

## Chapter 5

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### “Arthur Ellis”: His Canadian Hanging Career

“Arthur Ellis,” whose real name was Alexander Armstrong English, began to be hired as an executioner in Canada in 1910. As we will demonstrate when we examine the drunken scandals, botches, and family life of Ellis, there were remarkable parallels of character and conduct between the new hangman Ellis and the previous hangman Radcliffe.

#### I. CLAIMING TO BE THE “OFFICIAL” HANGMAN

As Radcliffe became more unreliable, rival hangmen like “Thompson” in Ontario and “Holmes” in the Western provinces were hired, but Ellis eventually became the executioner of choice by earning a reputation for reliability in his chosen profession. “Arthur Ellis” at one point claimed that he first hanged someone in Toronto on the invitation of Sherriff Mowat.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, several authorities state that his first hanging was Pasquale Ventricine in Toronto on June 30th of 1910.<sup>2</sup> However, this was not Ellis’s first Canadian execution; earlier in June 1910, he had already served as a hangman in North Bay, Ontario, and then in Peterborough.<sup>3</sup> The hanging in Toronto was actually his third in Canada and then he subsequently executed someone in Whitby, Ontario in July 1910.<sup>4</sup> In his first year at the job, he

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<sup>1</sup> “Executioner Has a Grievance,” *Montreal Gazette* (23 Dec 1912) at 17.

<sup>2</sup> Lorna Poplak, *Drop Dead: A Horrible History of Hanging in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2017) at 87; Jeffrey Pfeifer & Ken Layton-Brown, *Death by Rope: Volume One: 1867-1923* (Regina: Vanity Press, 2007) at 153-154 [Pfeifer & Layton-Brown].

<sup>3</sup> “Ross,” *Lindsay Post*, (24 June 1910) at 4; “Ross Pays Penalty,” *Windsor Star* (22 June 1910) at 1; “Youth is Hanged,” *Windsor Star* (24 June 1910) at 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Paid Penalty,” *Ottawa Journal* (13 July 1910) at 8.

already expanded his jurisdiction into Quebec and hanged a man in Montreal in November.<sup>5</sup> The following year after the death of Radcliffe, Ellis was already being hired in British Columbia, officiating at a double execution in New Westminster in December 1911.<sup>6</sup> Hangman “Holmes,” as well as others, continued to act in Alberta and Saskatchewan, and it took some time for Ellis to be the primary executioner in all provinces. However, just as Sheriff Mowat had promoted Radcliffe, he now promoted Ellis. Mowat wrote to the Attorney General of Ontario stating that Ellis, living at 167 Lisgar Street in Toronto, had acted quietly and quickly at the hanging in Toronto and he could find no fault with him as hangman.<sup>7</sup>

In his first years as hangman, Ellis manipulated the press and sheriffs into the belief that he was going to be, or was already, the “official” hangman replacing Radcliffe. Some commentators have suggested that Ellis was asked by government officials to come to Canada to replace Radcliffe.<sup>8</sup> We have no evidence for this, and Ellis was hanging people in 1910 at the same time as Radcliffe, the “official” hangman, was still alive and executing people in at least one province, namely British Columbia. When Radcliffe died in 1911, the Department of Justice, much to the chagrin of Ellis, discontinued the practice of sponsoring an official hangman.<sup>9</sup> We may well surmise that Radcliffe’s bad reputation had a lot to do with the discontinuation of the federal retainer, but there were also jurisdictional arguments supporting the discontinuation.

Radcliffe had been paid a \$700 yearly retainer by the federal Department of Justice, in addition to the fee he charged for each hanging in violation of the terms of his appointment which stated that he should only charge expenses. Under the Canadian federal system, the central government has the jurisdiction to legislate criminal law and procedure, but the provinces have jurisdiction

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<sup>5</sup> “Candy Pays,” *Montreal Star* (18 November 1910) at 6.

<sup>6</sup> “Two Executed,” *Vancouver Province* (5 December 1911) at 7.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Mowat Letter, Ontario Archives, RG4 -32 (1911) No. 308.

<sup>8</sup> Dale Braun, “Some Executioners,” *Brandon Sun* (23 April 2009) F3; There is a claim that Prime Minister Laurier wrote to English officials seeking a hangman, and Ellis was recommended. See, “Double Life of Hangman Ellis,” *Derry Journal* (23 December 1938) at 4; “Hangman is Found Starving,” *Montreal Gazette* (21 July 1938) at 9.

<sup>9</sup> “No Hangman for Canada,” *Ottawa Citizen* (28 February 1911) at 1.

over the administration of justice, which includes the office of sheriff. When the Conservative party won the federal election in 1911 and Robert Borden became Prime Minister, Ellis was informed that the position of “official” hangman would not be continued. Hangings were the responsibility of the sheriff within the jurisdiction where the hanging was to take place. There would be no official hangman, but rather the sheriffs could hire whomever they wanted, and if they could not find a hangman, the sheriffs had to carry out the mandatory penalty themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Given that sheriffs were not willing to risk the possible bungling of the job, or the emotional toll of doing the gruesome task themselves, they continued to hire Ellis for the job, but he threatened to go on strike at the “loss” of the federal retainer.<sup>11</sup> He claimed that he had only received about \$600 for the eight executions he had performed in 1912 and could not make a living, and so he threatened to resign.<sup>12</sup> Some sheriffs decided to try alternative hangmen, which usually resulted in disaster. For example, even though Ellis was available, a sheriff decided to hire a local man, “Holmes,” to hang Jasper Collins in Calgary in 1914.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the cause of the bungling, Collins was still alive when he was cut down from the rope and died groaning many minutes later.<sup>14</sup> Ellis was quick to assert that he had nothing to do with the Collins hanging, and that it illustrated why he alone should be hired.<sup>15</sup> Another bungled hanging occurred the next year in Montreal when Ellis was away in England, and “John Brady,” said to be an assistant to Ellis, failed to place the noose properly, or failed to pinion the hands properly. The victim, apparently clutching at the rope, died in agony as he slowly strangled to death.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a man called “Elliott” was the hangman in

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<sup>10</sup> “No Official Hangman,” *Ottawa Journal* (8 July 1912) at 1.

<sup>11</sup> “Hangman May Strike,” *Chilliwack Progress* (3 July 1912) at 1.

<sup>12</sup> “Executioner Has a Grievance,” *Montreal Gazette* (23 December 1912) at 17.

<sup>13</sup> “Ellis,” *Agassiz-Record* (19 February 1914) at 7.

<sup>14</sup> See Dale Brawn, *Last Moments: Sentenced to Death in Canada* (Quagmire Press, 2011) at 261-265 [Brawn].

<sup>15</sup> “Official Executioner Disclaims Responsibility,” *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, Feb. 19, 1914, at 2; “Executioner Wants to Preserve Reputation,” *Van. Sun*, Feb. 19, 1914, at 3.

<sup>16</sup> “Execution Was Gruesome,” *Montreal Gazette* (22 May 1915) at 4; “Di Lena

Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, in February of 1918. The hangman obviously failed to judge the length of the rope, and the victim came to rest with his feet on the ground and in a kneeling position. Two guards had to hold him up while he slowly strangled to death.<sup>17</sup> The victim was not pronounced dead for 34 minutes and was not cut down from the gallows until 44 minutes from the drop. “Elliot,” supposedly hired as an experienced hangman from the east, claimed that this was his first bungle.<sup>18</sup>

Ellis had only himself to blame for not achieving a de facto monopoly over executions, even though there was no longer a de jure “official” executioner. Not only did he often threaten to resign, or was unavailable due to taking trips to England, his reputation took a beating due to various personal scandals involving drunkenness and marital issues which were broadcast all across Canada. We will deal with these scandals in the next chapter.

In the early 1920s, controversy regarding Ellis’s “official” status surfaced again, when various sheriffs believed that federal authorities had fired Ellis, and Ellis himself threatened to resign in a huff about a possible rival learning the trade and replacing him.<sup>19</sup> Over 100 applications flooded into the Department of Justice in Ottawa seeking the job.<sup>20</sup> Again the clarification came that Ellis had never been hired by the federal government and therefore could not be fired.<sup>21</sup> There was no official hangman, but rather sheriffs could hire whomever they wanted.

In 1922, a sheriff in Woodstock, New Brunswick hired Ellis for a hanging, but Ellis declined to act and returned the retainer he had been paid because he was travelling to England. The Sheriff however believed that Ellis had been fired as dominion executioner

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Hanged,” *Montreal Star* (21 May 1915) at 3; Hanging Was a Gruesome Spectacle,” *Calgary Herald* (21 May 1915) at 1.

<sup>17</sup> “Elliott Bungled Hanging Fletcher,” *Brandon Sun* (26 February 1918) at 1; See Brawn, *supra* note 14 at 249.

<sup>18</sup> “Revolt Scene at Execution,” *Manitoba Free Press* (27 February 1918) at 8; “Hangman’s Job Badly Bungled,” *Calgary Herald* (26 February 1918) at 16.

<sup>19</sup> “Threatening to Resign,” *Regina Leader-Post* (21 July 1922) at 15; “Ellis is Huffy,” *Vancouver Sun* (22 July 1922) at 5.

<sup>20</sup> “Many Apply,” *Saskatoon Star* (20 October 1922) at 10.

<sup>21</sup> “Never Hired,” *Saskatoon Star* (15 September 1922) at 1; “What is Exact Status,” *Free Press* (16 September 1922) at 2.

in the wake of the charge that he had assaulted his wife. The Sheriff then hired J. M. Holmes from Montreal, who subsequently claimed that an accident prevented him from acting on the date in question. The Sheriff had the execution postponed by court order,<sup>22</sup> but thereafter, apparently on the recommendation from the Montreal sheriff, hired “W.A. Doyle” and an assistant hangman, “F. G. Gill,” both from Montreal. The execution was badly bungled. As in the Jasper Collins case in 1914, the young victim, Benny Swim, was not dropped far enough and was cut down too soon. The doctor said the neck was not broken and Swim was breathing on a cot in the prison after being cut down. His heart continued to beat for about an hour, when it was decided to hang him a second time, this time by assistant, Mr. Gill. This was one of the worst botches in Canadian history as Swim was hanged twice. It was alleged that Doyle was not only incompetent but also drunk.<sup>23</sup> At least one report suggested that “Doyle” was “Holmes” who had recovered from a car accident and arrived for the new execution date.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the threats to resign and the scandals, plus the lack of competent rivals, Ellis eventually was recognized as the de facto “official” hangman of Canada and was able to make a good living, allegedly bolstered by a retainer from the province of Quebec.<sup>25</sup> Spanning some twenty-seven years, Arthur Ellis presented himself as the official Canadian hangman, and the press called him the official hangman, or the Dominion executioner.<sup>26</sup> Ellis printed business cards with his self-proclaimed title of “Executioner for Canada.”<sup>27</sup> Throughout his career, despite repeated denials by federal officials, Ellis claimed to be an officer of the federal government. For example, as late as 1933, after Ellis claimed to

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<sup>22</sup> “Sheriff Not Fit,” *Montreal Gazette* (15 September 1922) at 10.

<sup>23</sup> As noted in Norm Campbell, “Parliament,” *Ottawa Citizen* (1 April 1965) at 21; Also see *Saskatoon Star* (20 October 1922) at 10.

<sup>24</sup> “Holmes Will Act as Hangman Tomorrow,” *Montreal Gazette* (5 October 1922) at 9.

<sup>25</sup> As noted in *Windsor Star* (6 Dec 1928) at 21.

<sup>26</sup> “Saved from Rope,” *Westminster Daily News* (24 June 1912) at 4. (Dominion Executioner); “Smith Will Hang,” *Westminster News* (28 January 1913) at 8. (official hangman).

<sup>27</sup> As recounted by Cecil Clark, “Moonshine,” *Victoria Colonist* (13 April 1969) at 81.

have hanged over 600 people, a newspaperman asked for the exact number. Ellis lied and said, “the Department of Justice does not allow me to say how many men I have hanged since I started.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite various personal scandals, Ellis became the “official” hangman on demand from coast to coast by the sheriffs.<sup>29</sup> By the latter half of the 1920s, Ellis finally had a de facto monopoly as the only hangman hired, except when he could not act due to conflicting dates, so we would assume he was making a good living. However, as we will note, Ellis obviously did not plan for retirement, because he died in absolute poverty.

It was announced in the press that the “official” executioner of Canada would retire in the Spring of 1927 and had already written a book about his experiences.<sup>30</sup> This again produced a deluge of applications to the Federal Minister of Justice from those who wanted to be the new hangman.<sup>31</sup> Once again, people had to be reminded that there was no such position as the Dominion hangman, since hanging was a provincial responsibility. But neither the retirement, nor the book, were forthcoming as Ellis continued to answer the call of the sheriffs of Canada for another decade. He subsequently denied the widely publicized claim that he would retire,<sup>32</sup> and spoke enthusiastically at the prospect of hanging serial killer, Earle Nelson, in Winnipeg in January 1928.<sup>33</sup>

However, there was more competition from rivals, particularly “Camille Branchaud” from Montreal, who was writing to sheriffs in 1931 offering his services.<sup>34</sup> There was also a “Sam Edwards” who hanged people in Ontario for a number of years after Arthur

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<sup>28</sup> “Arthur Ellis,” *Edmonton Journal* (24 November 1933) at 7.

<sup>29</sup> “No Amateurs for Future Hangings,” *Owen Sound Sun-Times* (13 January 1923) at 2.

<sup>30</sup> “Ellis,” *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* (25 January 1927) at 1; *Victoria Times-Colonist* at 2; *Montreal Gazette* at 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Would Be Hangman,” *Windsor Star* (15 March 1927).

<sup>32</sup> “Never Bungled,” *Calgary Herald* (17 March 1927) at 16.

<sup>33</sup> See Alvin A J Esau, *The Gorilla Man Strangler Case* (Altona: Friesen’s, 2022) at 384; Also, “Eastern Newspaperman Finds Talkative Fellow Traveler,” *Manitoba Free Press Bulletin* (13 January 1928) at 2.

<sup>34</sup> “Quebec Man Offers Cut Rates,” *Vancouver Province* (1 May 1931) at 36.

Ellis had one of his most spectacular bungles when he decapitated a woman.<sup>35</sup>

## II. BODY COUNT

Our own estimate is that from June 1910, when Ellis started, to March 1937, when Ellis performed his last hanging, there were 303 executions in Canada, and Arthur Ellis was the hangman in 210 of these cases. This is a rough estimate because, especially in the 1930s, the newspapers often did not identify the hangman, and we have made some inferences as to whether Ellis was the executioner or not. For whatever reason, Ellis greatly exaggerated his body count, both by the numbers of hangings in Canada, and his alleged additional hangings elsewhere. During the first decade of his career, from 1910 through to the end of 1919, he had rival hangmen, although he hanged 67 out of the 99 victims in that decade. In the second half of the 1920s, there was a period when he had few rivals, and in that decade, he hanged 83 out of the 97 victims. In the 1930s, he had numerous rivals for the job and only hanged 60 out of the 107 victims up to March 1937, when he performed his final hanging. Even if he never hanged anyone outside of Canada, his body count of at least 210 makes him the most prolific serial killer in Canadian history, even if the killings were judicially sanctioned. While we have no evidence of executions by Ellis outside of Canada, when he died in 1938, it was reported that Ellis claimed to have hanged 600 people.<sup>36</sup>

## III. DESCRIPTIONS, SELF PROMOTIONS, AND OPINIONS

Newspaper reports at the start of his career described the new hangman from Toronto: “He is a man of small stature, between 45 and 50, weighs about 130 pounds, smooth shaven, blue eyes and wears gold-rimmed spectacles.”<sup>37</sup> Some newspaper reports

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<sup>35</sup> Edwards hanged a father and son in St. Thomas, Ontario. See *Windsor Star* (27 June 1935) at 5.

<sup>36</sup> “Hangman Ellis, Legendary Figure, Dies in Montreal,” *Ottawa Journal* (22 July 1938) at 4.

<sup>37</sup> “Henderson Executed,” *Berlin News Record* (24 June 1910) at 1.

suggested that Ellis came from the United States.<sup>38</sup> Ellis bragged about having hung 88 people previously and, “was a talkative, boastful sort, with a nervous disposition,” who would “boss the job” as if he was in charge of everything, even interrupting the minister on the scaffold and commanding him to say the Lord’s Prayer rather than what the minister was saying.<sup>39</sup> When a newspaperman tried to take his picture, Ellis promptly confronted him and seized the camera and removed the film.<sup>40</sup> Ellis apparently was always well dressed for the occasion, “in tall hat, frock coat, white carnation, gloves and patent leather shoes.”<sup>41</sup>

Over the years, frequent mention was made that people would never guess that the meek-appearing Ellis was a hangman. One reported that he looked like a deacon on his way to church.<sup>42</sup> Another reported that he looked like a professor from McGill University.<sup>43</sup> While not looking particularly dapper, a picture of the middle-aged Ellis at the start of his hanging career in Canada was reproduced in the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* many years later, when Ellis died:<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “The Death of Candy,” *Montreal Star* (18 November 1910) at 6.

<sup>39</sup> “Was Very Nervy,” *Lindsay Watchman Warder* (21 July 1910) at 5.

<sup>40</sup> “Henderson Executed,” *Windsor Star* (24 June 1910) at 1; *Ottawa Journal* (13 July 1910) at 8.

<sup>41</sup> “Law Took Lives,” *Calgary Herald* (22 July 1938) at 3.

<sup>42</sup> Editorial, *Ottawa Journal* (7 November 1936) at 19.

<sup>43</sup> “My Friend, the Hangman,” *Vancouver Sun* (6 February 1971) at 31.

<sup>44</sup> “Arthur Ellis Succumbs to Brief Illness,” *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* (22 July 1938) at 7.





While Ellis may have hidden his drinking more than Radclive did, they both had the same difficulty with the bottle. Early reports noted his nervousness and described him as, "a mild little man with a fondness for strong perfumes."<sup>45</sup> Maybe to mask the smell of alcohol? Another reporter ran into Ellis on the train out of Vancouver and described him as a fluent speaker, cheery and affable.<sup>46</sup> A reporter for the *Calgary Herald* described how Ellis, a slim, dapper man, wearing thick, rimless spectacles, was always meticulously dressed, and while shunned by adults, was supposedly beloved by the children in his neighbourhood.<sup>47</sup>

Like Radclive, Ellis courted the press, trying to manipulate the image of the hangman in a favourable direction. For example, the following article, reprinted from the *Toronto News* in 1911, gave a

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<sup>45</sup> "The Air Dance," *Agassiz Record* (7 March 1914) at 22.

<sup>46</sup> "The Man in the Smoker," *Vancouver Province* (17 January 1932) at 39.

<sup>47</sup> Gilbert Draper, "Canada's Famous Hangman," *Calgary Herald* (4 November 1933) at 28.

picture of the kind-hearted hangman in confrontation with a budding psychopath. The reader would think that Ellis was more like God in the famous song, “His Eye is on the Sparrow,” rather than being a psychopathic killer himself.

### *Tale of a Sparrow*

A ragged little urchin was torturing a young sparrow at the corner of Elizabeth and Elm streets the other morning. He had a string tied around its leg and was pulling it along the road. A man walking down the street saw the poor bird pitifully fluttering in its efforts to escape. He approached the child. Placing his hand on its head he said: “Now, sonny, don’t you know that it is only heathen people that torture anything. You should be kind to everyone, and they will be kind to you.” The kindness of his voice reassured the urchin, and taking a five-cent piece from his pocket he gave it the boy saying: “Now, give me the bird and promise not to do such a cruel act again.” The boy willingly did so, and the man climbed a neighboring porch and placed the little sparrow so that it was beyond capture by any boys again. He then went on his way whistling merrily. That man was Arthur Ellis, the official executioner for the Dominion of Canada, spoken of more familiarly as “the hangman.”<sup>48</sup>

After a hanging in Peterborough in June 1910, Ellis, still lobbying for the job to replace Radclive, sought affirmation as to his good work and as reported, “some of the officials rather resented his call later in the day, asking if things were all right, if they were satisfied, and bidding them good-by. The Rev. Canon Davidson almost collapsed when he was called into his study and found the hangman waiting to bid him good-bye and comment on the success of the job.”<sup>49</sup>

A reporter for the *Vancouver Province*, witnessing Ellis at an execution, noted that he was impeccably dressed, “strutting and saluting continually” like a “pompous military lackey” and would order “all but officers in uniform to remove their hats” before commanding that the prisoner should be brought through the door to the gallows. The hanging was “his party,” and Ellis was lightning fast as he fixed the strap on the ankles, adjusted the hood and rope, and pulled the lever at the start of the Lord’s Prayer. The

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<sup>48</sup> Reprinted in *Victoria Times* (20 April 1911) at 17; and *Owen Sound Sun* (2 May 1911) at 4.

<sup>49</sup> “Affable Executioner,” *St. Joseph News-Press* (6 September 1910) at 3.

reporter noted the choking, gasping noises that got weaker and then gradually died out.<sup>50</sup>

We believe that Ellis continually lied about his background. For example, at a hanging in Montreal in 1911, it was reported that while he was born in England, he was educated in British Columbia and later went to the United States as a young man, where he first officiated at a hanging somewhere in the Southern States and subsequently had a long career there. He had now hanged 189 men.<sup>51</sup>

Like Radcliffe, Ellis presented himself as a humanitarian. In a 1913 interview with the *Montreal Star*, Ellis “expressed very feelingly the torture he suffers every time he receives a telegram from a sheriff telling him that he will be required to take the life of one of his fellow men. ‘Nobody,’ says he, ‘has the slightest knowledge of the intense pain and suffering the executioner feels in his heart and soul when he is told to send a prisoner into eternity- this is, of course, if the man has any human feeling.’”<sup>52</sup> We may well doubt any of this, because a few months later, when a man’s sentence was commuted in Toronto, Ellis suggested that the commutation was a travesty of justice. He claimed that he had hanged 307 people already. The report went on:

“What are your feelings when called upon to pull the trap?” asked the reporter. “It is a humane duty,” responded Ellis. “In the ordinary way of performing the duty I have always made a business to obliterate sympathy or sense of feeling. The execution occupies a matter of about fifty seconds, in fact the condemned man has but little time to think. When I spring the trap, my mind is relaxed, and I have the feeling that I am ten years younger. I do not allow sympathy to interfere with my official duty...”<sup>53</sup>

These remarks as to the commutation being a travesty of justice despite the petition of clemency signed by 55 to 60,000 people, prompted the Rev. Patterson to launch a complaint against Ellis with the Department of Justice, in terms of the “indecentcy and

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<sup>50</sup> Harold Winch, “I Saw a Man Die,” *Vancouver Province* (5 Dec 1936) at 11.

<sup>51</sup> “Screams for Mercy,” *Montreal Star* (26 May 1911) at 3.

<sup>52</sup> “Yacovloff May Get Reprieve,” *Montreal Star* (16 January 1913) at 9.

<sup>53</sup> “Hangman Ellis Lost a Job,” reprinted in *Lindsay Watchman Warder* (16 October 1913) at 11.

insolence” of the hangman, who had displayed his “nauseous blood hunger” in the newspaper interview.<sup>54</sup>

In Winnipeg in 1916, Ellis claimed that he had hanged more than 300 people but he would have liked to also hang the Kaiser. Ellis went on to say, “I spring the trap as soon as possible to put the condemned men out of agony without unnecessary delay. It is the kindest thing to do. Of course I dislike the job, but someone has to do it, and it should be a man who knows how to do it well.”<sup>55</sup>

Ellis continued to inflate his body count as if this was a virtue, although there was no consistency in any of his claims. The following year, in 1917, Ellis claimed that a hanging carried out in Halifax marked his 324th death penalty success.<sup>56</sup> In 1918, Ellis added von Hindenburg to the Kaiser as desired victims of his hangings, although in these cases, he would prolong their agony. He now claimed 486 victims.<sup>57</sup> His body count kept changing. In 1923, he claimed 417 victims.<sup>58</sup> By early 1929, he claimed to have hanged 569.<sup>59</sup>

Ellis allowed a newspaper man to interview him at a hanging in Woodstock in 1921. One of the reasons that Ellis called for the centralization of hangings at one place in each province, instead of having hangings at various county jails, was that there was too much sympathy and calls for commutation when the murderer was a local man from the county.<sup>60</sup> The reporter noted that Ellis was a “dramatic talker,” but would not answer some questions about his work given that he was under a contract to eventually write a book about it. The reporter noted that Ellis “has a flair for storytelling and at the conclusion of our business talk he sat for an hour smoking and spinning yarns with great effect. He laughs easily... As for his own viewpoint on the matter of executing men he declared,

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<sup>54</sup> Rev. T, A Patterson Complaint against Ellis, National Archives, RG 13-A-2, Vol #181 File # 1913-1383.

<sup>55</sup> “Hangman Wants Just ‘One More,’” *Winnipeg Tribune* (2 June 1916) at 1.

<sup>56</sup> “Hanged this Morning,” *Halifax Evening Mail* (27 July 1917) at 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Has Ambition to Hang Kaiser and Hindenburg,” *Brandon Sun* (2 October 1918) at 3.

<sup>58</sup> “Frederick Baldwin Hangs,” *Owen Sound Sun-Times* (15 January 1923) at 6.

<sup>59</sup> “O’Neil,” *Toronto Star* (4 Jan 1929) at 8

<sup>60</sup> “Why Not Centralize Executions,” *Toronto Star Weekly* (4 June 1921) at 19 and 21.

“I am the last wheel and the smallest wheel in carrying out the extreme sentence of the law... I take my work very religiously... Entering a cell five minutes before an execution, bringing a man out and hanging him is a mighty big strain which the average man on the street does not realize.” Ellis went on to explain that rapidity was part of being humane to the victim and “there is not as much pain for a prisoner in the actual execution as in having a tooth pulled.”<sup>61</sup>

At a typical execution like the one in the Parry Sound jail yard in late 1928, Ellis “wore a morning coat, grey trousers, and a black tie. It was just 8 seconds from the time the condemned man mounted the scaffold steps until the trap was sprung and as the man fell Ellis stood at attention with his right hand to his forehead in salute.”<sup>62</sup> In 1931, a newspaper reporter in Edmonton commented on Ellis’s nervousness involving “a continuous movement of the hands- twitching and trembling... He talked incessantly and was noticed time and again between lapses of conversation to be biting his fingernails. His fingernails were bitten short and before he had left us some time later, they were bleeding.”<sup>63</sup>

Arthur Ellis expressed no concern about hanging a woman, having done so on several occasions. “The idea of hanging a guilty woman does not worry me in the least,” Ellis said.<sup>64</sup> In 1928, he even expressed disappointment when a woman’s sentence was commuted while her husband was hanged. “The woman deserves to hang,” he told reporters.<sup>65</sup> A few months later, in August 1929, he hanged Mrs. Mary Viau and her lover in Hull, Quebec. Despite his bravado, one newspaper reported as to the nervousness of Ellis after having been awakened at the jail in the early hours by a messenger looking for the chaplain:

Finding it impossible to sleep, he donned his morning clothes, official attire for the execution, and walked out into the night. Pacing up and down the narrow sidewalk across the prison lawn, Ellis clasped and unclasped his hands in the uneasy motions of a man distraught. When

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> “Official Hangman Busy Buying Gifts,” *Toronto Star* (22 Dec 1928) at 2.

<sup>63</sup> “Hangman Just an Ordinary Man,” *Edmonton Journal* (3 March 1931) at 1.

<sup>64</sup> “Hanging Woman,” *Olean, N.Y. Times Herald* (2 March 1928) at 1.

<sup>65</sup> “George McDonald,” *Montreal Gazette* (23 March 1928) at 4.

newspapermen tried to interview him, he repelled them with the statement: "A man can't talk with this awful thing on his mind."<sup>66</sup>

Supposedly, Radcliffe started to doubt the value of capital punishment, but Ellis never did. When he received an invitation to join the Anti-Capital Punishment Association in 1930, Ellis wrote, "You uplifters are a source of worry to any decent, law-abiding person. But if a jury finds you at any time guilty of murder and a judge sentences you to death, I will willingly hang you."<sup>67</sup>

After decapitating a woman in March 1935 and losing a host of jobs to rival hangmen, Ellis wrote a letter to the editor of the *Toronto Star* in January 1936, where he defended capital punishment as a necessary deterrent and also stated that female murderers deserved no special mercy.<sup>68</sup> He also now claimed that the electric chair, but not lethal gas, should be used instead of hanging.<sup>69</sup> He decried the stigma given to him as a hangman and considered himself a loyal soldier of the state who should be treated no differently than the judge or jury.<sup>70</sup> Unlike Radcliffe, who was unsure as to the guilt of some of his victims, Ellis apparently believed that he had never hanged an innocent person.<sup>71</sup>

At a point late in his career, when "Sam Edwards" was getting most of the hanging jobs, Ellis represented himself to a reporter as a benefactor of the children in his neighborhood in Montreal. Supposedly, he was called "Uncle Arthur" and was helping a little ten-year-old girl to save her money rather than spend it on sweets. Furthermore, Ellis reportedly organized football clubs for the youngsters living in his district and bought them footballs and uniforms and also interceded with senior clubs on their behalf for the use of playing fields. In the same article, Ellis claimed to be an Anglican but did not go to church, explaining that his religion was

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<sup>66</sup> "Marie Viau & Lefebvre," *Ottawa Citizen* (23 Aug 1929) at 1; "Curious Crowds" at 2.

<sup>67</sup> "Hangman Dislikes Reformers," *Windsor Star* (3 April 1930) at 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis, "Capital Punishment," *Toronto Star Weekly* (11 Jan 1936) at 52.

<sup>69</sup> "Canadian Hangman," *Toronto Star Weekly* (16 May 1936) at 1 and 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> "Hangman Ellis Reported Dying," *Montreal Star* (20 July 1938) at 3.

helping the poor and less fortunate, which the church did not do.<sup>72</sup> The article included a picture of the dapper Ellis taken when he went to the local bank:



#### IV. SPEED

One major theme in the hanging career of Ellis was speed. He would brag about being the fastest hangman around. While speed might be a merciful factor, the narcissistic Ellis seemed to treat it more as a badge of his own greatness. He did not seem to care

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<sup>72</sup> Gilbert Draper, “Real Human is Claim for Noted Canada Hangman,” reprinted in *Calgary Herald* (4 Nov 1933) at 28; *Soult Star* (7 Nov 1933) at 2; *Edmonton Journal* (21 Nov 1933) at 5.

about last words or prayers, or the convenience of the victim. What mattered was having the record for the shortest time between when the prisoner stepped on the gallows and the drop.<sup>73</sup> What mattered was how quickly he could pinion the arms and legs, place the hood over the head, adjust the rope and pull the trap. At a hanging in Montreal in December 1912, the condemned man made an attempt to address those present but was prevented when Ellis, “with almost frantic haste, placed the black cap over his head and sprang the bolt releasing the trap.”<sup>74</sup> At a hanging in Portage la Prairie in 1913, Ellis took only 23 seconds.<sup>75</sup> Later that year in Vancouver, he carried out an execution in just 30 seconds, from the moment the man entered the prison yard to when he was hanged from the gallows.<sup>76</sup> In 1916, in Parry Sound, Ontario, it took only 15 seconds between when the procession left the death cell until the trap was sprung.<sup>77</sup> In 1919, in Cornwall, Ontario, it took 19 seconds between the victim touching the steps of the gallows and dropping through the trap.<sup>78</sup> At a 1924 double hanging in London, Ontario, Ellis pulled the trap before the Minister even started the Lord’s prayer.<sup>79</sup>

The record times kept getting shorter, and by 1924, he allegedly executed a very cooperative young man who ran up the gallows, and the trap was sprung just 11 seconds after the youth had left his cell!<sup>80</sup> When it came time to hang Bonnin in Winnipeg in 1927, “it took the hangman just 11 seconds to place him on the trap, pinion his legs, pull a hood over his face, put the noose around his neck and pull the lever.”<sup>81</sup> Later that year in Regina, it took only 3 seconds after the victim was on the gallows until Ellis pulled the trap.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “Ellis Talks Too Much,” *Lethbridge Herald* (19 Dec 1912) at 5.

<sup>74</sup> “Afraid to let Speak,” *Montreal Gazette* (21 Dec 1912) at 9.

<sup>75</sup> “Outlaw Baron,” *Manitoba Free Press* (21 May 1913) at 14.

<sup>76</sup> “Flying Dutchman,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (28 Aug 1913) at 2.

<sup>77</sup> Pfeifer & Leyton-Brown, *supra* note 2 at 189-190.

<sup>78</sup> “Foreigner Hanged,” *Montreal Gazette* (29 March 1919) at 6.

<sup>79</sup> “Murrell and Topping,” *Montreal Star* (10 April 1924) at 24.

<sup>80</sup> “Slayer Faces Death Bravely,” *Tribune* (25 March 1924) at 6.

<sup>81</sup> Dale Brawn, *Last Moments: Sentenced to Death in Canada* (Canada: Quagmire Press, 2011) at 146 [Brawn].

<sup>82</sup> “Pays Penalty,” *Edmonton Journal* (26 Aug 1927) at 1.



From newspaper accounts, it appears that the vast majority of condemned men and women walked bravely to the gallows, having been well prepared by their spiritual advisors and fortified by alcohol or drugs.<sup>83</sup> Occasionally, Ellis had a more difficult subject that slowed him down. For example, in Montreal in May 1911, the young Italian victim was screaming hysterically and had to be held up while Ellis swiftly hanged him, as other prisoners booed the hangman.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, at a hanging in Vancouver in 1916, a frantic and hysterical Italian man who believed that he would be given a new trial was strapped to a heavy armchair, and Ellis hanged the man while he was still in the chair. When Ellis was adjusting the chair, the man seized his hand. As reported, "instantly the hangman turned on him and with his free hand punched the fist that gripped his wrist. "What is the matter with you?" Ellis hotly demanded." The man kept asking to be taken back to court and "Ellis yelled fiercely at the condemned man in Italian, bidding him be still..."<sup>85</sup>

Some of the condemned garnered a great deal of public sympathy, and Ellis would face a hostile crowd in his role as executioner. Such was the case with McCullough in Toronto in 1919. Ellis performed the execution without a hitch, but he was "shaking like a leaf" and was very agitated.<sup>86</sup> After the hanging, he needed police protection in the face of a hostile crowd.<sup>87</sup>

## V. SCHEDULING AND TRAVELLING

Another theme in the life of the hangman was scheduling and travelling. Ellis spent a huge amount of time on trains, travelling from coast to coast. For example, in June 1913, he was scheduled to leave Vancouver, travel to Toronto and then go to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan for a double hanging, and then travel to Victoria and

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<sup>83</sup> As to the use of alcohol and drugs, see Brawn *supra* note 81 at 127-134; Ken Leyton-Brown, *The Practice of Execution in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010) at 80.

<sup>84</sup> "Screams for Mercy at Foot of Gallows," *Montreal Star* (26 May 1911) at 3.

<sup>85</sup> "Ferrante," *Vancouver Province* (15 Aug 1916) at 15.

<sup>86</sup> "McCullough," *Kingston Standard* (14 June 1919) at 1; *Toronto Star* (13 June 1919) at 1 and 4.

<sup>87</sup> For a full account of the case see, Mark Johnson, *No Tears to the Gallows: The Strange Case of Frank McCullough* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 2000).

then to Nanaimo.<sup>88</sup> It was reported in early January 1926 that he had seven engagements from Halifax to Vancouver in the next 30 days, plus four more dates in February.<sup>89</sup> The amount of time that Ellis spent on trains was quite extraordinary. When we look at the period when he was called upon to hang serial killer Earle Nelson in Winnipeg on January 13, 1928, we note that he had travelled from Montreal to Vancouver and then to Winnipeg. After the hanging in Winnipeg, he travelled to Halifax to hang someone on January 19, 1928.<sup>90</sup> He then travelled clear across the country to Vancouver to hang two youths, only to have their sentences reprieved after he arrived.<sup>91</sup> This was all within the month of January 1928. At the end of 1928, he allegedly asserted that he needed a plane for fear of giving up some of his engagements due to travel difficulties.<sup>92</sup> There was also the inevitable train delays for weather or equipment malfunctions. For example, in July 1929, he arrived at New Westminster only one hour before the hanging at 8 in the morning.<sup>93</sup>

On the information of the sheriff, a judge would often fix a date for an execution based on the availability of Ellis to perform the sentence. But it might still be the case that sometimes Ellis could not be in two places at once. For example, in February 1926, there was a hanging in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, by a “deputy,” while Ellis was in Montreal hanging someone.<sup>94</sup>

If there was a conflict in the schedule, most sheriffs would not dare to act as the hangman. For example, when Ellis did not arrive on time to hang two men in Winnipeg, a judge granted a five-day reprieve until Ellis arrived.<sup>95</sup> Ellis was scheduled to hang two men in Quebec City in 1920, but they were reprieved pending further appeal. When a new date was set in July, Ellis could not be in Quebec City for the double hanging as promised because he was executing someone in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The local

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<sup>88</sup> “Busy Days for Hangman Ellis,” *Vancouver World* (28 June 1913) at 2.

<sup>89</sup> “Canada Hangman,” *Atlanta Constitution* (11 Jan 1926) at 12.

<sup>90</sup> “Negro Wife-Slayer,” *Montreal Gazette* (19 Jan 1928) at 14.

<sup>91</sup> “Youths Are Saved,” *Vancouver Province* (26 Jan 1928) at 1.

<sup>92</sup> “Hangman Ellis Wants Plane,” *Ottawa Journal* (7 Dec 1928) at 1.

<sup>93</sup> “Delayed While Hangman Arrives,” *Van Province* (23 July 1929) at 5.

<sup>94</sup> “Two Murderers,” *Ottawa Journal* (9 Feb 1926) at 2.

<sup>95</sup> “Hangman’s Delay,” *Saskatoon Star* (26 Sept 1918) at 1.

sheriff in Quebec City would not perform the hanging, but instead had a prisoner, a "black" man called Allen, released from jail in exchange for acting as hangman. Apparently, Allen did not bungle the job.<sup>96</sup> We do have an example of a sheriff in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia hanging a man in November 1922, because on the same date, Ellis was in Brantford, Ontario, at an execution. In 1927, a sheriff in Regina was beside himself when Ellis did not show up as scheduled, and at the last minute, the Department of Justice granted a reprieve of 10 days, during which time Ellis arrived.<sup>97</sup> Because Ellis was in Quebec executing someone on January 11, 1929, the sheriff in Regina got another court order deferring an execution until Ellis could arrive.<sup>98</sup>

## VI. HIS SHARE OF BUNGLES

A reporter for the *Manitoba Free Press* noted the following at the hanging of the famous outlaw Krafchenko in 1914:

Ellis himself was terribly nervous, but this did not in any manner affect his work. His nervousness was plainly seen as he took the measurement of the stretch of the rope, which gave a full four inches with the weight of the drop. His hands shook as he measured the distance of the dead man's feet from the ground and were shaking a great deal when he affixed the string to the upper part of the rope which showed the stretch.<sup>99</sup>

While he may have been a nervous type, Ellis presented himself as a competent hangman. A few months before the hanging of serial killer Earle Nelson in 1928, Ellis bragged that after hanging over 400 people, he had never bungled a single execution.<sup>100</sup> However, this was a bald-faced lie on his part. While he bragged about his perfect record, an editorial in the *Vancouver Sun* asserted that even

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<sup>96</sup> "A Colored Hangman," *North Bay Nugget* (13 July 1920) at 1; "Two Rumanians Hanged," *Montreal Star* (13 July 1920) at 1; "Double Hanging," *Montreal Gazette* (13 July 1920) at 2.

<sup>97</sup> As recounted in "Could Happen," *Regina Leader-Post* (24 Sept 1947) at 3.

<sup>98</sup> "Defer Date of Haack Hanging," *Regina Leader-Post* (4 Dec 1928) at 11.

<sup>99</sup> "Krafchenko," *Manitoba Free Press* (10 July 1914) at 3.

<sup>100</sup> "Hangman's Pride," *Free Press* (17 March 1927) at 6; *Calgary Herald* (17 March 1927) at 16; *Regina Leader-Post* at 5; next day in *Edmonton Journal* at 19.

Ellis had a share of carefully hidden mistakes.<sup>101</sup> Many executions took place without any newspaper reporters allowed, so the mistakes may have been far greater than we can tell.

Arguably, despite his drinking, Ellis probably had no bungles during the first five years of his Canadian career. It is possible that a bungle occurred in August 1915 in New Westminster, when Ellis allegedly misjudged the length of the drop he gave to McKillarney, whose feet touched the floor after the drop and who was not pronounced dead until 18 minutes later.<sup>102</sup> One may question the definition of bungle. Clearly there were many cases where the victim was “strangled” rather than having their neck broken. For example, decades after a hanging in August 1927, a reporter who had witnessed the execution claimed that Ellis had bungled the case because 13 minutes passed before the man was pronounced dead, and the doctor confirmed that the man did not have a broken neck but was strangled to death.<sup>103</sup> But was the victim conscious for any relevant time after the drop? Probably not. Similarly, very little detail emerged in the press as to a so-called “bungle” by Ellis in Quebec City in November 1931. All we know is that it took 16 minutes for the victim to be pronounced dead from strangulation, and the sheriff declared that Ellis had bungled the case.<sup>104</sup> But again, was the victim conscious for any relevant time after the drop?

However, we do have quite a few cases where Ellis did indeed bungle the job, while he continued to pretend that he had never bungled a case. For example, at a double simultaneous hanging in Winnipeg in 1918, Ellis mixed up the ropes and gave the longer drop to the heavier of the two men. The local *Tribune* said, “his head was all but torn from the body.”<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, you would not know about the bungled execution of Joseph Arthur Campbell in April 1919 in Edmonton

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<sup>101</sup> “Method of Capital Punishment,” *Vancouver Sun* (11 Dec 1922) at 4.

<sup>102</sup> “New Westminster News,” *Vancouver Daily News Advertiser* (4 Aug 1915) at 4.

<sup>103</sup> “A Witness to a Hanging,” *Montreal Star* (17 Feb 1973) at 45.

<sup>104</sup> “Ellis Did Very Bad Job Quebec Sheriff Charges,” *Toronto Star* (20 Nov 1931) at 1.

<sup>105</sup> “Murderers Deny Guilt,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (2 Oct 1918) at 1.

if you read the account of the execution in the local paper.<sup>106</sup> But decades later, while the debate over capital punishment was raging, a reporter who had witnessed the hanging gave the following account:

...the man hung unconscious for perhaps three or four minutes before he began to writhe and twist. The lunatic hangman had already disappeared to partake of whatever macabre refreshment is required after such solemnities. Before he could be summoned back, Campbell had broken his hands and feet free and was climbing up the rope, clutching at his neck and uttering hoarse and frightful cries of terror and despair.

Ellis reappeared, surveyed the condemned man with a cold and practiced eye and demanded a stepladder. Then he mounted the ladder, tore Campbell's hands from his throat, pinioned those frantic hands to the dying man's sides with his own arms and stepping from the ladder swung on the body until the wretched creature was dead.<sup>107</sup>

The same reporter also asserted that after the hanging, Ellis stated:

'You think that's bad? You should see some electrocutions. I've been doing quite a bit of burning lately for New York State. They can't find a regular man. And I tell you burning is tough... Electrocution is terrible. Give me hanging any day.'<sup>108</sup>

The hanging may have been bungled, but did Ellis really hang onto Campbell to kill him? Can the reporter be trusted? In any event, there is no evidence that Ellis was ever hired in New York State under any possible name to execute people in the electric chair.

One execution in the same period that was not completely hidden was the hanging of Antoine Spracuse (some say Sprecacce) in the Bordeaux jail in Montreal in September 1919. The youth only weighed 110 pounds, so the drop had to be long. But because of the neck and chest strength of the young man, the drop was not long enough to break his neck. A local newspaper reported that “he was conscious” after the drop and, for four minutes, “the dangling body was wrenched by convulsive movements.” Another four minutes passed before the body was cut down, but then an

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<sup>106</sup> “Without Sign of Fear,” *Edmonton Journal* (23 April 1919) at 6.

<sup>107</sup> Harold Weir, “Chatting with Weir,” *Vancouver Sun* (13 Dec 1951) at 3.

<sup>108</sup> Harold Weir, “No Compromise,” *Vancouver Sun* (17 May 1955) at 4.

hour passed before death was pronounced.<sup>109</sup> This was because the young man was not dead when he was taken from the gallows.<sup>110</sup>

Despite these botches, Ellis claimed in an interview in late 1920 that he had never botched a single case.<sup>111</sup> Subsequently, another botched execution took place in Winnipeg in the summer of 1926. The local *Free Press* admitted the bungle but gave few details.<sup>112</sup> The local *Tribune* also put the story on the seventh page but gave more expansive coverage.<sup>113</sup> Other papers across Canada noted that Prociev (Prociev), a 48-year-old man weighing 220 pounds, was decapitated:

The drop from the death trap decapitated him. His neck was not strong enough to support the weight of his body in the drop and was severed.<sup>114</sup>

Another report proclaimed:

“I knew it! I knew it!” shouted the executioner, stamping down the steps after his professional pride had received a jolt. “That is the first time in 182 hangings,” he cried.<sup>115</sup>

Decades later, a witness to this execution wrote that before the hanging, Ellis was talking to a man who was the brother of Prociev. Ellis, “kept up a running commentary of lewd stories, laughed at his own poor jokes, and even in his person looked offensive because of his beady little eyes and outsized watch chain.” After Ellis pulled the trap, “Onlookers were horrified to see the head separate completely from the body and go thumping across the jail yard, bouncing inside the black cap. The trunk fell immediately below the trap door and the man’s blood gushed out from two arteries in the neck like the streams from two fire hoses. It formed

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<sup>109</sup> “Young Slayer Hanged,” *Montreal Gazette* (13 Sept 1919) at 4.

<sup>110</sup> “Hanged, But Not Officially Dead for Over an Hour,” *Montreal Star* (12 Sept 1919) at 3.

<sup>111</sup> “Hangman Ellis,” *Brandon Expositor* (2 Dec 1920) at 14.

<sup>112</sup> “Prociev Hanged,” *Free Press Evening Bulletin* (25 Aug 1926) at 1; “Hanging of Prociev is Horribly Bungled,” *Free Press* (26 Aug 1926) at 7.

<sup>113</sup> “Wife Slayer is Executed,” *Tribune* (25 Aug 1926) at 7.

<sup>114</sup> “Pays Penalty,” *Brandon Sun* (25 Aug 1926) at 12; *Saskatoon Star*, at 1; *Victoria Times Colonist* at 15; *Ottawa Journal* at 1; *Lethbridge Herald* at 1; *Windsor Star* at 1; *Montreal Gazette* (26 Aug 1926) at 3. Some papers do not mention the decapitation- *Edmonton Journal* (25 Aug 1926) at 1; *Calgary Herald* at 1.

<sup>115</sup> “Gossip,” *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* (12 Jan 1935) at 4.

little lakes and rivulets and as the blood left the body the man's knees straightened out until the legs were lying completely on the ground.”<sup>116</sup>

Despite this bungle, which was widely reported, Ellis at this time had no rivals. For example, there were nine executions in 1927, seven in 1928, and fifteen in 1929. Ellis performed all of them for those three years.

Ellis continued to lie about his clean record. After it was reported that he was thinking of retiring in 1927, Ellis denied the report and stated, “I have officiated at more than 400 hangings and have yet to make a bungle... I am justly proud of that record,” he added.<sup>117</sup> Earlier that year he proclaimed, “I may not have the most delicate profession in the world, but I'm darn proud of my reputation.”<sup>118</sup>

Finally, we come to the most spectacular bungle, one that received such wide publicity that Ellis could no longer deny it. However, as we will note, he denied responsibility for it. Arthur Ellis hanged a woman in Montreal at the end of March 1935. Mrs. Tomasino Sarao was hanged, along with two males, for the insurance murder of her husband. The local newspaper reports were very discreet, the *Gazette* just mentioning at the end of the story that “the jury returned a verdict of death due to decapitation,” and that the lawyer for the woman had complained that she was 187 pounds and the rope was too long, and that “calculation by the hangman should be scientifically exact.”<sup>119</sup> The *Montreal Star* noted the hangings but refused to print anything about the decapitation on the day it happened.<sup>120</sup> However, the *Toronto Star* stated, “the rope was too long, permitting the body to drop 18 feet before being jerked up on the rope's end. The force of the jerk decapitated her and her body fell 12 feet further,

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<sup>116</sup> A. G. Carlye, “How One Man Was Hanged More Than 30 Years Ago,” *Ottawa Citizen* (12 February 1960) at 6.

<sup>117</sup> “Never Bungled Yet,” *Calgary Herald* (17 March 1927) at 16.

<sup>118</sup> “Ellis Will be on Hand,” *Tribune* (22 January 1927) at 1.

<sup>119</sup> “Bodies Taken by Families,” *Montreal Gazette* (30 March 1935) at 5.

<sup>120</sup> “Woman, Two Men Die on Gallows,” *Montreal Star* (29 March 1935) at 3 and 13.

thudding in the snow below.”<sup>121</sup> Her lawyer stated that after the body crashed into the yard, the head fell to the ground several seconds later.<sup>122</sup> There were a raft of newspapers in the United States that carried a story about how proud Ellis was of his skill, and that he was suing the newspaperman who had allegedly said that the drop Ellis had given Sarao was 18 feet, which was impossible, since the gallows were only 12 feet from the ground.<sup>123</sup>

The public backlash over the barbaric decapitation of a woman led to immediate calls for an inquiry and ultimately fed various debates about using alternative methods of capital punishment, like electrocution or the gas chambers.<sup>124</sup> Ellis reportedly favoured the electric chair, despite his comments earlier in his career about how superior hanging was compared to the electric chair.<sup>125</sup> A special parliamentary committee investigated methods of capital punishment<sup>126</sup> and in the end decided to retain the noose.<sup>127</sup> Ellis was miffed that he was not called upon to testify, while sheriffs who “knew nothing” in his opinion were called.<sup>128</sup>

While there were many opportunities for Ellis to defend himself to the press at the time it happened, he later came up with a story that blamed others for the bungle. Perhaps he was telling the truth, but he was still responsible to properly assess the weight of the condemned person.

Ellis stated, “In Quebec, the hangman is not allowed to see the condemned person until the latter is ready to be led to the scaffold. I have always had to depend on the information given to me by authorities as to the height, age, and weight of the

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<sup>121</sup> “Widow, Two Slayers Hanged for Murder,” *Toronto Star* (29 March 1935) at 29.

<sup>122</sup> “Bungled Execution Inquiry is Sought,” *Montreal Gazette* (1 April 1935) at 5.

<sup>123</sup> “Canadian Hangman Proud,” *Seminole Producer* (19 July 1935); *Sandusky Register* (21 July 1935); *Orlando Sentinel* (21 July 1935); *El Paso Herald-Post* (2 Aug 1935); *Danville Bee* (4 Sept 1935); and many more.

<sup>124</sup> “Decapitating Woman Will Be Investigated,” *Toronto Star* (29 March 1935), at 2; “Bungled Execution Inquiry is Sought,” *Montreal Gazette* (1 April 1935), at 5; “Justice Department Will Probe,” *Tribune* (14 March 1936) at 3.

<sup>125</sup> “Hanging Antiquated,” *Regina Leader-Post* (14 March 1936) at 11.

<sup>126</sup> “Dominion Seeking Substitute for Hangman’s Noose,” *Windsor Star* (14 March 1936) at 11.

<sup>127</sup> “Canada Retains Noose,” *Vancouver Sun* (18 March 1937).

<sup>128</sup> “Sheriffs Shut Eyes at Hanging,” *Toronto Star Weekly* (6 March 1937) at 14.



condemned, and it was on this information the I calculated the drop for Mrs. Sarao. After the execution the authorities admitted that they had made an error, and that Mrs. Sarao was 40 pounds heavier than they had reported.”<sup>129</sup> He repeated later to a friend that, “At the women’s prison I was not allowed to see her... and I had to get details of her estimated weight and body structure second hand,” and he filed for safekeeping the paper which he had been given by the jailer and officials giving the woman’s [original and wrong] weight.<sup>130</sup>

The excuse is doubtful because Ellis bragged to a journalist that he could judge the weight of a person just by looking at them and be correct within a fraction of a pound. For example, he instantly judged the weight of the journalist to be 208 pounds and then proceeded to tell him what drop would be required to hang him.<sup>131</sup> So why was he not judging the weight of Sarao when he was leading her to the gallows?

There seems to be some myth that the decapitation Mrs. Sarao in Montreal in 1935 was Ellis’s last hanging.<sup>132</sup> This is certainly not true. While “Sam Edwards” and “Joe Branchaud” had already secured positions from various sheriffs for some years, Ellis still had some retainers to fulfill. A few days after the decapitation of Mrs. Sarao, Ellis hanged someone in Campbell’s Bay, Quebec.<sup>133</sup> Then in May 1935, he performed a hanging in Edmonton,<sup>134</sup> and did so again in August 1935 in that city.<sup>135</sup> However, his reputation clearly took a hit, and he appears to have lost a lot of future jobs in Quebec and Ontario to “Edwards” and “Branchaud.” In June 1936, the *Montreal Gazette* reported that Ellis was retired, but several days later, it was reported that Ellis was not retired at all, except in the Province of Quebec. He was on his way to perform a hanging in

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<sup>129</sup> “Canadian Hangman Doubts Gas Chamber,” *Toronto Star Weekly* (16 May 1936) at 1 and 4.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> As recalled by McKelvie, “My Friend Arthur, the Hangman,” *Shoulder Strap: Official Journal of the B.C. Provincial Police*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed (October 1945) at 27.

<sup>132</sup> Mark Leslie and Shayna Krishnasamy, *Macabre Montreal* (Toronto: Dundrum, 2018) 33-50.

<sup>133</sup> “Goes to Gallows,” *Lethbridge Herald* (5 April 1935) at 1.

<sup>134</sup> “Pays Penalty,” *Lethbridge Herald* (15 May 1935) at 1.

<sup>135</sup> “Hawryluk,” *Tribune* (21 August 1935) at 18.

New Brunswick.<sup>136</sup> He hanged two brothers in Dorchester, New Brunswick on September 22, 1936.<sup>137</sup> He hanged three in New Westminster in early November 1936, and another toward the end of November 1936.<sup>138</sup> As late as March 1937, he hanged a man in Edmonton.<sup>139</sup> So while the Sarao bungle did not altogether end his career, the boycott of many sheriffs led to complete collapse of Ellis's finances and health over the next two years.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> "Ellis Retires," *Montreal Gazette* (6 June 1936) at 19; followed by "Ellis Contradicts Retirement Story," *Montreal Gazette* (8 Jun 1936) at 7.

<sup>137</sup> "Brothers Hanged," *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* (23 September 1936) at 1.

<sup>138</sup> "Ellis," *Vancouver Province* (6 November 1936) at 9.

<sup>139</sup> "Ernst Hanged," *Edmonton Journal* (3 March 3, 1937, at 1.

<sup>140</sup> See Andy O'Brien, "My Friend, The Hangman," *Free Press*, Feb. 6, 1971, at 112-115. This is an excerpt from one chapter in the book by O'Brien, *My Friend the Hangman* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1970) dealing with 20 people the journalist met over the years.