1898) at 1.

¹⁴⁴ “Ready to Drop,” *Buffalo News* (3 February 1898) at 2.

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

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 Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe.¹⁴⁹ Notation on the file indicates that he had recently moved from 210 Sorauren Avenue in Parkdale to 52 Fern Avenue in Parkdale. We have a sample of Radcliffe’s writing:¹⁵⁰

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

¹⁴⁷ *Weekly News-Record* (4 February 1898) at 1.

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

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

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

191/98
 Toronto
 February 21st 98
 52 Fern Ave

Sir

In answer to yours of the 18th I advised the Department of change of address as soon as I moved - and on several occasions my address has been on the back of my cheque. The Attorney General of Quebec had my address as far back as the Shookin case.

I remain Sir
 your obedient servant

J. B. Padeleur
 Esq.
 J. B. Padeleur
 Attorney

The second hanging in 1898 was back in Nelson, B.C., where the drop system was used successfully, with the victim's neck broken. The hangman was said to be a local Nelson man called "Holbrook,"¹⁵¹ but very likely it was the Calgary tailor again.

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

In May, Radcliffe 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 onto the roof of the jail, jail sheds, and other vantage points to witness the execution. The crowd was jeering and laughing, and Radcliffe launched a formal complaint, but we are not told with whom.¹⁵²

Over the course of the construction of the scaffold and the hanging, Radcliffe 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 Radcliffe's self-presentation to the journalist. The journalist admitted that Radcliffe'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 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

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

¹⁵³ "Hangman Radcliffe," *Kingston Whig-Standard* (28 Nov 1898) at 6; *Montreal Star* (31 December 1898) at 15; *Ottawa Journal* (7 January 1899) at 6.

¹⁵⁴ *Buffalo Morning Express* (15 December 1898) at 8.

we might conclude that Radclive 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 Radclive 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, Radclive, 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. Radclive was the hangman for 10 of them. At a double hanging in St. Scholastique, Quebec, in March, Radclive was refused 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 Radclive had to hang a woman, and a massive, unruly crowd assembled at the hanging, both inside and

¹⁵⁵ “Expert Executioner,” *Buffalo Morning Express* (15 December 1898) at 8.

¹⁵⁶ “Hanging of Hammond,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (15 September 1898) at 1.

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

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

¹⁵⁹ “Radcliffe Refused Accommodation,” *Ottawa Citizen* (8 March 1899) at 8.

¹⁶⁰ “Gallows Ready,” *Montreal Star* (7 March 1899) at 9.

¹⁶¹ “Two on the Gallows,” *Bradford Witness* (15 March 1899) at 2.

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

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, including some prior to 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

¹⁶² “Two Hanged,” *Ottawa Citizen* (10 March 1899) at 1 and 8.

¹⁶³ *Ibid* at 8.

¹⁶⁴ “City Comment,” *Toronto Star* (11 March 1899) at 4.

¹⁶⁵ “Prevost Hanged,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (17 March 1899) at 1; *Victoria Times* at 1; *Montreal Gazette* (18 March 1899) at 1.

¹⁶⁶ “Marion Brown Pays the Penalty,” *Bradford Witness* (25 May 1899) at 2.

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

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

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*.

effort of the double hanging in Winnipeg.¹⁷⁰ In Kamloops, using an 8-foot drop, Radclive broke the neck of the accused.¹⁷¹ While he may have performed well at the job, his reputation was not enhanced by his “outrageous behaviour” 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

What precisely was meant by “indecent” is left unclear – the writer apparently found the details too offensive to print.

Radclive was out of funds, and the sheriff telegraphed the Attorney General of British Columbia to send him money.¹⁷³ Thereafter, Radclive continued on to New Westminster to hang a man at the end of June. The sheriff of New Westminster did not want to hire Radclive, preferring to hire Dupan from Calgary instead.¹⁷⁴ However, since Radclive had already arrived, he got the job. He arrived from Kamloops weeks before the hanging, which was 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 attend.¹⁷⁶ However,

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

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

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

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

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* (7 June 1899) at 1.

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

since Radcliffe remained in B.C.,¹⁷⁷ a man calling himself “Thompson” from Toronto performed the drop in Hamilton. It was said to have been done just as well as if Radcliffe had done it himself.¹⁷⁸ The hangman wore a “heavy false whisker” and was said to be an Englishman who had previously hanged people in England.¹⁷⁹

Radcliffe remained in British Columbia for about a month until the hanging in New Westminster on June 30. It was reported that Radcliffe again performed the hanging without a hitch, dropping the slender victim 10 and a half feet.¹⁸⁰ Radcliffe 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.

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

¹⁷⁷ *Kingston News* (19 June 1899) at 8.

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

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

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

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

¹⁸² “Hanged,” *Halifax Mail* (1 August 1899) at 4.

¹⁸³ “Dawson’s First Hanging,” *Van World* (25 August 1899) 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.

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, Radclive 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 Radclive. 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 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 ten years and had certainly not broken every neck when using the jerk up gallows. Interestingly, the article noted that Radcliffe was now

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

¹⁸⁵ “The Penalty Paid,” *Brandon Sun* (28 December 1899) at 1.

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

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* (25 June 1899) at 15; *Cincinnati Enquirer* (1 July 1899) at 12; *New York Times Union* (7 July 1899) at 5 and many others. Then a new wave of articles later in *Kansas City Press* (28 July 1899) at 3; *Wichita Star* at 4; *McPherson Kansas Republican* (5 August 1899) at 12; and many others.

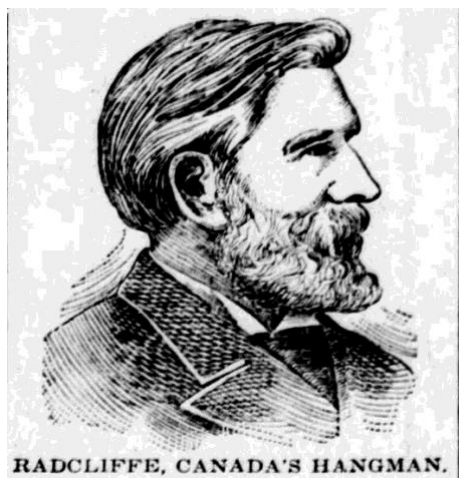
¹⁸⁸ “Hangman Radcliffe Has Pride in His Profession,” *Ottawa Citizen* (24 June 1899) at 10.

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

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 Radcliffe 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." Radcliffe 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. Radcliffe 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 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 Radclive’s career.