

Chapter 6

“Arthur Ellis”: Mercenary Motives and Public Scandals

A major theme in Ellis's long career as hangman involved financial matters. In his first years as hangman, he complained that without the federal salary that had been paid to Radclive, he could hardly make a living at it. He had to have a second job. While first living in Toronto, Ellis had several jobs as a mechanic working at a lathe, but when his hangman identity was discovered, he was fired.¹ He also understandably had a hard time explaining his repeated absences from the job.² He then moved to British Columbia in 1913, where he lived in New Westminster in the vicinity of Albert Crescent,³ and was hired as a bailiff-doorman-usher at the courthouse in New Westminster, involving the very courtrooms where murder trials were being held. Objections were voiced as to this “grimly inappropriate job” when accused murderers, before conviction, were seeing the very man who might kill them, a sinister foreboding of the outcome of the trial.⁴ At one point in 1915, it was reported that after returning from a trip to England, Ellis announced his retirement and that he would return to England, even though he owned a farm in Prince Rupert, British Columbia.⁵

While Sheriff Mowat in Toronto had initially been supportive of Ellis, he later complained about the expense of bringing Ellis back to Toronto for hangings after Ellis moved to British Columbia. For example, in a case that was reprieved and then ultimately commuted, Ellis was brought from British Columbia to

¹ “Hangman Ellis Tired of His Job,” *Lindsay Watchman* (2 January 1913) at 8.

² “Executioner Has a Grievance,” *Montreal Gazette* (23 December 1912) at 17.

³ “Death Catches Own Agent,” *Van. Province* (22 July 1938) at 9.

⁴ Editorial in *Vancouver World* (23 June 1913) at 6; also see “Few People Aware That Usher in Court is the Executioner,” *Brandon Sun* (17 July 1913) at 10.

⁵ “Canada Without Hangman,” *Kingston Whig-Standard* (15 June 1915) at 7.

Toronto twice at an expense of over \$500. In 1913, Mowat claimed that British Columbia was paying Ellis a retainer fee of \$500 per year, in addition to the expenses and special fees that Ellis charged for each execution. We have no indication that British Columbia ever did so, and likely Ellis was falsely claiming this retainer so as to induce a retainer from Ontario. Mowat suggested that Ontario and Quebec should get together and retain a “sober” hangman which might only cost \$250 for each province.⁶ One might surmise that the “sober” part meant that Mowat was no longer a big fan of Ellis?

Rival hangman, “John Holmes” wrote to the Attorney General of Ontario in 1916, falsely claiming that he had the approval of three other provinces to be paid \$370 per year for all hangings in the province. Holmes would even handle all travel expenses, but Ontario had to also agree to this proposal before it could be implemented.⁷ We will deal with the bungling and totally untrustworthiness of Holmes in another chapter. Of course, Holmes would not name the supposedly three other provinces that had agreed to the proposal, and Ontario rejected it. We surmise, however, that the hiring of Holmes by various sheriffs may well have motivated Ellis to move to a location more central in Canada.

After moving to Montreal, Ellis was for a time an inspector of liquor vendors, but had to give it up when his identity was discovered, so he claimed that he was going to return to his “fruit farm and horse ranch at Golden, B.C.”⁸ While we have no confirmation as to Ellis owning such a farm, it would make sense to have a farm or some occupation where he worked for himself, not subject to being fired once his identity as hangman became known. We assume that Ellis moved to Montreal by at least 1916, when he got married in Montreal, although some newspaper reports from 1920, 1921, and 1922 continued to allege that he also had a fruit farm in Golden, British Columbia.⁹ An archival file

⁶ Mowat memo of November 17, 1913, and subsequent correspondence, Ontario Archives, RG 4-32 1913 #2037.

⁷ John Holmes, Ontario Archives, RG 4-32 1916 No, 444.

⁸ “Official Hangman Chucks Sideline,” *Brandon Sun* (20 November 1920) at 18.

⁹ For example, “Hanging Details,” *Montreal Star* (13 January 1920) at 3; “Why Not Centralize Executions,” *Toronto Star Weekly* (4 June 1921) at 19 and 21; “Ellis is Threatening to Resign,” *Regina Leader-Post* (21 July 1922) at 15.

indicates that in 1918 his address was Box 735 in Montreal.¹⁰ At some stage, a lawyer acquaintance of Ellis in Montreal got a job for him in a department store, “but he was let out a few days later when he was recognized by customers who complained against being served by the public hangman.”¹¹ Understandably, Ellis needed to make hanging pay enough to make a living at it, and arguably, he was able to do so for much of his three decades at it.

I. MAKING A LIVING

Indeed, in early December 1920, Ellis asserted that he had already hanged 29 people that year at \$125 each, plus retainer fees and expenses.¹² As usual, this statement was a lie, as he had only hanged nine people in 1920. Nevertheless, it was widely reported that Ellis had to pay income tax on \$12,500 earnings for that year.¹³ He may have had a retainer of some sort from Ontario in addition to a retainer from Quebec? Considering inflation, these 1920 earnings would be equivalent to about \$200,000 in 2025 dollars. During 1921 and 1922, Ellis executed 13 people, although it was falsely reported that he had hanged about 60 people, often charging \$250 for a hanging, whether the person was hanged or reprieved.¹⁴

At some stage he reduced his fee of \$250 and charged only \$100, in the face of competition from other hangmen.¹⁵

We have numerous archival materials that demonstrate that Ellis’s presentation of himself as merciful was overshadowed by his own mercenary motives. Money was a big motivation in his hanging career. For example, in 1924, he had a fee dispute when he came to London, Ontario to hang three men. One of them, however, received a reprieve or a commutation. Ellis still charged

¹⁰ Controversy over Proposed Book, National Archives, RG 13-A-2 Volume #310, File # 1927-228.

¹¹ “Life of a Hangman,” *Montreal Gazette* (10 March 1955) at 2.

¹² “Hangings in Canada,” *Montreal Gazette* (4 December 1920) at 15.

¹³ “Official Hangman Had Successful Year,” *Edmonton Journal* (5 May 1921) at 1; *Brandon Sun* (6 May 1921) at 1.

¹⁴ “Ellice Once More at Sheriffs’ Call,” *Vancouver Province* (13 January 1923) at 2; “Hangman’s Price,” *Free Press* (11 December 1924) at 5.

¹⁵ “Elli Cuts Fee for Hanging,” *Calgary Albertan* (11 December 1924) at 1.

\$300 as if he had hanged all three, but the Inspector of Prisons objected to this, suggesting he should only get \$75 for each of the two hanged, plus \$37.50 for the one reprieved. Ellis was angry at what he termed “bargain hunting in the execution of the law” and he wrote to the Ontario Attorney General, “I have served your province for the last 14 year and have kept her good name clean from scenes or blunders during that time. I have asked \$100 for each culprit, reprieve or not. Is \$100 too much to send a soul to eternity when that soul is sent there by the greatest of rapidity and humanity?”¹⁶ His appeal was partly successful, as the Attorney General agreed he should get \$100 for each hanging, but only \$50 for the man who was reprieved.¹⁷

A few years later, the issue of multiple hangings arose again when one or more of the victims received a reprieve or commutation. Ellis had come to Oakalla prison in British Columbia to hang four people on January 14, 1926, plus another on January 18. Sheriff McMartin paid Ellis \$500, even though Ellis ended up only hanging two of the five, given the appeals or commutations of the others. The chief clerk of the Attorney General’s department objected to what the sheriff had done and sought advice from other provinces.¹⁸

The chief financial clerk in Ontario wrote back and cited the arrangements where Ellis got \$100 for each person hanged, but only half the fee for the persons commuted. Alberta noted that Ellis had not been hired in that province for some time but previously would have been paid \$100 for an execution, but at a double execution, he would only get \$75 for the second. The writer acknowledged that back in 1916, Ellis was fully paid for a hanging that did not take place. Quebec noted that the hangman was paid \$100 for each hanging and \$50 for a reprieve.

Manitoba noted that Ellis had recently asked for the full \$100 for a case where a reprieve had been granted, but Manitoba only

¹⁶ Letter of Ellis to Attorney General (20 March 1924). Ontario Archives, 4-32 File 1924 #641.

¹⁷ Reply dated March 21, 1924, *ibid.*

¹⁸ All of the survey materials are found in B.C. Attorney General Correspondence, B.C. Archives, Executions 1926-27, GR-1725 A.G., Container G07573, File Code C-280-20. The Survey Letter from B.C. Chief Clerk to Ontario Chief Clerk (21 January 1926) is also found in Ontario Archives, 4-32 1926 #113.

paid him \$50 plus various expenses, as he had started out on his journey to Winnipeg but then found out the hanging had been called off. Sheriff Colin Inkster noted an old bill from October 2, 1918, when Ellis had hanged 2 people in Winnipeg. (This was a case that Ellis bungled in terms of almost decapitating one of the victims.) The bill provides an interesting insight into the hangman costs in 1918: Train to Winnipeg return \$75.50; Sleeper \$18.70; Meals on Train \$16; two ropes \$6.50; two black caps \$3; Telegram \$2; Hotel for 2 and half days \$9; Double execution, \$200; total: \$330.70.

Saskatchewan cited a case in 1919 where Ellis had arrived to hang three persons who were then reprieved for a month. Ellis returned to hang the three and charged a full fee of \$600, claiming \$300 as a reservation fee for the first date. The Chief Clerk objected to this, but was finally persuaded that Ellis had reserved the date which gave Saskatchewan priority over any other hangings for three days before and three days after the date.¹⁹

After collecting these survey results, the Chief Clerk wrote to Sheriff McMartin asking him to make a new arrangement with Ellis. In cases of multiple hangings, British Columbia would pay \$100 for the first, \$75 for subsequent hangings on the same day, and \$50 for cases that were reprieved or commuted. If Ellis was to hang one person but it was commuted or reprieved, he would get \$100.²⁰ Sheriff McMartin agreed to talk to Ellis when he was next in New Westminster, but the sheriff noted that Ellis said that he always gave British Columbia priority but for Quebec, because he got an annual retainer from Quebec for \$500 a year over and above the hanging and travelling fees. McMartin wanted to keep Ellis happy as, “He is a good man for the work and the only man I will engage to carry out so important and serious work.”²¹

Shortly thereafter, Ellis was at Oakalla prison hanging two men, and when Sheriff McMartin raised the new proposal for fees, Ellis rejected the proposal.²² Instead, Ellis contacted the Deputy Attorney General asking for an annual retainer of \$600. The province turned him down, promising to pay the usual fees for

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Chief Clerk of B.C to Sheriff McMartin (8 July 1926), *ibid.*

²¹ Sheriff McMartin to Chief Clerk Colvin (10 July 1926), *ibid.*

²² Sheriff McMartin to Chief Clerk Colvin (16 July 1926), *ibid.*

each execution.²³ Thus, Ellis appears to have manipulated his way clear of the British Columbia proposals to pay him less in terms of various cases of reprieves and commutations.

Ellis complained that some sheriffs would not pay his fee if the victim's death sentence had been commuted at the last minute to life in prison. As Brawn states, "There is little doubt that the reason federal officials took so long to advise prisoners on death row whether their sentences were commuted was to distract them from thoughts of their execution."²⁴ But this practice was problematic for the hangman travelling across Canada by train. Obviously, it would be unfair to have Ellis travel many miles, supervise the construction of the gallows, and then not receive payment when the hanging was cancelled. Eventually the convention developed, as noted above, that Ellis would be paid when he was engaged to hang one person, whether the sentence was commuted or not.²⁵ In 1919, Ellis travelled to hang a man in North Bay, Ontario on April 18, but a reprieve moved the hanging a couple of weeks forward to May 2. Ellis charged \$100 for the reprieve, another \$100 for the hanging, plus all expenses. While we do not know the outcome, provincial officials rejected this overreach, suggesting a fair charge for Ellis's two week wait time, but not a double fee.²⁶

Understandably, Ellis argued that he should be paid when he travelled to an execution, only to have it commuted at the last moment, but Ellis also started to charge a retainer-reservation fee of \$100 for keeping a date open, and he usually kept this even if the commutation or reprieve took place before he ever travelled to a hanging.²⁷ We assume that if he did travel and hanged the victim, the \$100 already paid to him would be his hanging fee, or did he charge another \$100 in addition to the reservation fee? In 1927, when a man was given a reprieve in British Columbia due to an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, Ellis charged \$100 even

²³ Chief Clerk Colvin to McMartin (19 July 1926), *ibid.*

²⁴ Dale Brawn, *Last Moments: Sentenced to Death in Canada* (Canada: Quagmire Press, 2011) at 30.

²⁵ "Ellis," *Tribune* (31 January 1920) at 7; "Hangman Ellis Gets Fee Though Man is not Hung," *Owen Sound Sun Times* (1 August 1929) at 5.

²⁶ *Correspondence*, (8 & 14 May 1919) Ontario Archives, 4-32 1919 #289.

²⁷ "\$100 to the Hangman," *Kingston Wig-Standard* (21 January 1931) at 11.

though he never left his house, and this was paid to him.²⁸ Ellis was not above manipulating officials to secure these fees. In June 1931, he told Sheriff Cotton in New Westminster that he had other engagements in the East that he would take if the fees for two hangings were not paid, and he would not take the British Columbia cases unless the reservation fee was paid. Later in the year, regarding another hanging, Ellis telegraphed to Sheriff Cotton, “remit cheque by wire or I will cancel your date.”²⁹ It appears that these charges were paid in British Columbia in 1931.

However, this reservation fee was questioned in a British Columbia case in 1934, when Ellis initially sought to charge a reservation date fee of \$300 for a triple hanging at Oakalla. The Attorney General told Sheriff Cotton not to pay, given the likelihood of appeal.³⁰ Ellis wrote to the Attorney General objecting that reservation dates were important or else he would take an engagement elsewhere.³¹ Sheriff Cotton wanted Ellis to at least get \$100 for the reservation but the Government Agent, Mr. Campbell, refused to pay. Ellis wrote back with what appears to be a threat on the government agent. Ellis concluded, “It will be a pleasure for me to call on you when I visit your town. I have had trouble with you before, but I will see that you are a little more prompt in your decision after I see you...”³²

A new government agent wrote to the Deputy Attorney General several days later: “the man [Ellis] is very much a law unto himself... the Sheriff seems to think there is some sort of an agreement where Ellis can claim his money whether he performs a hanging or not. If this is so, times have changed...”³³ When the reservation money still had not been paid, Ellis wrote to the Attorney General and defamed Deputy Attorney Bass. Ellis wrote,

²⁸ *Executions – Feb. 1927 to Feb. 1928*, BC Archives, GR-1725, Attorney General Correspondence, Container G07573, File Code C-280-20.

²⁹ *Memo from Cotton to Attorney General* (11 June 1931), *Hangings 1931*, Archives of BC, Attorney General Correspondence, Container 7573, File Code C-280-20.

³⁰ *Hangings 1925-1934*, Archives of BC Attorney General Correspondence, Container 7573 File Code C-280-20.

³¹ Ellis to Attorney General, undated, 1934, *ibid.*

³² Ellis to Campbell (12 November 1934), *ibid.*

³³ Government Agent Grant to Deputy AG (19 November 1934), *ibid.*

"I know that if... Bass had to do my duty, he would be unemployed. I have known him for many years- if you knock the ego out of him, there would be nothing left..."³⁴ Ellis also wrote a very angry letter to the new government agent in New Westminster, where he defamed the retired agent, Campbell. As to Campbell, "living on his superannuation, may he enjoy it for the short time he lives, as the gates of hell will never close until he has entered." Ellis went on to argue that if he had known that there would be no reservation fee, "I would have politely told those who are responsible to go straight to hell... Send me your cheque of \$100 or more..."³⁵

The Deputy Attorney General finally wrote to Ellis, "You were notified in plenty of time prior to the date you intended leaving Montreal to perform the execution in question. You did not perform any services for the Government of B.C. for which a claim can be made. I am directed to state, however, that purely as a matter of grace, and not a matter of right, and without prejudice, the government will pay you \$100."³⁶

Sheriff Cotton noted that six people were scheduled to hang at Oakalla on November 6, 1936.³⁷ Mr. Grant, the government agent, forwarded \$175 in travel expenses to Ellis, and then asked the Deputy Attorney General, "knowing the troublesome character of the above Ellis, I would ask you to instruct me, if the 6 hangings take place, am I to pay \$100 for each hanging, and if any reprieves are granted, what allowances should be made?"³⁸ Given the very precarious financial situation of Ellis at this time, he must have been quite unhappy when the Deputy Attorney General noted that one hanging would definitely take place and Ellis should get \$100 for that hanging and for each hanging, but nothing for any reprieves, "as he has to come for the Russell execution in any event."³⁹ In the end, three of the six were executed on the day in question and one was reprieved for 21 days and then hanged. We

³⁴ Ellis to Attorney General (21 November 1934), *ibid.*

³⁵ Ellis to Government Agent Grant, undated, *ibid.*

³⁶ Deputy to Ellis (27 November 1934). *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Hangings 1936*, Archives of BC, Attorney General Correspondence, Container 7573 File Code C-280-20.

³⁸ Agent Grant to Deputy AG (31 October 1936), *ibid.*

³⁹ Deputy AG to Agent Grant (31 October 1936), *ibid.*

presume Ellis stayed around New Westminster for the 21 days, so he would have made \$400 in the end, plus expenses. One of the men was granted a new trial and another had their sentence commuted.

In conclusion, the archival evidence points to the mercenary motives of Ellis and also show his character as he displayed angry outbursts at those who disagreed with him.

II. SCANDALS

The first case under this heading was not so much a scandal as it was another example of the character of Ellis as someone who thought more highly of himself than was warranted. In early January 1912, Ellis travelled to Windsor, Ontario to “rescue” 16-year-old, Olive Sheldon, who had been allegedly abducted by a 36-year-old married man, Fred Gower. Ellis claimed the girl was his niece. The couple, eloping together, had been caught by Detroit border guards and handed over to the Windsor police. Ellis demanded that the Chief of Police in Windsor should hand the girl over to him. Eventually after Ellis established his identity, the girl was handed over to him, but when they reached the train station, the girl was taken back into custody by the police as a material witness. The furious Ellis waited to get on the next train in the afternoon which was scheduled to carry the arrested man, the girl and a police officer to Toronto.⁴⁰ However, allegedly without informing Ellis, the man, the girl and the police left on a different train earlier than expected. Ellis visited the Chief of Police to complain about the way the police had tricked him. As reported, “When the executioner became abusive, the chief ordered him out of the office. The hangman beat it but afterwards called up the chief two or three times and voiced his opinions in rather strong language.”⁴¹

A different account stated that Ellis was informed as to the correct train, but Ellis went to visit Detroit and missed the train.⁴² Back in Toronto, Fred Gower was sentenced to 18 months for

⁴⁰ “Hangman Ellis in Clash with City Police,” *Windsor Star* (19 January 1912) at 1.

⁴¹ “Hangman Ellis Was Left in the Lurch,” *Windsor Star* (20 January 1912) at 1.

⁴² “Public Hangman is Real Peeved,” *Detroit Free Press* (20 January 1912) at 9.

abducting the girl.⁴³ We see here an early example of the kind of entitlement and abusive language that is illustrated in some of the Ellis correspondence as to fees in the B.C. Archives.

The second scandal was when Ellis was arrested in Montreal in early 1914, leading to headlines across the country like the one in the *Edmonton Journal*: “Hangman is Arrested: Arthur Ellis Draws Gun in Theatre While Drunk.”⁴⁴ We know that Ellis carried a gun as reported earlier in an execution in 1913 in Winnipeg:

Mr. Ellis makes no attempt to conceal his identity but having misgivings that he might meet with violence he goes about heavily armed. After the execution he strapped a big revolver about his waist, and went out for his breakfast, returning in time to be present at the burial.⁴⁵

In Montreal, he was arrested while watching a show sitting in a box at the Orpheum Theatre, where he pulled out a .38 pistol and caused “great excitement among the theatre’s patrons.” One report noted that “Ellis did not care about the performance, so expressed his contempt for the quality of the acting by unstrapping a revolver from his belt and flourishing it about.”⁴⁶ An usher tried to intervene but was waved off by Ellis brandishing his gun. The usher went outside the theatre and summoned a police officer.⁴⁷ “Don’t you dare to lay a hand on me,” said Ellis to the officer. Two policemen ushered him to the police station for the night, with Ellis protesting continually about the injustice of being “brought down from his position and herded in with common criminals.”⁴⁸

The *Montreal Star* provided a picture of Ellis taken the next day at the court hearing:⁴⁹

⁴³ “Hangman Ellis Was Left in the Lurch,” *Windsor Star* (20 January 1912) at 1.

⁴⁴ *Edmonton Journal* (23 January 1914) at 6.

⁴⁵ “Outlaw Baron,” *Free Press* (21 May 1913) at 14.

⁴⁶ Editorial “Familiarity Breeds Contempt,” *Vancouver Sunset* (31 January 1914) at 5.

⁴⁷ “Hangman Arrested,” *Montreal Gazette* (23 January 1914) at 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Hangman Ellis Fined,” *Montreal Star* (23 January 1914) at 3.



The court docket listed Ellis as a single man, aged 40, and while there was a huge crowd to see the trial, it was moved from the courtroom to the judge's chambers with Sheriff Lemieux present. Ellis pleaded guilty and was fined \$5 for carrying a revolver without a permit, while the sentence was suspended on the drunkenness charge. Sheriff Lemieux paid most of the fine, given that Ellis only had \$1.75 on him. The next day, Ellis fulfilled his duty in hanging William Campbell.⁵⁰

This story morphed over the years into one of the most sensationalist accounts of his life, published in the *American Weekly*, where it was stated "he started to shoot out the footlights and it took half a dozen men to subdue him."⁵¹ A satirical editorial writer in a Vancouver paper stated:

Ellis... seems to have an exalted idea of the importance of his position in the community. When arrested he inveighed bitterly against the police in Montreal, referring often to the degradation caused by his arrest and the trouble it would make for the police when the matter was taken up by the higher authorities. It is a peculiar case of exaggerated ego... On being arrested Ellis is reported to have said: 'The idea of placing *me* in a position like this. The idea of degrading one in *my*

⁵⁰ "Ellis Arrested," *Medicine Hat News* (23 January 1914) at 1.

⁵¹ "Strange Double Life of Mr. Ellis," *San Francisco Examiner* (18 September 1938) at 3.

*position. This is terrible. This is an injustice. Some person will suffer for this...*⁵²

Of course, Ellis was an adept liar and had his own version of events, where he denied that he was a drinking man and described the whole thing as a minor incident:

I needed police protection, as I was to hang an Italian named Battista. This night I went out alone to the theatre, so wore a revolver strapped to my hip. When the usher helped me off with my coat, he saw the revolver and had me arrested. I was only at the police station twenty minutes and was not fined as reported.⁵³

At this point, he had already executed the Italian, Battista, a whole year previously and one may certainly doubt Ellis's denial that he was a drinking man. Ellis told another reporter:

"When I first started this business, I never used to drink... but my nerves got me at last. Added to that, the loneliness and isolation of my position finally works on me, but I don't drink much and intend to give it up now."⁵⁴

There is no doubt that Ellis was an alcoholic and stories of his drinking continued throughout his career. For example, a New Brunswick journalist recounted an incident near the end of Ellis's career after he hanged two brothers in Dorchester, New Brunswick in September 1936:

Then Ellis, his natty formal clothes hanging less jauntily now, came in and there was a hush. Drinks went around. Men who hardly ever took a drink gulped whisky down fast and went for another. Ellis led the way... apparently, he had drunk before, much and often... and the crowd brightened. The hours sped, and Ellis passed out.⁵⁵

The next scandal involved the arrest of Ellis in 1922 for assaulting his estranged wife, and this scandal also resulted in quite a number of sheriffs hiring rival hangmen. For example, in addition to "Holmes," there was a "Wakefield" taking a number of hangings in Alberta in 1923.⁵⁶ It was widely reported in July 1922 that Ellis, living in Montreal, was arrested when his wife asserted that, "her

⁵² *Vancouver Sunset* (31 January 1914) at 5 (emphasis added).

⁵³ "Executioner Wants to Preserve Reputation," *Vancouver Sun* (19 February 1914) at 3.

⁵⁴ "Hangman Left for B.C.," *Lindsay Watchman* (5 February 1924) at 7.

⁵⁵ "Arthur Ellis, Lonely Man," *Windsor Star* (20 January 1945) at 25.

⁵⁶ Pfeifer and Leyton-Brown at 229-232.

husband had struck her repeatedly and attempted to strangle her.”⁵⁷ Not only did this incidence obviously threaten his continued career, but it also served to blow his cover.

An example of the kind of reports found in newspapers across Canada is this one from the *Windsor Star* under the headline “Hangman Arrested” and the byline, “Ellis Charged with Wife Beating by Montreal Police:”

Ellis, the hangman was arrested at one o'clock this afternoon by Assistant High Constable Dan Sullivan, charged with aggravated assault upon his wife. The warrant is made out for “Alexander Armstrong English, alias Arthur Ellis” and his occupation is given as “hangman.” The charge reads that Ellis did “commit an aggravated assault upon Edythe Grimsdale (his wife), by strangling and striking her upon the face, throat and body, and at the same time did threaten to shoot her.” Ellis was arrested in his room which he has been occupying in an Outremont residence. His wife, it is said, lives on Colonial Avenue.⁵⁸

After his arrest, Ellis was arraigned on a charge of aggravated assault. At the arraignment in front of Judge Enright, he had his own story about how his wife had assaulted him, “broke his glasses and injured his face... causing a scar which he pointed out to the court.”⁵⁹ The local press stated that Judge Enright did not believe that the wife was violent. “But she is very violent,” argued Ellis, “she smashed my glasses with a stick and that is why I smacked her on the face.” Eventually Enright stated, “There is no justification for your action,” but he allowed Ellis-English to be released on a cash bail of \$800 pending the trial but prohibited Ellis from visiting with his wife.⁶⁰ Ellis also wanted a quick hearing to dispose of the matter so he could travel to his next assignment. The preliminary hearing was set for July 20 in the chambers of Judge Enright.⁶¹ As far as I can tell, pretty much every paper in Canada carried the story.

Press reports included information about Edythe Grimsdale, who claimed that she only had recently discovered that her husband was the hangman, although she claimed Ellis did not know that his wife had discovered this about him. She also alleged

⁵⁷ “Hangman Arrested,” *Saskatoon Star* (14 July 1922) at 2.

⁵⁸ *Windsor Star* (13 July 1922) at 17.

⁵⁹ “Hangman Ellis Charged,” *Montreal Gazette* (20 July 1922) at 6.

⁶⁰ “Hangman Ellis Under Arrest,” *Montreal Star* (13 July 1922) at 1.

⁶¹ “Hangman’s Wife Withdrew Charge,” *Montreal Gazette* (21 July 1922) at 8.

that while they had been married since 1916, Ellis had spent a lot of time at his fruit farm in British Columbia.⁶²

At the hearing on July 20, Ellis appeared “in a light summer suit, gray silk gloves and a swanky cane.”⁶³ Both parties were represented by a lawyer, and Judge Enright seemed to agree that money was the main cause of the fight, and the wife now asked for \$110 per month. Ellis offered to pay her half his earnings in exchange for her dropping the charge of assault, but he did not know what his earnings might be. The wife insisted on at least \$75 per month, and the Judge said that if Ellis could not pay at least that amount, he should get another job. After agreeing to this amount, the couple shook hands and the Judge allowed Mrs. Ellis to withdraw the charge of assault and said that if the money was not paid, she could come to him and he would issue a warrant for non-support.⁶⁴ It was reported that, “She told the judge the quarrel between them was because of another woman. ‘I loved him until this woman came into his life’ she said, ‘and he left me forever.’”⁶⁵ She also said that her husband had left her, “just after my father died, when I was sick and alone.”⁶⁶ However, after the hearing, Mrs. Ellis immediately asked for \$150 per month again, rather than \$75, and threatened to sue for legal separation.⁶⁷ Ellis immediately embarked to Vancouver to execute three men.⁶⁸ As we will note in the next chapter, it would appear that Arthur Ellis and his wife had a period of reconciliation before she finally realized she could not live with a hangman.

A fourth scandal involved drunkenness again. While in Vancouver in 1924, Ellis had supervised the construction of the gallows. But then the condemned man had been granted a new trial by the Court of Appeal. Ellis went on a bender and was arrested as a drunk, placed in jail and then released when he had

⁶² “Hangman Ellis Jailed for Threat to Shoot his Wife,” *Halifax Evening Mail* (14 July 1922) at 5.

⁶³ “Ellis in Court,” *Montreal Star* (20 July 1922) at 6.

⁶⁴ ‘Hangman Makes Peace with Wife,” *Ottawa Journal* (21 July 1922) at 3.

⁶⁵ “Hangman Will Split Profits with Wife,” *Vancouver Sun* (21 July 1922) at 14; “Hangman Makes Peace with Wife,” *Ottawa Journal* (21 July 1922) at 3.

⁶⁶ “Hangman’s Wife Withdraws Charges,” *Montreal Gazette* (21 July 1922) at 8.

⁶⁷ “Hangman Ellis Has His Troubles,” *Medicine Hat News* (21 July 1922) at 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

sobered up.⁶⁹ One may also wonder what steady drinking had to do with the incident in 1930 when Ellis fainted while springing the trap door.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ “Today’s Oddest News,” *Tribune* (6 March 1924) at 1.

⁷⁰ “Hangman Ellis Faints While Springing Trap,” *Regina Leader-Post* (9 July 1930) at 1.

