

## Chapter 3

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### “John Radcliffe”: “Descent into Hell” 1900-1911

In 1900, a journalist mentioned that Radcliffe may have been a hangman while serving in the English navy. Radcliffe also was quoted as telling the reporter, “I have absolutely no feeling towards convicted prisoners... I have a certain duty to perform and this I do to the best of my ability and with as little show as possible. That’s all there is to it. Haunted!” said the hangman with a hearty laugh, “Why should I be? Do you think any of her majesty’s judges are haunted? Why should I be?”<sup>1</sup> However, if Radcliffe, displaying psychopathic characteristics, proudly thought of himself as on top of the world at the beginning of the new century, it did not take long before he descended into drunken bungling and multiple expressions of regret. One might suggest that the next decade was a “descent into hell” for him emotionally. It is an open question, however, if the expressions of regret were genuinely felt, or just manipulative self-pity.

We will not review each hanging during the next dozen years but rather note some of the mishaps and scandals. In July 1900, he bungled a drop in Quebec City, when the victim was strangled rather than having their neck broken.<sup>2</sup> In November 1900, he wanted to cut off the ponytail of his Chinese victim in Vancouver to sell as a souvenir, which obviously outraged the Chinese community.<sup>3</sup> He was prevented from doing so by the Sheriff of New Westminster. Radcliffe had also arrived at the hanging in a drunken state and fumbled with the trap for ten seconds, causing

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<sup>1</sup> “Radcliffe, the Hangman,” *Vancouver Province* (13 November 1900) at 8.

<sup>2</sup> “Neck Not Broken,” *Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 1900) at 8; *Brantford Expositor*, (6 July 1900) at 1; “Dube Hanged,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (6 July 1900) at 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Victoria Colonist* (18 November 1900) at 1; *Vancouver Province* (24 November 1900) at 9.

the victim some extra psychological suffering.<sup>4</sup> It was noted, “The hangman was not in a fit condition to properly perform his duty. He had spent nearly the entire night drinking at a number of the Westminster bars and was very shaky on his pins when he went to his hotel about two this morning.”<sup>5</sup> Some editorial writer suggested that drunkenness was not to blame for the malfunction, but rather the expansion of the trap boards due to an overnight rain.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps hinting at his sexual proclivities, he gave the noose to a Westminster young lady.<sup>7</sup> He was now getting some bad press as headlines proclaimed, “Intoxicated Hangman Bungled.”<sup>8</sup> When Radclive read what the reporters had to say about him, he remarked in psychopathic fashion, “Never mind: I’ll get even with those fellows sometime.”<sup>9</sup> It was later reported that Radclive had been severely reprimanded for his conduct by the Minister of Justice.<sup>10</sup>

It seems the reprimand did not work. Radclive often appeared to be out of control. When he arrived in Hamilton, he was black and blue, and claimed that he was in several train accidents on the way back from British Columbia.<sup>11</sup> It is much more likely that Radclive was now having drunken altercations with people.

Arriving in Regina in January 1901, the local press reminded citizens that Radclive had been there in 1894 and, “after the execution he came into town, got drunk, and made himself obnoxious to many citizens.”<sup>12</sup> He now claimed that he had hanged over 100 people, from 14 different nationalities.<sup>13</sup>

We have some information as to Radclive’s financial arrangements with sheriffs in B.C. over the decade that he was hired for executions. In June 1901, he wrote to the sheriff of North

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<sup>4</sup> “Yip Luck Hanged,” *Free Press* (17 November 1900) at 7.

<sup>5</sup> “Yip Luck Hanged,” *Vancouver World* (16 November 1900) at 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Vancouver Province* (21 Dec 1900) at 6.

<sup>7</sup> “Lip Luck’s Queue,” *Van Semi-Weekly World* (23 November 1900) at 6.

<sup>8</sup> For example, *San Francisco Examiner* (17 November 1900) at 12.

<sup>9</sup> “Notes and Comments,” *Toronto Star* (11 December 1900) at 4.

<sup>10</sup> “Repulsive Radclive,” *Vancouver World* (21 March 1902) at 1.

<sup>11</sup> “Radcliffe in the East,” *Van Semi-Weekly World* (18 December 1900) at 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Regina Leader-Post* (10 January 1901) at 6.

<sup>13</sup> “Morrison Hanged,” *Kingston Whig-Standard* (17 January 1901) at 1; *Hamilton Spectator* at 1.

Kootenay demanding \$100 (said to be half the expenses) before he would take the job.<sup>14</sup> In December 1901, he wrote to the government agent in New Westminster asking for \$120 in advance for train fare and expenses before he would accept a job.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, sheriffs were not keen on sending Radcliffe advance money in cases where it was likely that a new trial would be granted or the sentence of death would be commuted. Presumably, Radcliffe might keep the advance even if he had not left for the hanging.<sup>16</sup> There are numerous letters in the B.C. Archives dealing with payments to Radcliffe. For example, after paying him an advance of \$120 in January 1905 for a hanging in Kamloops, the total bill came to \$242.15.<sup>17</sup> Later that year, for a planned double hanging in Kamloops, Radcliffe wanted \$50 for each victim, and \$130 advance on expenses.<sup>18</sup> At a planned triple hanging in New Westminster, Radcliffe demanded to be paid \$50 for each victim, even though he planned to hang them all together on one scaffold.<sup>19</sup>

Radcliffe's descent might be attributable not just to his drinking but to the unravelling of his home life. We will deal with these matters in the next chapter. At a hanging in Sault St. Marie in February 1902, an insightful local journalist noted that Radcliffe now hated his job, given that his wife and children had left him on account of it. It was also noted that he had the remnants of a black eye he received in a barroom brawl two or three nights before.<sup>20</sup> Instead of having an admiring crowd following him around town, he was apparently refused admission to all the hotels and rooming houses,<sup>21</sup> and before the hanging, he was set upon by a gang of roughs and given a black eye.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> BC Archives, GR-0429 Box 07, File 02 1901.

<sup>15</sup> BC Archives, GR-0429 Box 08 File 02 1901.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Sheriff of Yale, BC Archives, GR-0429 Box 10 File 02 1903.

<sup>17</sup> BC Archives, GR-0429 Box 12 File 04 1905.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> BC Archives, GR-0429 Box 16 File 01 1908.

<sup>20</sup> "The Hangman," *The Sault Star* (13 February 1902) at 1.

<sup>21</sup> "Hanged for Murder," *Marion Star* (7 February 1902) at 3.

<sup>22</sup> "Here Goes Innocent Man," *Omaha News* (7 February 1902) at 1 [Innocent Man].

In early March 1902, it was reported that Radclive was sick and might not be able to execute a man in Hull on March 21, causing great anxiety for the sheriff.<sup>23</sup> However, Radclive eventually arrived in Hull in a drunken state. He was refused admittance to the jail to examine Lacroix, the man to be hanged in the morning.<sup>24</sup> After the refusal, a reporter found Radclive quite intoxicated and indignant at a hotel. Radclive stated, "That man is my prisoner, and I am a bigger man today than the sheriff of the whole Dominion."<sup>25</sup> That evening, he went into a saloon and told the bartender that Lacroix was, "not the last Frenchman he was going to hang." The proprietor of the saloon allegedly jumped over the bar and hit him.<sup>26</sup> Thereupon, the hangman was attacked by a large crowd after hurling insults at them when he left the bar.

An alternative version was that Radcliffe had travelled from bar to bar, collecting a greater number of bystanders upset at his comments. According to this report, after being hit, "Radcliffe fell to his knees and the crowd closed in on him. He was kicked in the face a couple of times and struck by several fists when he arose."<sup>27</sup> While reports vary, he was rescued by police and eventually ended up in the same jail overnight where he would perform the hanging in the morning. His head was badly cut and had to be stitched.<sup>28</sup>

His black eyes, badly cut head and ~~badly~~ swollen cheeks were apparent to all during the bungled hanging of Lacroix. As he waited to hang the man, Radclive stated, "I don't feel like myself. My two month's illness and the shock given to me by that crowd yesterday have upset me and I'm not well. But I'll do the job all right. I don't see why I should be insulted when I am going about my business."<sup>29</sup> That he had instigated the attack by his remarks

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<sup>23</sup> "Radcliffe is Sick," *Ottawa Journal* (7 March 1902) at 9 [Radcliffe].

<sup>24</sup> "Wanted to See Lacroix," *Ottawa Journal* (19 March 1902) at 9; "Radcliffe in Trouble," *Gladstone Age* (27 March 1902) at 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> "Came Near Being His Last Boast," *Buffalo Courier* (21 March 1902) at 1.

<sup>27</sup> "Battered and Bruised by Mob," *Ottawa Citizen* (20 March 1902) at 1; "Hanging," *Tribune* (21 March 1902) at 1.

<sup>28</sup> "Hangman Mobbed," *Victoria Times* (20 March 1902) at 1.

<sup>29</sup> "The Law Has Settled," *Ottawa Journal* (21 March 1902) 1 at 2.

was not mentioned. The hanging was said to be bungled as the neck of the prisoner did not break, and he strangled to death.<sup>30</sup>

After the hanging, Radcliffe stated, "It's an awful thing... I suppose, however, it's necessary sometimes, but I don't believe hanging should be carried out so often. It may do good occasionally but as a general thing, I think it's bad."<sup>31</sup> A large crowd waited to beat him up again after the hanging, but he remained in the jail, sobering up, and in the evening, the sheriff took him to the train station for his return trip to Toronto.<sup>32</sup> At some stage in the scandal of his visit to Hull, a reporter quoted him, "I have a duty to perform and in the performance I protect society, my wife and daughters, as well as outsiders. No one knows my feelings. Instead of getting used to it, I seem to feel worse after every successive execution."<sup>33</sup> Compare these remarks, probably made while inebriated, with all the proud bravado Radcliffe displayed about his job over the previous decade.

In one of the rare pictures taken at a hanging, we have a photo of the execution of Lacroix from the National Archives of Canada.<sup>34</sup> The injured face of Radcliffe is not apparent as he is looking away from the camera and the picture is blurred:

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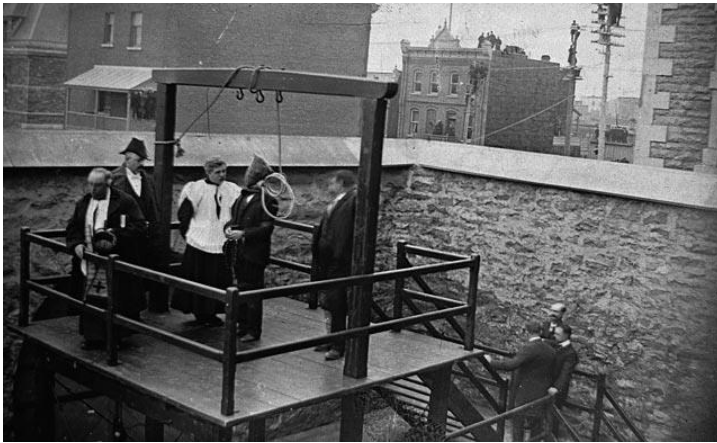
<sup>30</sup> "With a Prayer," *Ottawa Citizen* (21 March 1902) at 1; "The Law Has Settled," *Ottawa Journal* (21 March 1902) at 1; "Repulsive Radcliffe," *Vancouver World* (21 March 1902) at 1; "Hangman," *Vancouver Province* (21 March 1902) at 1.

<sup>31</sup> Radcliffe, *supra* note 23.

<sup>32</sup> "The Departure of the Hangman," *Ottawa Journal* (22 March 1902) at 15; *Ottawa Citizen* (22 March 1902) at 1.

<sup>33</sup> "The Man with a Drop," *Ottawa Citizen* (20 March 1902) at 7.

<sup>34</sup> National Archives of Canada, 1953-024NPC, Box #T-311.



Instead of travelling to Fort Saskatchewan (Edmonton) for a hanging on March 26, Radclive went home to Toronto. The hanging in Fort Saskatchewan was performed by a masked hangman by the name of D.F. Binkley of Ponoka, a man who had allegedly performed numerous executions in Ohio.<sup>35</sup>

At a hanging in Kamloops on June 3, 1902, the sheriff prevented Radclive from drinking from “start to finish” during his stay.<sup>36</sup> While a hanging in Montreal on June 13, 1902, seems to have gone without a hitch,<sup>37</sup> Radclive travelled to Brandon for a hanging on June 20. In this case, the victim probably was almost decapitated, although most papers suggested that the hanging simply broke every bone in the neck.<sup>38</sup> However, as the spectators approached to look at the body, Radclive, trembling like a leaf, shouted at them, “Keep back, keep back,” and when he examined the body he reportedly stated, “Oh it is awful. Too bad, too bad, poor thing.”<sup>39</sup> Next day, the same paper reported that, “he broke down and cried bitterly... He wept like a child. He said that he felt

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<sup>35</sup> *Calgary Herald* (10 April 1902) at 7.

<sup>36</sup> “Hanging,” *Van Province* (3 June 1902) at 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Hanson Hanged,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (13 June 1902) at 1. See also, “Gordon”, *Free Press Prairie Farmer* (25 June 1902) at 7.

<sup>38</sup> “Gordon’s End,” *Kingston Whig-Standard* (20 June 1902) at 6; “Hanging,” *Van News* (21 June 1902) at 1.

<sup>39</sup> “Gordon Hanged,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (20 June 1902) at 1 and 6.

his position of hangman keenly and wished he was out of it. No other job was open for him."<sup>40</sup>

About a month later, Radcliffe bungled another job in Toronto, as the victim was strangled. Several papers reported, "When the bolt was shot and Rice fell, his feet struck the edge of the pit dug below the trap. The body swung around and the knot slipped from behind the left ear to the right side of the head. The sudden jerking of his muscles wrenched one arm free from the pinioning belt.... Radcliffe became indignant when it was suggested that the slipping of the rope was a bit of a bungle. 'He was dead in an instant.' He exclaimed."<sup>41</sup>

Arriving for a hanging in Winnipeg in 1902 (later commuted), an editorial writer noted that Radcliffe would likely stay at a certain hotel on Portage Avenue where he was great friends with Spence, the bartender. At a previous hanging, he had appointed Spence as deputy executioner and, "Spence was right up in the scaffold as large as life and no doubt did the square thing by Radcliffe in the matter of free booze."<sup>42</sup>

Radcliffe now presented himself as no longer untroubled by the victims he hanged, despite all his assertions through his career that he was not bothered at all. For example, in Nelson, B.C. in 1902, he seemed very nervous, and after the hanging approached one of the witnesses asking if he thought the man was really guilty, adding, "I hope he was, but that last speech was pretty strong."<sup>43</sup>

Radcliffe briefly seemed to return to his old self. As far as we know, he did not travel to Dawson in the Yukon in the dead of winter for a double hanging in January 1903, but the other four hangings in that year were reportedly executed by Radcliffe without a hitch, and without reports of any scandal, as far as we can tell. At an execution in Windsor, Nova Scotia, in March, Radcliffe was refused admission to the hotels and had to find a rooming house. He apparently kept himself in seclusion and tried not to mingle with the public or talk to reporters. All that one reporter got out of him was that Radcliffe now declined to say how many executions

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<sup>40</sup> "Radcliffe Broke Down," *Winnipeg Tribune* (21 June 1902) at 1.

<sup>41</sup> "Gallows Closes," *Toronto Star* (18 July 1902) at 2; *Ottawa Journal* (18 July 1902) at 1; "Rice Hanged," *Brantford Expositor* (19 July 1902) at 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Brandon Sun* (30 October 1902) at 24.

<sup>43</sup> *Fort Macleod Gazette* (28 November 1902) at 4.

he had performed, as “he did not remember the past and never wanted to recall the executions at which he had officiated.”<sup>44</sup> This does not mean that Radclive was no longer drinking. As he passed through St. John, New Brunswick on his way back from the hanging, an unsympathetic local reporter stated that Radclive got off the train for only about 20 minutes to get a drink at a bar:

He hopped from the train, bustled outside and presently returned with the flavor of rye hovering about his sinister person, and sublime in his disregard of those who knew [his identity], and stared with unwinking stare... His dress was breezy, careless, ill fitting... There was a shirt bosom ample and soiled, with a necktie that had once been loud slewed across it, from under a turned down collar.<sup>45</sup>

The reporter gave a physical description of Radclive including his bad teeth.

In 1904, Radclive still had what appeared to be a monopoly in the hanging business as all five of the executions for the year were performed by him, despite his growing negative reputation. After the high profile hanging of Cashel in Calgary in 1904, Radcliffe, “had many sensational encounters in the city with some local celebrities. It is reported that he narrowly escaped being shot on Saturday night.”<sup>46</sup> While the hanging of Cashel allegedly resulted in a broken neck, the execution was partly bungled in that the trap door swung back and hit Cashel on the head during the drop and “he had a severe wound on the side of his forehead and blood was trickling down his face.”<sup>47</sup> A local newspaper repeated most of the information about him that was published years ago, and noted again that his past was a mystery, but “it has been learned that he was born in the county of Devonshire, England, leaving there 34 years ago.”<sup>48</sup> As we will eventually point out, this again was false information.

At the next hanging on April 28, 1904, at L’Original, Ontario, Radclive was out of control once again. On the way into town, the

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<sup>44</sup> “Hanged,” *Halifax Herald* (18 March 1903) at 1.

<sup>45</sup> “Well, Here’s The Hangman; Look Him Over if you Like,” *St. John Telegraph-Herald* (27 March 1903) at 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Tribune* (15 February 1904) at 5.

<sup>47</sup> “Cashel Hanged,” *Calgary Herald* (2 February 1904) at 1.

<sup>48</sup> “Something About the Public Executioner,” *Calgary Albertan* (4 February 1904) at 6.

drunk hangman took a pistol out of his pocket and fired three shots into the air, as if to scare off those who might harm him.<sup>49</sup> The sheriff locked him up in the jail, hoping he would be sober for the hanging in the morning.<sup>50</sup> Radcliffe was relieved after the hanging was over, and "remarked that the strain is telling on him, and that he wants to get out of the business."<sup>51</sup>

When he arrived in Montreal that same year to hang Belanger in St. Scholastique, he first visited some old friends and, "sipped copiously of the flowing bowl." The *Ottawa Journal* noted that he eventually "was in a good-humored maudlin condition" all afternoon and evening. The report went on:

Early in the evening he was in one of the hotel bars when an officer came to him and said the sheriff wanted him. Radcliffe replied with an oath that he was not waiting on the sheriff, but the sheriff on him.<sup>52</sup>

He told a reporter, "...how each execution becomes more difficult to him and remarked that his mental unrest never lets up till the job was over."<sup>53</sup> He claimed that Belanger should have his sentence commuted. The next morning, a near disaster occurred when one of the priests stumbled on the bolt releasing the trap, almost shooting Belanger, Radcliffe and another priest down a fifteen-foot shaft. Radcliffe then proceeded to bungle the execution — the drop was too long, and Belanger's head was almost completely severed.<sup>54</sup> It was reported:

After the hanging today Radcliffe broke down and wept like a child. Asked as to what was the matter with him, he said it was sympathy for Belanger and his family. "I have a family of my own," he stated, "and can realize what it would be like to be in Belanger's place." The hangman afterwards proceeded to drown his sorrow in liquids and succeeded pretty well. He went to Montreal on the noon train.<sup>55</sup>

At a hanging in Woodstock, Nova Scotia in July 1904, Radcliffe once again displayed his increasingly fragile emotional state. On the day before the hanging, Radcliffe was in the jail when a number

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<sup>49</sup> "Goyette Paid," *Ottawa Journal* (28 April 1904) at 1.

<sup>50</sup> "Radcliffe was Drunk," *Halifax Mail* (29 April 1904) at 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ottawa Journal* (28 April 1904) at 1.

<sup>52</sup> "Belanger Hanged," *Ottawa Journal* (10 June 1904) at 1 and 2.

<sup>53</sup> "Expiated," *Ottawa Citizen* (11 June 1904) at 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> "Hangman Wept," *Ottawa Citizen* (11 June 1904) at 9.

of women were allowed to conduct a hymn sing service with the condemned man. Radclive “with tears coursing down his cheeks,” asked for a particular hymn to be sung, but the folks did not know the hymn, so Radclive requested, “Nearer my God to Thee.” Allegedly, Radclive was greatly affected by the service.<sup>56</sup> However, after the hanging, Radclive was uncharacteristically in good spirits. As reported:

He was not in a depressed mood, and made himself very agreeable to the children, whose morbid curiosity had led them to the vicinity of the jail. During the forenoon, the executioner removed a couple of the boards in the fence surrounding the scaffold, and invited all comers to inspect the mechanism... Radcliffe boarded the train... There was a large crowd to witness his departure. He talked with the people- even opened his grip and displayed the knot. He joked with the onlookers and seemed in an agreeable frame of mind.<sup>57</sup>

However, another report indicated that not all went well, as one young man during the departure took a snapshot photo of Radclive and, “The official resented the honor and made a rush for the camera declaring that he would smash the kodak. He didn’t do it, however, and was given quite a jostling by the crowds before he boarded the train, among hisses from the crowd.”<sup>58</sup> Allegedly, Radclive charged an additional \$200 for the hanging,<sup>59</sup> and he was still cutting up the rope to sell as souvenirs.<sup>60</sup>

At this stage, however questionable his reputation, Radclive was still hired by the sheriffs for hangings. Due to a schedule conflict in early 1905, the sheriff of Woodstock, New Brunswick, much to his annoyance, had to perform the hanging himself, because Radcliffe was in Kamloops.<sup>61</sup> As we have noted, once he adopted the drop system, Radclive appeared to be faultless at the job during the first decade, despite his otherwise obnoxious behaviour. But in the second decade, marked by nervous decline, the bumbles continued. At a hanging in March 1905 in Toronto,

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<sup>56</sup> “Nerves Sustain Him,” *Fredericton Gleaner* (22 July 1904) at 6.

<sup>57</sup> “Radcliffe, the Hangman, Leaves Woodstock in Good Spirits,” *Moncton Transcript* (23 July 1904) at 1.

<sup>58</sup> “Almost Mobbed Radcliffe,” *Fredericton Gleaner* (23 July 1904) at 10.

<sup>59</sup> “Official Hangman,” *Moncton Times-Transcript* (12 August 1904) at 7.

<sup>60</sup> Note, *St. John Telegraph-Journal* (23 July 1904) at 8.

<sup>61</sup> “Sheriff Was Hangman,” *Ottawa Journal* (12 January 1905) at 9.

Radcliffe was sleeping in the jail overnight and seemed nervous and rather slow at adjusting the noose in the morning.<sup>62</sup> "The knot slipped around behind Martin's ear, and because of this, it was some time before they were able to pronounce life extinct."<sup>63</sup> Later that year at a hanging in Ontario, there was another bungle as reported: "After waiting a few minutes those in attendance went below. The body hung without movement, but a low moan was emitted at intervals."<sup>64</sup> Supposedly, the victim was nevertheless unconscious. The hanged man had earlier objected to the smell of liquor on Radcliffe's breath when Radcliffe had visited him in his cell.<sup>65</sup>

Several years later, in January 1908 in Toronto, while the neck of the victim was supposedly broken, it was reported that, "The noose was not properly adjusted and slipped when the trap was sprung and came up round the ear and over the chin, causing two distinct breaks in the skin, from which the blood flowed profusely."<sup>66</sup> Radcliffe was in a hurry at the hanging, and wanted to get away as quickly as possible. He claimed that the wounds were caused by the rope not being stretched ahead of time, to which a guard replied that the rope had been stretched. An argument ensued. Later, Radcliffe cut off portions of the rope which he took with him.<sup>67</sup>

In 1909, at a hanging in Brampton, while the neck was supposedly broken, the noose slipped under the left jaw, partly because of the stiff collar of the victim. This "was responsible for a nasty cut about two inches long, from which the blood trickled after the drop."<sup>68</sup>

Radcliffe also continued to express the idea that his job was abhorrent, which is opposite the proud views he had of the job in

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<sup>62</sup> "Pays the Penalty," *Windsor Star* (11 March 1905) at 4.

<sup>63</sup> "Martin Hanged," *Toronto Star* (10 March 1905) at 1.

<sup>64</sup> "Went to the Gallows," *Hamilton Spectator* (15 December 1905) at 1.

<sup>65</sup> "Didn't Like the Hangman's Breath," *Brantford Expositor* (18 December 1905) at 6.

<sup>66</sup> "Boyd is Hanged," *Edmonton Journal* (8 January 1908) at 1; *Winnipeg Tribune* at 1.

<sup>67</sup> "Boyd Hanged Within the Jail Building," *Toronto Star* (8 January 1908) at 1 and 7.

<sup>68</sup> "Hanged at Brampton," *Orangeville Sun* (18 February 1909) at 3.

the first decade. For example, allegedly when a sentence of death was commuted in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Radclive sent a post card to the sheriff that stated, "In response to your letter, allow me to congratulate you, and myself as well, on having escaped a duty at once repugnant and terrible, and may you never have need of my services for such work."<sup>69</sup>

We do not really know how genuine these expressions were, or whether Radclive was quite consciously trying to gain sympathy for himself in the face of the public disdain directed at him. These expressions of regret may be a psychopathic Radclive playing the victim. While passing through Winnipeg on the way to British Columbia in July, he again sought sympathy when questioned by a reporter about how many executions he had performed:

"Don't ask me, don't ask me. I don't like to think about it. You know I am as tender hearted as any man, but what are we going to do? Are we going to fill our penitentiaries with a den of murderers? It's hard to hear the snap that sends some men into eternity, but for the man who deliberately murders another of us mortals, there is only one place for him- that's under the ground. But when there's any doubt about the man, then it's hard, I tell you, and I don't like to do it."<sup>70</sup>

Another report out of Winnipeg suggested that Radclive was accompanied by his brother, and that the "dining car department of the railway do not look with favor on the executioner and regard him very coldly when he proffered money in exchange for a meal on the diner."<sup>71</sup> A reporter from Winnipeg later wrote about encountering Radclive in a local bar. He noted that the hangman, freely imbibing booze and wobbly on his feet, had the look of a man trying to forget something and, "a startled look filled with the venom of remorse as though he had been confronted with the avenging spirit of one of his many victims."<sup>72</sup>

After a hanging at Fort Saskatchewan near Edmonton, Radclive attempted to disguise himself "like a bushman, with heavy boots, cap and overalls, and rode in the train with a big pipe in his

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<sup>69</sup> "What Radclive Thinks of Hanging," *Montreal Star* (12 May 1905) at 11.

<sup>70</sup> "Radcliffe, The Hangman, Here," *Winnipeg Tribune* (19 July 1905) at 1.

<sup>71</sup> Note, *Manitoba Free Press* (21 July 1905) at 20.

<sup>72</sup> "Hangman Radcliffe," *Winnipeg Tribune* (26 August 1905) at 15.

mouth and his face carefully concealed by the collar of his coat being turned up."<sup>73</sup>

After a hanging in New Westminster in 1905, Radcliffe was at the western end of Columbia Street, where a crowd of four men, some of whom had been drinking, recognized Radcliffe and jeered at him and "invited him to come to a certain pile driver where he would be sent along the same road that he had seen so many travel. Radcliffe thought things were commencing to look serious, so he produced something from his hip pocket, which the quartet said was a revolver. With this in his hands he stood off the crowd and made his way back to his hotel. The matter was reported to Chief of Police McIntosh, who met Radcliffe on the street and searched him for concealed weapons. The executioner then explained that it was a black razor case which he had pulled from his pocket and which in the dark much resembled a revolver."<sup>74</sup>

In early January 1906, Radcliffe passed through Winnipeg on his way back from a hanging in Kamloops, "with blood and matter oozing from a frightful wound" in one eye, that he said he received in Swift Current when he fell heavily against a train door when a sudden lurch threw him off his feet.<sup>75</sup> One wonders what role drinking had to do with his ability to stay on his feet. For example, on his way to Windsor, Nova Scotia in July 1906, the train stopped at St. John and Radcliffe proceeded to drink at a bar before returning to the train.<sup>76</sup> After the hanging, he was seen on the train as it stopped in Moncton. As reported, "The hangman occupied a seat in the smoking compartment of the first-class cars on the express, and with him were seated a couple of other male passengers. The three seemed to be on the most cordial terms, and a long bottle passed among them with a frequency that boded little good to its contents."<sup>77</sup> The description of Radcliffe included that "his face is rather bloated, and his general appearance is of a man who has dissipated considerably."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> "John C. Worlly," *Calgary Herald* (13 October 1905) at 1.

<sup>74</sup> "Radcliffe's Bluff," (27 July 1905) at 4.

<sup>75</sup> "He May Lose Sight," *Tribune* (9 January 1906) at 8.

<sup>76</sup> "St. John News," *Fredericton Gleaner* (26 July 1906) at 1.

<sup>77</sup> "Hangman Radcliffe Passed Through," *Moncton Transcript* (3 August 1906) at 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

A newspaper reporter saw him on the train in Fort William at the end of the year and noted that Radcliffe was, “a mental and physical wreck... He is not the Radcliffe of old. His much-mooted buoyancy has gone and, in its place, has come reserve and a wrecked nervous system.”<sup>79</sup> He was said to be a “victim of nervous prostration... in a very shaky condition, and only kept himself up by a liberal priming of whisky. To an inquisitor he said that he was a sick man and that he would not officiate at another hanging unless he got better. He claimed to be in need of rest, and that his future activities depended on his restoration to health.”<sup>80</sup>

Of the six hangings in 1907, Radclive only performed two of them, one in November in New Brunswick and another at the end of the year in Hamilton. It would appear that Radclive was out of commission for most of 1907 until mid-November.

In early 1907, Radcliffe, sick in Toronto, wrote to Sheriff Colin Inkster and told him that he would not show up for a hanging in Winnipeg. Instead of mentioning his sickness, he claimed that Inkster could hire a local man for cheaper than Radclive’s expenses would be to get to Winnipeg and back.<sup>81</sup> However, the real reason he did not go was because he was now “a nervous wreck” and a “decrepit invalid.”<sup>82</sup> When he had returned from British Columbia to his friends in Toronto, “they could scarcely recognize him. His buoyant spirits have gone, his hair is streaked with gray, and he sits all huddled up like an old man.”<sup>83</sup>

Sheriff Inkster then allegedly received nineteen applications from people who wanted to be the hangman.<sup>84</sup> At the hanging, the executioner chosen by Inkster wore a false beard and was masked for the execution itself, which apparently was not bungled, even though the prisoner’s feet were touching the ground after the drop!<sup>85</sup> Another report stated that, “The rope was a trifle long, and the feet touched the ground as the body fell, caused by the knot

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<sup>79</sup> “Radcliffe Failing,” *Tribune* (24 December 1906) at 10; Also, *Toronto Star* at 7.

<sup>80</sup> “Radcliffe is Sick,” *Manitoba Free Press* (24 December 1906) at 18.

<sup>81</sup> “Radcliffe Declines,” *Regina Leader-Post* (8 January 1907) at 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Regina Leader-Post* (8 January 1907) at 1.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Tribune* (12 January 1907) at 15.

<sup>85</sup> “Macri Dies on the Scaffold,” *Tribune* (15 January 1907) at 1.

slipping to the back of the neck, but the neck was broken..."<sup>86</sup> While the hangman was described as a young man,<sup>87</sup> another report suggested he was from Port Arthur, and he had an army record, had been in the Northwest Mounted Police and had been in the war in South Africa.<sup>88</sup> This does not sound like a young man, and it was also noted that he was applying to the federal government to replace Radcliffe as official executioner.

In December 1907, a masked hangman wearing a false beard and moustache proceeded to hang someone in Morden, Manitoba, even though Radcliffe was back at work by that time.<sup>89</sup> This time, the hangman was described as a foreign Ruthenian, using the alias "G. Miek."<sup>90</sup> We have no evidence that Radcliffe travelled to BC for two hangings in Kamloops, one in July and another in early December, when he was supposedly back on the job.

We are not sure when Radcliffe recovered from his sickness sufficiently to return to work. However, in early November 1907, he was in Parry Sound, Ontario, when the intended victim was commuted at the last moment.<sup>91</sup> Later that month, on the way to New Brunswick, he stopped in Montreal and spent the morning "at some familiar places of refreshment" and he looked quite cheerful.<sup>92</sup> However, when the train stopped in Moncton, it was noted that "his face bears every mark of dissipation and he was noticeably nervous... his hands twitching constantly... He says that he has never felt more nervous at any hanging... While he had no doubt Collins was guilty, having kept himself well posted on the facts of the case, yet the evidence, being overall of a circumstantial nature... which disturbed him more than such events usually do. In fact, Radcliffe, said, he had not wished to officiate at this particular execution, but did so only upon urgent and repeated

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<sup>86</sup> "Executioner was Masked," *Regina Leader-Post* (16 January 1907) at 1.

<sup>87</sup> "Macri Paid," *Montreal Star* (15 January 1907) at 6.

<sup>88</sup> "Wants Hangman's Place," *Victoria Times* (18 January 1907) at 7; *Vancouver World* at 12.

<sup>89</sup> "Gowland Hanged," *Calgary Herald* (13 December 1907) at 2.

<sup>90</sup> "Murderer was Hanged," *Winnipeg Tribune* (13 December 1907) at 1.

<sup>91</sup> "Capelli Escapes Gallows," *Brantford Expositor* (7 November 1907) at 1.

<sup>92</sup> "Radcliffe as Seen in Montreal," *St. John Telegraph-Journal* (14 November 1907) at 1.

requests.”<sup>93</sup> While the officials at Hopewell Cape had shipped the old jerk up gallows from Dorchester, Radclive understandably refused to use the bungling machine and had a proper drop gallows built.<sup>94</sup> There is a book about the Collins case which contains many of the myths about Radclive’s background, but is otherwise a valuable account of the crime and execution.<sup>95</sup>

After the hanging in Hopewell Cape in New Brunswick on November 15, 1907, Radclive was interviewed on the train as he returned from the hanging.<sup>96</sup> We have serious doubts as to the veracity of Radclive, but portions of the interview are worth quoting at length, especially his comments about his family. After repeating his feelings about hanging Collins:

“Do you usually feel sorry for your victims?”

“No. In some cases I am glad to hang them. It was a delight to swing Birchall in Ontario and also to hang Belanger in Ste. Scholastic... Those men richly deserve to die. So did scores of others, and so did Collins, yet I felt sorry for him. The saddest case I ever had was that of George Gee in Woodstock... There are a whole lot of people I’d like to hang.”

“But what do your family think of it all?”

“My family has nothing to do with it. I am a good husband, a good father, and a good son. That’s all I need to care about.”

As to his family, the hangman said he lived in Parkdale with his mother, wife and son. He says his daughters have married well. He is fond of children and dogs and formerly kept many canaries.

The interviewer went on to claim that, while Radcliffe<sup>97</sup> did not confirm it, he was paid \$1000 by the federal government and in addition, received \$50 for hanging Gee and \$100 for Belanger. The reporter claimed that Radcliffe’s real name was J. R. Radclive, who had been in Canada for 25 years and his body count was now over

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<sup>93</sup> “Radcliffe Goes to Hopewell Cape,” *Moncton Transcript* (13 November 1907) at 1. See also, “Radcliffe Does not Relish Job,” *Windsor Star* (14 November 1907) at 6.

<sup>94</sup> “Execution,” *Halifax Mail* (13 November 1907) at 12.

<sup>95</sup> Kenneth Saunders, *The Rectory Murder: The Mysterious Crime That Shocked Turn-of-the-Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1989).

<sup>96</sup> “Canada’s Hangman Talks of His Work,” *Bangor Daily News* (18 November 1907) at 8 [Hangman Talks].

<sup>97</sup> While this book consistently uses the spelling “Radclive,” many newspapers at the time often referred to him as “Radcliffe.” To maintain clarity and reflect the terminology used by the interviewer, I have chosen to spell it as “Radcliffe” in this context.

200.<sup>98</sup> One may well doubt most of what Radcliffe said. In fact, at this stage his body count was 61, not 200 plus. Furthermore, as we will note, his wife and daughters had long since left him, and his real name was not Radcliffe.

At the end of 1907, at a hanging in Hamilton, Radcliffe spent the night at the jail, smoking cigars, "and airing his opinions on all sorts of subjects." He claimed that he did not read about the murders committed by those he hanged, clearly contradicting what he had just said in New Brunswick. In the morning, he was in "a highly nervous state," that he attributed to a severe cold and stomach trouble. After the hanging at the inquest, he was proud of the neat job he had done and "picked up the head of the dead man and swung it around to show the doctors that the neck had been broken."<sup>99</sup> In a rather obscure newspaper, Radcliffe's physical features were described, and then it was claimed that Radcliffe worried about the guilt of some of his victims. Then came another version of his past: "Radcliffe is said to have originally been expected to enter the church. He then became a sailor and entered the army, seeing service in India, and China and visiting Japan, where he acquired the art of jiu-jitsu."<sup>100</sup>

Radcliffe was sick again in 1908, and unable to attend a hanging in Kenora in September, where J. Thomson or Thompson from Owen Sound<sup>101</sup> or Toronto<sup>102</sup> served again as the hangman. Whether from sickness or from not being hired, Radcliffe again missed a hanging in the Yukon in October, which was performed by an unknown masked hangman.<sup>103</sup> However, by the end of the year, he was well enough to travel across the country for a triple hanging in New Westminster, B.C. This execution was apparently successful as all three necks were broken.<sup>104</sup> A local paper noted that Radcliffe, bareheaded and in shirtsleeves, went about his work with business-like brutality.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Hangman Talks, *supra* note 96 at 8.

<sup>99</sup> "I Didn't Do It," *Hamilton Spectator* (28 December 1907) at 1.

<sup>100</sup> "A Gruesome Job," *Clinton New Era* (10 January 1908) at 3.

<sup>101</sup> "Hanging of Paul," *Free Press Prairie Farmer* (23 September 1908) at 13.

<sup>102</sup> "Hanging," *Montreal Gazette* (19 September 1908) at 16.

<sup>103</sup> "Hanging," *Daily Alaskan* (15 October 1908) at 1 and 4.

<sup>104</sup> "Triple Execution," *Vancouver World* (18 December 1908) at 1 and 2.

<sup>105</sup> "Triple Hanging," *Van. News Advertiser* (19 December 1908) at 9.

As if it was necessary to rid the world of murderers before the start of a new decade, 1909 included 13 executions – 8 of them by Radclive, travelling from one end of the country to the other several times. But Radclive, with his drinking and scandals, had lost his virtual monopoly of the business to rival hangmen. For example, Thompson, said to be from Owen Sound, was the hangman again at a hanging in Kenora.<sup>106</sup> Allegedly, Radcliffe failed to show up for an execution in North Bay and “Ike Thompson,” from Owen Sound, performed the duty for the sheriff.<sup>107</sup> This failure to show up led to speculation that Radclive would be “fired” by the Department of Justice from his status as official hangman for Canada.<sup>108</sup> Of course, in typical psychopathic fashion, Radclive always blamed someone else for failure to provide adequate notice of the need for his attendance.<sup>109</sup>

In Edmonton, a local man calling himself “Holmes” from Regina, wearing a mask and false moustache, hanged a man, but the local press thought he might be one of the warder’s at the jail.<sup>110</sup> The hanging was bungled, as the rope slipped, and the man was strangled to death.<sup>111</sup> Another masked hangman showed up at an execution in Winnipeg, which apparently was not bungled.<sup>112</sup> The man, calling himself Holmes, also officiated at Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, in December. This was arguably due to conflicting dates, given that Radclive was in Toronto at the time, where he bungled a case.<sup>113</sup>

At a hanging in Brampton in February, a Toronto reporter interviewed Radclive at a hotel the day before the hanging. This time, Radclive sounded like the proud hangman of the previous decade:

Somebody asked him how many people he had hanged.  
 “I don’t know... Never keep track of ‘em.”  
 “Ever hang a man you thought was innocent?”

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<sup>106</sup> “Johnson Faced Death,” *Tribune* (20 January 1909) at 1.

<sup>107</sup> “A New Hangman,” *Ottawa Citizen* (26 November 1909) at 1.

<sup>108</sup> “May Lose His Job,” *Ottawa Citizen* (27 November 1909) at 1.

<sup>109</sup> *Calgary Herald* (29 November 1909) at 1.

<sup>110</sup> “Barrett’s Executioner?” *Edmonton Journal* (14 July 1909) at 1.

<sup>111</sup> “Hangman Bungled,” *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* (14 July 1909) at 8.

<sup>112</sup> “Doomed Murderer,” *Tribune* (27 August 1909) at 1.

<sup>113</sup> “Paid Penalty,” *Ottawa Journal* (24 December 1909) at 1.

"No, sir, not one."

... Radcliffe confided that he had had too much business to do lately; he needed a rest... "A man can't be up to a high strain like this all the time."

... For an hour or so Radcliffe amazed the crowd in the hotel smoking-room with demonstrations of the slipknot.<sup>114</sup>

The unreliability of newspaper reports, as well as the lack of veracity of the hangman, led to some wild exaggerations. At a hanging at Stratford in June, it was reported that Radcliffe had now hanged 450 people from 22 different nationalities.<sup>115</sup> Much to the scandal of local sensibilities, Radcliffe sold portions of the rope to various people and the black cap to a local plumber in Stratford who displayed it at his shop.<sup>116</sup>

At a hanging in Montreal, just after the victim was commuted at the last moment, Radcliffe spoke to reporters and admitted that his real name was neither Radcliffe nor Radclive and it was so long ago that his real name was used that he would hardly recognize it, but he did not divulge his real name. He suggested, supposedly for the first time, that he hanged people before he hanged Birchall in 1890 and he seemed to suggest at some stage that he knew Marwood. He was supposedly happy to see the sentence commuted: "I never want to have to hang another man. I would be very glad, indeed, not to be called upon again. What I did originally was an accident and not intended to be what has become in the eyes of the average man a profession."<sup>117</sup> The *Montreal Star* included a drawing of the burley hangman:

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<sup>114</sup> "Radcliffe Talks," (11 February 1909) at 2.

<sup>115</sup> "Smiled as He Walked to Death," *Orangeville Sun* (1 July 1909) at 1.

<sup>116</sup> "Adds Insult to Injury," *Saginaw Courier-Herald* (8 July 1909) at 2.

<sup>117</sup> "Hangman Admits Radclive in Not his Real Name," *Montreal Star* (20 November 1909) at 3.



The next day, Radcliffe went to the train station to go back to Toronto, but he was in quarrelsome mood, "loudly expressing denunciations against judges and sheriffs and all who were responsible for law's delays." When confronted by an Englishman who objected to the diatribe, Radcliffe made a heavy lurch toward the man, who proceeded to punch him square in the face:

Down went Radcliffe, sprawling on the floor, with his grip three yards in front of him and his peak behind him. He lay prone for about a minute and a crowd immediately began to gather. Someone in authority came along and Radcliffe was helped to his feet. He walked with assistance and an apparently subdued air to the train.<sup>118</sup>

Of course, Radcliffe, would give a different story:

When taunted and jeered because he was a hangman, Radcliffe at Montreal a few days ago rushed at two men near the Windsor station, knocked out their teeth with well placed blows, knocked them down and went at them again when they got up... They were badly cut about the face but all that was wrong with Radcliffe was a cut finger that had

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<sup>118</sup> "Knocked Hangman Down," *Winnipeg Tribune* (26 November 1909) at 2.

come in contact with a set of teeth. 'I gave them what they wanted,' announced Radcliffe later. "Then they wanted more, and I gave them that too. Now I'm ready to go at them again." After the fight Radcliffe walked down Windsor Street to Quipp's drug store... where he had his finger dressed and gave a glowing account of the battle.<sup>119</sup>

This story of Radcliffe winning the fight is probably another of example of his pathological lying.

We have a sense of the prices back in 1909, because Radcliffe submitted a bill to the Sheriff that included \$16.50 for a return trip from Toronto to Montreal; \$4 for berths both ways; \$2 for meals; and \$3 for cab rides.<sup>120</sup>

When Radcliffe did not show up at a hanging in North Bay even though he was scheduled to come, there was speculation that he would lose his job.<sup>121</sup> An editorial writer for the *Ottawa Citizen* suggested that:

Radcliffe has been an unmitigated nuisance ever since he held the position, and on nearly every occasion that he has been called upon to perform his gruesome task he has outraged the feelings of the community which had the misfortune to harbour him for even a few hours.<sup>122</sup>

The start of a new decade ushered the end of Radcliffe's career as public hangman. A new hangman calling himself Arthur Ellis took over in 1910, and the hangman calling himself Holmes was active as well. As far as we can tell, Radcliffe's last executions were in British Columbia, where he hanged two people in Kamloops on July 20, and one in New Westminster on July 22, 1910. It is ironic that British Columbia authorities did not hire him till long after other jurisdictions, but British Columbia was the site of his last hangings, long after other jurisdictions were through with him. He apparently was not displeased that others were now taking over. "This work is telling on me a good deal now," and he remarked that continuous travel was impossible at his time of life.<sup>123</sup> In total, with the three executions in 1910, Radcliffe hanged 78 people in

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<sup>119</sup> "Street Fight," *Moncton Transcript* (22 November 1909) at 3; 'Hangman is Fighter,' *Stonewall Argus* (1 December 1909) at 3.

<sup>120</sup> "Radcliffe's Bill," *Montreal Gazette* (26 November 1909) at 3.

<sup>121</sup> "Hangman Missing," *Kingston Standard* (27 November 1909) at 1; "Radcliffe," *Montreal Gazette* (29 November 1909) at 5.

<sup>122</sup> *Ottawa Citizen* (30 November 1909) at 6.

<sup>123</sup> "Radcliffe Still an Active Man," *Claresholm Review* (25 August 1910) at 6.

Canada. There were some executions that provoked virtually no press coverage, and it might be that Radcliffe had some unattributed hangings bringing his total to around 80. This is a significant number, but much less than the body count usually attributed to him.

In the next chapter, we will try to deal with the real identity and personal history of Radcliffe using genealogical records, but for now, we note that he went home from British Columbia in July 1910 and died on February 26, 1911, after a long illness. When he died, there was a blizzard of newspaper articles about him — most of which were rather sympathetic. He had performed his duty for the public and the job had cost him dearly. He lived like a hermit in his neighbourhood in Toronto, abandoned by family, but well-liked by his neighbours, who found him genial, jolly, and generous, and especially loved by the children living nearby whom he befriended and cared for.<sup>124</sup> Most newspapers across Canada reported that his real name was Donald James Ratley.<sup>125</sup> As we will note in the next chapter, his real name was Daniel James Ratley. The *Toronto Mail* stated that he left a widow in England, and four grown up children, two of whom are in Toronto.<sup>126</sup> The *Montreal Star* suggested that his wife left him after strongly objecting to his hanging of a woman in 1898.<sup>127</sup> Most articles stated wrongly that his last hanging was in Toronto in December of 1909. As we have noted, he hanged three people in British Columbia in 1910.

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<sup>124</sup> “Passing of Radcliffe,” *Ottawa Citizen* (28 February 1911) at 12; “Hangman is Dead,” *Windsor Star*, (27 February 1911) at 14.

<sup>125</sup> “Hangman Radcliffe,” *Toronto Mail* (28 February 1911) at 5; “Radcliffe Dead,” *Montreal Star* (27 February 1911) at 3; “Hangman is Dead,” *Windsor Star* (27 February 1911) at 14.

<sup>126</sup> *Toronto Mail*, *ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Montreal Star*, *supra* note 124.