

Chapter 7

“Arthur Ellis”: His True Identity as Alexander Armstrong English

What do we really know about the life of this hangman? The information that Ellis gave about his past cannot be trusted. He claimed to have been a steam engineer,¹ and a marine engineer.² It was reported that he was the son of an old English military officer who served in the King's Guard, and “Ellis” himself had a distinguished military career, serving with British forces in India and the Near East.³ When Ellis died, there were reports that he had been an assistant to Radcliffe.⁴ An early report said he had already hanged over 200 people before coming to Canada and was an assistant public executioner at Holloway prison.⁵ Another report stated that he became interested in being a hangman when, as a Captain in the Army, he witnessed the famous execution of Edith Thompson.⁶ This last claim is ridiculous since Thompson was executed in 1923, long after Ellis was in Canada hanging people. Arthur Ellis also claimed that English hangmen James Barry and James Billington were friends of his.⁷

It was said that he was related to John Ellis of Rochdale, England, one of the official English executioners.⁸ He told a

¹ Doris Milligan, “Daily Tattler,” *Vancouver Sun* (9 November 1937) at 1.

² “Plans Krafchenko Job,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (22 June 1914) at 2.

³ “Hangman Is Found Starving in Attic,” *Montreal Gazette* (21 July 1938) at 9.

⁴ “Ellis Dies,” *Lethbridge Herald* (22 July 1938) at 1; “Hangman Ellis,” *Ottawa Journal* (22 July 1938) at 4.

⁵ “Hangman Ellis,” *Windsor Star* (19 January 1912) at 1.

⁶ “Double Life of Hangman Ellis,” *Derry Journal* (23 December 1938) at 4.

⁷ “Hangman Ellis Dies in the City,” *Montreal Gazette* (22 July 1938) at 1 and 9.

⁸ “Hangman,” *Saskatoon Star* (28 March 1921) at 3.

lawyer friend that John Ellis was his uncle.⁹ He told another reporter that John Ellis was his brother.¹⁰ However, the English hangman, who committed suicide in 1932, would have been a decade younger than the “Arthur Ellis” who was the Canadian hangman, and examining the family tree of John Ellis shows that our “Arthur Ellis” could not be a brother, uncle or even distant cousin. John Ellis himself reportedly stated that the Canadian hangman had no family relationship to him.¹¹ Arthur Ellis allegedly told Vancouver journalist B. A. McKelvie that his forefathers for 100 years were executioners, and he was born into the job.¹²

All this information that Ellis gave about his background is mostly mythology coming from an accomplished teller of tales. I would argue that most of the biographical information written about Arthur Ellis based on these claims is unreliable. For example, Frank Anderson, without reference to any authorities, is wrong about his name, birth, army career, relationship to English hangmen, and the date of his arrival in Canada.¹³ Most of the misinformation or mythological reports about Ellis have been repeated by other authors, including Howard Engel, Deanna Foster, Mark Leslie, Shayna Krishnasamy, and more recently, Jean Claude Castex.¹⁴

Some of the mythology surrounding Ellis can be traced back to a major article published in the *American Weekly Magazine*,

⁹ J. Alex Edmison, as reported in, “Life of a Hangman Described in House,” *Montreal Gazette* (10 March 1955) at 2.

¹⁰ “Hangman is Found Starving,” *Montreal Gazette* (21 July 1938) at 9.

¹¹ “English Hangman Resigns,” *Regina Leader-Post* (3 May 1924) at 33.

¹² “My Friend Arthur, the Hangman,” *Shoulder Strap: Official Journal of the B.C. Provincial Police*, 14th edition (October 1945) at 27.

¹³ Frank W Anderson, *Hanging in Canada* (Calgary: Frontier Publishing, 1973) at 57.

¹⁴ Howard Engel, *Lord High Executioner* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1996) at 172-175; Deanna Foster, *A History of Hangings in Nova Scotia* (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pettersfield Press, 2007) at 34-36; Mark Leslie & Shayna Krishnasamy, *Macabre Montreal* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2018) at 43-50; Jean-Claude Castex, *Crimes and Punishments of Canadian Woman, Book Two* (Vancouver: PO Publishing, 2022) in 105-123.

which appeared in Hearst newspapers across the United States several months after his death.¹⁵

He was presented as a dual personality, a Jekyll and Hyde type, keeping his identity hidden from his wife until she discovered it seven years before he died and then separated from him. After this separation, Ellis often drank himself into a stupor after hangings and ended up decapitating a woman in Montreal in 1935. This was presented as if it were his first and only bungle! The drunken scandal in the Montreal theatre was presented in the article as having occurred after Ellis's wife left him in the early 1930s instead of 1914 when the event took place. As to his background, according to this article, "Captain" Ellis had served under Lord Kitchener in Egypt, and under General Roberts during the Boar War, and then had a distinguished army record in the First World War. This is, of course, preposterous, given that all throughout the war, Ellis was hanging people in Canada. Equally ridiculous, as mentioned before, was the story in this article that Ellis started out because of his witnessing of the hanging of Edith Thompson by John Ellis, and thus, Arthur adopted the English hangman's name and decided to be a hangman.

A great deal more of the mythology comes from a chapter in a book written by journalist Andy O'Brien in 1970.¹⁶ Ellis fed various stories to his friend O'Brien, who seems to have accepted everything as gospel truth. He accepted that Ellis had hanged 549 Canadians. He accepted the tales that Ellis recounted about his army experiences, even though, as we will point out, the evidence points to a career in the Navy and merchant marines, not the army. O'Brien recounts Ellis's mythological army experience as follows:

As a young man English joined the Northumberland Fusiliers who were known as the "Fighting Fifth" and went to India in 1887. He was eventually promoted to lieutenant. He got a six month leave and went to Lancashire where his home was... When his leave expired Ellis returned to the army and soon his regiment was transferred to Egypt where his fighting ability under fire won him promotion to

¹⁵ For example, "The Strange Double Life of Arthur Ellis," *San Francisco Examiner* (18 September 1938) at 65; *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* (18 September 1938) at 53. Also reprinted in English newspapers like *Derry Journal* (23 December 1938) at 4.

¹⁶ Andy O'Brien, *My Friend the Hangman* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1970).

captain and he became attached to the staff of sirdar, Kitchener. He saw action in the Boar War and the famed Jameson Raid before being mustered out of the army.¹⁷

O'Brien also accepted the story from Ellis that he trained under English hangman Bellington, who explained the fine art of hanging, and when Bellington got sick at an execution, Ellis substituted for him and thereafter officiated at other hangings. This is not true, as we will note below. Ellis supposedly told O'Brien, "I had no more compunction about executing a convicted murderer than I would at killing a mad dog." O'Brien also accepted the story of Ellis's wife discovering his hangman identity when an RCMP officer visited the lawn bowling club and pointed out her husband as the hangman, leading to their breakup, even though he was a "good man," she stated.¹⁸ And so it went. Aside from the decapitation of the woman that supposedly ended his career, even though it was not his fault, there is nothing from O'Brien about drunken scandals or assaults on his wife.

I. HE WAS TRAINED IN ENGLAND AS A HANGMAN IN 1905

The results of our archival research do not refute all the background stories about Arthur Ellis, but they do shed some light on his identity, family life, and some biographical details of his personal life. As we will note below, Arthur Ellis's real name was Alexander Armstrong English. The Home Office in Great Britain kept a list of executioners, and sheriffs would hire a hangman from the list when needed. When hangman John Bellington died in 1905, the Home Office decided to advertise for a replacement. Eventually there was an announcement in several English newspapers in December 1905 that a man calling himself Alec Taylor from Hull, native of Newcastle, residing in the Holderness division of East Yorkshire, was appointed public hangman, and that he had previously been a stoker in the Navy

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ This O'Brien story was widely reprinted in the *Weekend Magazine* of various newspapers. For example, *Vancouver Sun* (6 February 1971) at 30-32; *Winnipeg Free Press* (6 February 1971) at 112-115.

and had made application for the post of hangman previously, but was unsuccessful.¹⁹ One account added that he was formerly from Hedon, East Yorkshire.²⁰

It turns out that “Alec Taylor” was the name Alexander English (Arthur Ellis) planned to use in his career as hangman, perhaps borrowed from a famous billiards player, a steamer, or a famous racehorse trainer, all of whom had the name Alec Taylor at the time. However, several newspapers gave his real name and provided the following details:

Alexander English is the correct name of the Hull man who has been appointed public executioner. He is a married man with two children, and his friends describe him as of a very pleasant disposition. Up to a few weeks ago he was driving a steam navvy for the North-Eastern Railway, the vibrating engine requiring a man of strong nerves, for the task was refused by several drivers. English has so far given satisfaction in his training as a hangman. Replying to a Hull comrade in the Royal Naval Reserve, to which he belongs, he philosophically said: “Some one must take the job.” It is stated that English will receive 50s. a week and 5 (pounds) for every execution.²¹

Alexander English as “Taylor” also humorously “promised before receiving the appointment that he would hang one or two of the stationmasters on the Withernsea branch railway and charge no fees...”²² The local *Hull Evening News* provided a drawing of the new public executioner, Alexander English. There is no doubt that this is an early picture of our hangman Arthur Ellis:²³

¹⁹ “The New Hangman,” *Christchurch Times* (2 December 1905) at 6; Also, *Leeds Mercury* (2 December 1905) at 10.

²⁰ *Portsmouth Evening News*, (2 December 1905) at 5.

²¹ “New Hangman’s Strong Nerves,” *Bolton Evening News* (2 December 1905) at 5; Also *Shields Daily News* (4 December 1905), at 4; *London Daily News* (2 December 1905) at 7.

²² “New Public Hangman,” *Manitoba Free Press* (18 December 1905) at 12.

²³ “Public Executioner,” *Hull Evening News* (28 November 1905) at 5.



There were also newspaper reports about how English, as “Taylor,” had to take a weeklong training session in hanging at Pentonville Prison in London as a condition of his appointment:

The executioner was Alec Taylor, the newly appointed common hangman who is said to be a native of Newcastle, and the subjects “hanged” in set form were lay figures of cloth and sand. Several sandbags shaped to represent men of different weights were supplied for Taylor’s practice. He was instructed that men of varying builds should be given certain prescribed “drops” to effect instantaneous death. Then a sandbag made to the rough semblance and weight of a man was placed on the scaffold trap. Taylor was told the weight, the noose was properly adjusted, the requisite drop arranged for, and the lever was pulled. This experiment was performed again and again with differently weighted bags. The other part of the hangman’s training - the pinioning of the condemned prisoner - was even more realistic. For the time being stalwart warders posed as condemned murderers. Taylor, practising on them, was shown the quickest and most effective way of securing the hands and feet. The experiments were repeated daily until today, when the new hangman will be

regarded as efficient and ready to respond to the sheriff's call to officiate at a real execution.²⁴

II. HE HAS NO CAREER AS HANGMAN IN ENGLAND, BUT RATHER ABANDONS HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN AND DISAPPEARS IN 1906.

There were several "official" hangmen on the Home Office list of approved executioners. When we examine the hangings over the next few years in England, the names of the hangmen or their assistants that were reported at actual hangings were Henry Pierrepont, on the list from 1900, John Ellis, on the list from 1901, and Thomas Pierrepont from 1906. While it is possible that Henry Pierrepont or John Ellis took part in the training course that English-Taylor-Ellis took at Pentonville, I can find no evidence that Alexander English as Alec Taylor was ever called upon for an actual hanging in England!²⁵ Nor is there evidence that he ever was trained by Bellington or even knew the man.

Instead of reports of successful hangings, or at least assisting therein by the new hangman, what we find is that Alexander English abandoned his family and disappeared!²⁶ Several newspapers reported that English had returned home from his hanging training, "delighted with his experience." However, as reported:

...Opportunities of work were not plentiful... English when he applied for the Government appointment was unemployed; so, when the executions failed, he was absolutely adrift. He sent his two children to live with his wife's parents, and one Monday morning in

²⁴ "The Hangman's Apprenticeship," *Edinburgh Evening News* (2 December 1905) at 6: Also see "New Hangman in Training," *London Sunday Dispatch* (3 December 1905) at 9; "The New Hangman," *London Sunday People* (3 December 1905) at 8.

²⁵ <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>. Also, Steve Fielding in numerous books lists all the hangman and their assistants, and Alec Taylor or Alexander English does not appear in any of them. See Fielding, *Hanged At Manchester* (History Press, 2008); Fielding, *The Executioner's Bible: The Story of Every British Hangman in the 20th Century* (John Blake publishing, 2008).

²⁶ "Hangman Vanishes," *London Daily Mirror* (14 May 1906) at 4.

February he determined to set out in search of employment. Packing his box, he took his departure, promising to write a letter to his wife on the Wednesday. Since then, he has not been seen, and no communication has been received from him. His wife is utterly unable to account for his long absence and silence.²⁷

His disappearance had been in February 1906, and it was now May. The article gave his name as Alexander Aimsbury Clarence English.

Since English had disappeared, other candidates for the job of public hangman were now going through the training process at Pentonville prison, hoping to be chosen as a public hangman.²⁸ Some Canadian newspapers also reported on the disappearance of Alexander English. For example, it may be that Alexander English came to Canada in 1906 as reported in the *Manitoba Free Press* in June of that year: "It is reported that a man named English, the official hangman of Great Britain, has taken a holiday and is spending his time in the Canadian West. He was last heard from in the vicinity of Winnipeg and is supposed to be making some real estate investments here."²⁹ At the same time another Canadian report alleged that the hangman, Alexander English, had disappeared to the United States, and that "if anyone finds him they are respectfully requested to send him back to Herbert Gladstone, Secretary of State for the Home Department."³⁰ While we cannot trust the hangman to be honest with any information, upon his return to Halifax harbour from a trip to England in 1914, he stated that he had been in Canada since 1906 and had lived variously in Toronto and Vancouver for eight years.³¹

What seems clear in any event is that just like the earlier hangman, "Radclive," had abandoned his family in England, our hangman, "Arthur Ellis," appears to have done the same. We do

²⁷ "Hangman Missing," *London Sunday Dispatch* (20 May 1906) at 3; *Aberdeen People's Journal* (19 May 1906); Also, *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail* (12 May 1906) at 6.

²⁸ "School for Hangmen," *Ottawa Citizen* (17 February 1906) at 15.

²⁹ "Winnipeg News," *Free Press Prairie Farmer* (20 June 1906) at 6.

³⁰ "A Hangman Lost," *Niagara-on-the-Lake Times* (22 June 1906) at 7. This article was earlier printed in several American papers. For example, *Duluth News Tribune* (3 June 1906) at 30; *Chicago Inter Ocean* (3 June 1906) at 17.

³¹ Canada, Incoming Passengers Lists, 1886-1935.

not know when his wife in England discovered his whereabouts, or whether she knew that after 1910 he was the Canadian hangman using the name Arthur Ellis. Furthermore, like Radcliffe, Ellis eventually had a different wife in Canada, without evidence of any divorce as to the wife left behind in England.

III. HIS PARENTS AND SIBLINGS

While we have started his biography at the hangman training stage, we move back now to examine his earlier life. When "Arthur Ellis" died in 1938, it was reported that his real name was Arthur Bartholomew Alexander English.³² Earlier, as we have noted when he was arrested for assaulting his wife, it was reported that his name was Alexander Armstrong English.³³ We believe that this earlier account gave the correct identity of the hangman and his proper middle name was indeed Armstrong, and that "Arthur Bartholomew," as well as "Aimsbury Clarence," were just examples of Alexander English's many aliases and pretensions over the years.

Alexander Armstrong English was born in South Shields, County of Durham, in 1869, and his birth was registered in the April/May/June period of that year.³⁴ South Shields, on the south bank of the River Tyne as it meets the North Sea, was by 1860 a community of 75,000 people due to a thriving coal mining and shipbuilding industrial base. It was near the larger centers of Newcastle and Sunderland, and across the river from North Shields.³⁵ Notice that if our hangman was born in 1869 and died in Canada in 1938, he would have been 69 years of age when he died, not 73 as widely reported.

³² For example, "Hangman Is Found Starving in Attic," *Montreal Gazette* (21 July 1938) at 9; "Death Catches Own Agent," *Vancouver Province* (22 July 1938) at 9.

³³ "Hangman Arrested," *Brandon Sun* (14 July 1922) at 2.

³⁴ England and Wales, *Civil Registration Birth Index*, 1837-1915. All genealogical references are found at Ancestry.ca or Familysearch.com unless otherwise noted.

³⁵ "South Shields", Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia (last modified 5 July 2025 at 14:23), online: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Shields> [<https://perma.cc/N8X4-R65N>].

We find Alexander Armstrong English at the age of two in the 1871 English census in two different places. His father was listed as Edward English (24), a coal miner, and his mother was Patience Armstrong English (23). One enumeration has the family living somewhat further north from South Shields in the coal mining town of New Hartley, while a different enumeration date has them listed as living at Seaton Delavel, not far north of Newcastle³⁶ In both the enumerations, the information as to Edward, Patience and two-year-old Alexander are the same.

Edward English, the father of our hangman, was born in 1847 in North Shields. Edward was the youngest of five children, meaning that our hangman had a bunch of uncles and aunts on his paternal side. Edward English had three older brothers and one older sister.³⁷ John English (our hangman's grandfather) was a steamboat captain. His wife, Margaret (our hangman's grandmother) must have died when Edward was very young, because in the 1851 English Census, when Edward was only three years old, John English was listed as a widower. Looking after the domestic chores for the family with five children was a widowed cousin of John.³⁸ Later in life, John English, the steamboat man, lived with his daughter's family and became a coal miner.³⁹ He was listed at the age of 80 as still living with his daughter's family in New Hartley.⁴⁰

Armstrong is the proper middle name of our hangman because his mother's maiden name was Patience Ruth Armstrong. Her parents were born in Scotland but moved to England. Patience was born in 1846, according to the Census of 1851, where at the age of 4, she was living with her parents Charles and Margaret, as well as an older sister Elizabeth, age 11, and brother Alexander, age 8. The Armstrong family was living in Seghill, a coal mining area in Northumberland, not far northwest from North Shields. While I cannot make out her father's occupation, it is telling that the family had three coal

³⁶ *English Census of 1871.*

³⁷ *Census of 1851.* Family of John English living in North Shields.

³⁸ *England Census of 1851.*

³⁹ *England Census of 1881.*

⁴⁰ *England Census of 1891.*

mining boarders living in the house,⁴¹ and ten years earlier in the Census of 1841, Charles was clearly listed as a coal miner.

In the 1861 Census, Patience Armstrong, then 15, was working as a servant while living with her widowed mother, Margaret Armstrong, a schoolteacher, and her older brother, Alexander Armstrong (18), a seaman. They now lived in South Shields.⁴² Listing yourself as a widow was a common practice when your husband had left you, but we may assume that Charles had died and that sister Elizabeth, at the age of 21, was now married. Notably, our hangman Alexander English had an uncle on his mother's side with the same first name, perhaps the source of his own name. Jumping ahead, Patience English died in 1912 in South Shields, which was after her son, the hangman, had disappeared and moved to Canada.⁴³ Our hangman's uncle Alexander died in 1913.

Edward English and Patience Armstrong were married in 1868 in South Shields,⁴⁴ and as noted, Alexander Armstrong English was born in South Shields in 1869. He may have been born in the larger town of Sunderland close by, but his birth was registered in South Shields. As previously mentioned, in the 1871 Census, the family had either moved from New Hartley to Seaton Delavel or vice versa, while Edward worked as a coal miner. Ten years later, according to the Census of 1881, the family was living in Monkwearmouth Shore, Sunderland. By then, Edward English (34) and his wife Patience R. English (34), had two children, Alexander English (12) and Florence English (5).⁴⁵ Instead of coal mining, Edward was now employed as a boat builder.

By the 1891 Census, Edward and Patience had more children. At this point, our hangman Alexander English had three much younger siblings: sisters Florence (14) and Sarah (9), and brother Charles (5). Edward was now listed as a storekeeper, and the family was living in Bishop Wearmouth, Sunderland.⁴⁶

⁴¹ *England Census of 1851.*

⁴² *England Census of 1861.*

⁴³ *England and Wales- Civil Registration of Death Index.*

⁴⁴ *England and Wales- Civil Registration of Marriage Index, 1837-1915.*

⁴⁵ *English Census of 1881.*

⁴⁶ *English Census of 1891.*

By 1891, Alexander English would have been 22 or so and had long since been married, as we will note below.

Ten years later in 1901, Edward (53), and Patience (53) were living in Jarrow, Sunderland with their three younger children: Florence (24), Sarah (18), and Charles (15).⁴⁷ We don't know how, but shortly after the enumeration of 1901, 15-year-old Charles, the hangman's only brother, albeit many years younger than him, died.⁴⁸

Before turning more specifically to the biography of hangman, Alexander English, we note some subsequent history of his parents and remaining siblings. By the 1911 Census, Edward was living alone at 19 Wellington Street in South Shields and was listed as a 64-year-old, unemployed boat builder and widower. Edward stated in this census that his wife had given birth to 16 children, but only 3 survived.⁴⁹ This probably explains the seven-year gap between Alexander and his sister Florence, and perhaps the gaps between the other children. It is also a shocking reminder of the high rate of infant mortality and the horrible medical conditions that poor people lived with at this time. One also wonders if the hangman's parents separated later in life. When Edward listed himself as a widower in 1911, his wife Patience was still alive. She can be found living in South Shields with Mr. Graham, a marine engineer, his wife and their two young children. Patience was acting as a nurse for the family, and unlike her husband, she was listed as married. She died in March 1912 in South Shields,⁵⁰ and Edward died in 1917, also in South Shields.⁵¹

Alexander's sister, Florence, born in 1876, eventually got married in South Shields in 1908 to Robert Cook Stobbart, who was about a decade older than her.⁵² According to the Census of 1921, they were still living in South Shields, where Robert was listed as a foreman in a carting or charter enterprise.⁵³ Robert

⁴⁷ *English Census of 1901*.

⁴⁸ *England and Wales- Civil Registration of Death Index, 1837-1915*.

⁴⁹ *English Census of 1911*.

⁵⁰ *England and Wales- Civil Registration of Death Index, 1837-1915*.

⁵¹ *England and Wales- Civil Registration of Death Index, 1837-1915*.

⁵² *England and Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915*.

⁵³ *Census of 1921*.

died in South Shields in 1937,⁵⁴ and Florence died at age 81 in 1958.⁵⁵ We do not have any evidence as to children.

There may be some doubt about what we say regarding the other sibling, Sarah English, born in 1882 in Sunderland, because there were several girls with that name born in the same region at about the same time. However, it is likely that Sarah English married a man, Thomas Campbell English, in South Shields in 1904.⁵⁶ They happened to have the same last name. In 1905, their only child, Thomas, was born in South Shields. Sarah’s husband Thomas died in 1931 at the age of 50 in South Shields,⁵⁷ while Sarah died in 1970 at the age of 87.⁵⁸ We do not have records dealing with the nephew of our hangman, also called Thomas Campbell English. In 1921, he was a 16-year-old office boy living with his parents in South Shields.⁵⁹

IV. EARLY YEARS, MARITIME CAREER, FIRST AND SECOND MARRIAGE

As noted, the birth of Alexander Armstrong English in South Shields/Sunderland was registered sometime in April, May, or June of 1869.⁶⁰ As we have noted with reference to his parents and siblings, he grew up in Sunderland, South Shields, Newcastle, and the wider Durham region of Northeast England. The last time he appeared in census records as living with his family was as a 12-year-old boy, listed as still attending school in 1881 in Sunderland.⁶¹

Alexander Armstrong may well have joined the Navy at a very young age, as soon as he finished school. Several decades later, when he was appointed hangman in 1905, the local *Hull Evening News* stated, “though a Hull citizen, Mr. English was born and

⁵⁴ *National Probate Calendar*, 1858-1995.

⁵⁵ *Civil Registration Death Index*, 1916-2007.

⁵⁶ England and Wales, *Civil Registration Marriage Index*, 1837-1915.

⁵⁷ England and Wales, *Civil Registration Death Index*, 1916-2007.

⁵⁸ England and Wales, *Civil Registration Death Index*, 1916-2007.

⁵⁹ *England Census 1921*.

⁶⁰ *England and Wales Civil Registration Birth Index*, 1837-1915.

⁶¹ *England Census 1881*.

brought up at Sunderland from whence at an early age he went to sea. Up to four or five years ago he had practically lived on the ocean, having served in the Royal Navy, and later in the merchant service, occupying chiefly the position of fireman.”⁶² We have some confirmation of this in the 1891 Census, where the 23-year-old Alexander English, already married, is on board a steam cargo ship called “Dean.” He was part of a 21-man crew and was listed as a fireman, which we presume is a stoker of coal.⁶³

Alexander English, said to be 21 years of age, married Edith Florence Stafford on July 14, 1889 at the Venerable Bede Church in Monk-Wearmouth, Sunderland.⁶⁴ Edith came from a large family, and her father was a blacksmith while her mother was a dressmaker.⁶⁵ We assume that Alexander was away at sea most of the time during the period of his first marriage. Alexander and Edith had a child, Florence Lambertine Armstrong English, born on March 27, 1892, and baptized in St. Stephens in South Shields on May 8, 1892.⁶⁶ However, the baby girl later died in 1892.⁶⁷ Tragically, Alexander English’s first wife, Edith (Stafford), also died a few years later in 1894 at the age of 24.⁶⁸ Did she die in childbirth? We do not know. One wonders how the death of his child and wife shaped our hangman’s character.

Assuming Alexander continued his career at sea after the death of his child and wife, when he was home, his residential focus shifted at some point from the Newcastle, Sunderland area to the area around Hull in East Yorkshire, which is some distance south of the Sunderland area, but still a major maritime centre on the coast of England. It was here that Alexander English got married again under the name “Alexander Aimsbury St. Clarence Donnison English” to Rebecca Everett in 1900 at

⁶² “Public Executioner,” *Hull Evening News* (28 November 1905) at 5.

⁶³ England, *Census of 1891*.

⁶⁴ England, *Select Marriages*, 1538-1973.

⁶⁵ England *Census of 1871 and 1881*.

⁶⁶ England, *Select Births and Christenings*.

⁶⁷ England and Wales, *Civil Registration Death Index*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Sculcoates, a suburb of Hull.⁶⁹ By this point, our hangman was 30 or 31 years of age.

Rebecca was born in 1874,⁷⁰ the second child in what would eventually be a large family. The family lived in the village of Preston, in the Holderness suburb, about 6 miles east of the centre of Hull.⁷¹ In the 1891 Census, when Rebecca was 16 and working as a domestic servant but living at home, her father was listed as a market gardener.⁷²

In the 1901 English Census, we find the recently married Alexander English (30), listed as a labourer, and his wife Rebecca English (26) living on Holderness Road in Hull. Alexander was said to have been born in Sunderland, Durham.⁷³ It is very likely that after his second marriage in 1900, Alexander's career in the Navy or merchant marine came to an end. Notice that our hangman started to lie about his age. Going back ten years to the 1891 Census, when he was listed as a stoker on a cargo ship, he was recorded as 23. However, ten years later, he was listed as 30, rather than 33 or 34.

V. SUBSEQUENT HISTORY OF ABANDONED WIFE AND CHILDREN

Our hangman and his second wife eventually had two children. Tracy Potter English was born on November 15, 1901.⁷⁴ Alexander Everett English was born in 1903.⁷⁵ As noted, our hangman seems to have abandoned his wife and sons in early 1906. In the 1911 English Census, while our hangman was already hanging people in Canada, we find Rebecca English, age 36, with her two children, living with her parents back in Hedon, near Hull. Her parents were Joseph and Mary Everett, aged 67 and 65, and daughter Rebecca English, listed as married for 11 years, was living with them, as well as her two sons, Tracey

⁶⁹ England and Wales, *Civil Registration Marriage Index*, 1837-2005.

⁷⁰ England and Wales, *Civil Registration of Birth Index*, 1837-1915.

⁷¹ *England Census of 1881*.

⁷² *England Census of 1891*.

⁷³ *English Census of 1901*.

⁷⁴ England and Wales, *Civil Registration Births Index*, 1837-1915.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

English (9) and Allec English (7).⁷⁶ Rebecca was a dressmaker working out of her parents' home.⁷⁷ Interestingly, Rebecca did not list herself as a widow, which many women would have done if their husband had abandoned them. Did she know her husband was the hangman in Canada? Was there any communication from him during this seven-year lapse?

We will eventually learn that Alexander English got married for a third time in Montreal in May 1916. Meanwhile, back in England, second wife, Rebecca English, got remarried in April 1916 to Philip Whatling.⁷⁸ The dating of the two remarriages seems to be more than a coincidence, and perhaps Rebecca was able to secure a divorce from Alexander; although, there does not appear to be a record of a divorce.⁷⁹ In 1920, Philip Whatling came to Canada to engage in farming.⁸⁰ Evidently, Rebecca followed him, because the 1921 Census of Canada has Philip and Rebecca living together in Patricia, Alberta, where he is listed as a farm labourer.⁸¹ They moved on at some stage to Ontario, where Rebecca died at age 54 on April 19, 1927 in Welland, of acute endocarditis aggravated by tuberculosis of the spine.⁸² Philip Whatling remarried in 1929 and died in Welland, Ontario in 1942 at age 75.⁸³ One wonders whether hangman, Alexander English, ever had any contact with his remarried second wife after she arrived in Canada.

Did he ever see his children again? As far as the hangman's two children in England are of interest to us, Tracy English got married in December 1929 to Elsie Akinson.⁸⁴ In 1939, he was

⁷⁶ In my book, *The Gorilla Man Strangler*, I stated that the second child was a girl, Alice. I now believe that this was a mistake, and the second child was also a boy. There is a picture of Rebecca Everett English and her two sons on a family tree in Ancestry.ca.

⁷⁷ *English Census of 1911*.

⁷⁸ England and Wales, *Civil Registration of Marriage Index*, 1916-2005.

⁷⁹ England and Wales, *Civil Divorce Records*, 1858-1918.

⁸⁰ Canada, *Ocean Arrivals*, 1919-1924.

⁸¹ *Canada Census 1921*.

⁸² Ontario, *Deaths*, 1869-1947.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ England and Wales, *Civil Registration of Marriage Index*, 1916-2005.

listed as a Cooper’s labourer,⁸⁵ and several children of Tracy and Elsie were listed. A cooper is a craftsman who produces wooden casks, barrels, vats, buckets, tubs, troughs, and other similar containers from timber staves.⁸⁶ Tracy died at age 44 in 1946.⁸⁷ He appears to have lived all his life in the Hull area.

The younger son of our hangman, Alexander English Jr., may have changed his name to Alec Whatling when his mother remarried. Alec Whatling, at age 17, arrived in Canada in 1921 with his mother, Rebecca Whatling, to join her husband, Philip Whatling, on a farm in Alberta.⁸⁸ He reverted to his original name by the time he married Anne Louis Sherwood from Amhurst, Nova Scotia, in 1943.⁸⁹ Alexander Everett English died at the age of 88 in Victoria in 1992, and his wife Annie Louise English died at the age of 93 in Victoria in 1998.⁹⁰

VI. CANADIAN EVENTS AND THIRD MARRIAGE.

We cannot find Alexander English or “Arthur Ellis” in the Canadian Census of 1911. We have noted previously that Alexander English, as hangman Arthur Ellis, moved his residence from Toronto to Vancouver and then Montreal, and on several occasions was not available as the hangman in various cases (often bungled by others) because he was back in England. The passenger lists available to us are hardly complete, but we note that the hangman travelled to England in November 1914, and when he arrived back to Canada, he was listed as a 44-year-old engineer who had been in Canada since 1906.⁹¹ The following year in April 1915, Alexander English, 45, listed as an engineer, arrived in England travelling from New York.⁹² He

⁸⁵ 1939 *English and Wales Register*.

⁸⁶ Wikipedia.

⁸⁷ England and Wales, *Death Index*, 1916-2007.

⁸⁸ Canada, *Incoming Passenger Lists*, 1865-1935.

⁸⁹ “Engagement,” *Saint John Times Globe* (8 June 1943) at 6.

⁹⁰ *BC Registration of Death Certificates*.

⁹¹ Canada, *Incoming Passengers Lists*, 1865-1935.

⁹² UK and Ireland, *Incoming Passenger Lists*, 1878-1960.

evidently stayed for a considerable period of time, arriving back on a ship from Liverpool to Quebec City at the end of May 1915.⁹³ Perhaps on these trips, Alexander English reconnected with his family in the Sunderland area and visited his wife and children in the Hull area?

As noted, hangman Alexander English married Edyth (Edith) Grimsdale in Montreal on May 13, 1916, at Presbyterian Saint Giles.⁹⁴ In the 1921 Canadian Census, they were listed as renting at 486 Colonial Ave. Alexander was listed as 48 years old (being born in 1873) instead of his actual age of around 52, being born in 1869. His lie as to age makes the gap between Arthur and Edith less, as she was listed as 43.⁹⁵ Alexander's listed occupation in the 1921 Census was as a Detective in Federal employment and his date of immigration was given as 1909.

It would appear that when Alexander married Edith, they moved right beside her parents' place, because going back to the census of 1911, we find Edith, age 34, living with her parents, William Grimsdale, 57, a janitor working for the CPR, and his wife, Elizabeth, 56, living at 484 Colonial Ave.⁹⁶ In the 1921 census, we have Alex and Edith living at 486 Colonial right beside her parents at 484 Colonial.⁹⁷ Edith's father, William Grimsdale, died on April 24, 1922, at age 69.⁹⁸ In the 1922 Montreal City Directory, we find an Alex English listed as an engineer living at 486 Colonial Ave.⁹⁹

Before the scandal of assaulting his wife in July 1922, which we dealt with in the last chapter, our hangman took a short trip to England, arriving in Liverpool in March on the ship Montcalm. He was listed as 57 years of age, working in the civil service and going to Newcastle.¹⁰⁰ When he arrived back in Canada, he was listed as 56 years old, married, working in the

⁹³ *Canada Incoming Passenger Lists, 1865-1935.*

⁹⁴ *Quebec Vital and Church Collection* (Drouin Collection).

⁹⁵ *1921 Census of Canada.*

⁹⁶ *1911 Canadian Census.*

⁹⁷ *1921 Canadian Census.*

⁹⁸ *Quebec Vital and Church Records* (Drouin Collection), Presbyterian Saint Giles.

⁹⁹ *Montreal City Directory, 1922.*

¹⁰⁰ *UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960.*

civil service, living at 486 Colonial Avenue, Montreal, and his sister Florence Stobbart was listed as his nearest relative in England.¹⁰¹

After the scandalous assault on his wife, Alexander English once again travelled from Montreal to Liverpool on the ship *Magentic*, arriving on August 22, 1922. He now dropped two years in age, stating he was 55, retired, and visiting South Shields.¹⁰² When he returned to Canada, he was listed as only 54 years of age, single, working in the civil service, and residing at 16 Sherbrook Street, Montreal.¹⁰³

Despite the marital dustup in the summer of 1922, we have evidence that Alexander and Edith reconciled for some time before Edith finally separated from him. For example, Alexander and Edith made a trip to England in 1929, where upon arrival, Alexander was listed as a detective, age 59, while Edith was listed as being 51 years of age.¹⁰⁴ When they left England, he was listed as a 58-year-old detective and his wife was now 54.¹⁰⁵

The Montreal City Directory continued to have Alex English living at 486 Colonial Avenue until 1925, when there was a move to Avenue Lebrun, where through the years, he was reported to be an "employee at the court house."¹⁰⁶ As late as the census of 1931, Ellis was still listed with his wife at 3452 Lebrun.¹⁰⁷ Illustrating again his lying ability, the information in 1931 varies from the information in the 1921 census. Now he said he was 60 and born in 1871 (compared to before when he was born in 1873) but still a lie as to his real birth in 1869. In 1931, he was listed as immigrating in 1904 rather than 1909. Now he was a messenger in the court system.

In a rare interview in December 1928, after a hanging in Parry Sound, Ontario, it was reported that Ellis was buying Christmas presents. It was reported that his body count was now

¹⁰¹ Canada, *1922 Ocean Arrivals (Form 30A)*, 1919-1924.

¹⁰² UK and Ireland, *Incoming Passenger Lists*, 1878-1960.

¹⁰³ Canada, *Ocean Arrivals (Form 30A)*, 1919-1924.

¹⁰⁴ UK, *Incoming Passenger Lists*, on White Star Line- Regina- arriving in Liverpool from Montreal on September 29, 1929.

¹⁰⁵ UK, *Outward Passengers Lists*, 1890-1960.

¹⁰⁶ *Montreal City Directories*.

¹⁰⁷ *Canadian Census of 1931*.

568 and the reporter stated, “When he is at home he lives in Montreal with his wife, whose picture he carries around with him. They have no children of their own but have many nephews and nieces...” Ellis claimed to have been born in Manchester, and claimed to have been a very good featherweight boxer and had immigrated to Australia where he first hanged someone in Sydney.¹⁰⁸ As we have noted, Ellis was an adept liar. When he died a decade later in 1938, most newspapers correctly identified his body count in Canada as around 200, even if he claimed to have hanged 500 or even 600.¹⁰⁹

This is the picture of Ellis that is found in many publications. The second picture, from a different angle, is from the *Montreal Gazette*:¹¹⁰



VII. THE LAST YEARS AND DEATH

We noted earlier that after Ellis was arrested and charged with assaulting his wife Edith Grimsdale in 1922, there must have been some sort of reconciliation, because as late as 1929,

¹⁰⁸ “Official Hangman Busy Buying Gifts,” *Toronto Star* (22 December 1928) at 2.

¹⁰⁹ “Ellis Dies,” *Lethbridge Herald* (22 July 1938) at 1; “Hangman Ellis,” *Edmonton Journal* (21 July 1938) at 3; “Canada’s Hangman Dies,” *Van. Province* (22 July 1938) at 9.

¹¹⁰ “Hangman Ellis Dies,” *Montreal Gazette* (22 July 1938) at 9.

we have evidence of a trip they took together to England.¹¹¹ We noted earlier as well, that Edith obviously knew her husband was the hangman by the time of the assault in 1922. However, at some point, six or seven years before Ellis died in 1938, Edith allegedly decided she could not live with a hangman, and just like Radcliffe before him when his wife left him, Ellis's career as hangman started to unravel as the bungles added up and he spent his last years alone and in desperate poverty.

As noted earlier, journalist friend O'Brien circulated a story that Edith finally discovered that her husband, Alexander English, was Arthur Ellis, the hangman. Allegedly, she told the reporter that she discovered her husband's identity because Arthur was the secretary-treasurer of a lawn bowling club and one day, an RCMP inspector was a guest of the club and pointed Arthur out as the hangman of Canada. She went on to say:

"I loved Arthur, there is no doubt about it, and he was always good to me," she said. "But there are things too horrible to demand even the loyalty of love. Arthur's business was always vague to me - a lot of Englishmen are like that. He discouraged questions and when he travelled, I assumed it had something to do with secret governmental affairs. At least, when I hinted that way Arthur never denied it, so I accepted the idea. When the incredible news got to me of his true identity it was a devastating shock. I just could not bear the thought of living with the executioner. The kindly husband was inseparable from the man who had killed so many hundreds of murderers on so many scaffolds. I told him I would leave for a while and try to get used to the idea, but I never did. And, typically, Arthur was too proud to beg me to return. The 'while' stretched into months, then years."¹¹²

At the funeral in 1938, Edith allegedly said that "the 'while' stretched into... seven years more..."¹¹³ If this is believable, she split from her husband sometime in the early 1930s.

This story that Edith discovered her husband's occupation sometime in the early 1930s period, instead of 1922, given the wide publicity in 1922 of his actual name and occupation during the marital dispute that she herself was involved in, makes no sense to me, unless Ellis persuaded her that he had left his earlier

¹¹¹ UK, *Incoming Passenger Lists*, on White Star Line- Regina- arriving in Liverpool from Montreal on September 29, 1929.

¹¹² Andy O'Brien, "My Friend, The Hangman," *Free Press* (6 February 1971) 112 at 114.

¹¹³ Andy O'Brien, "Moments I'd Like to Relive," *Free Press* (22 March 1975) at 137.

occupation and she naively believed him during their years of reconciliation till she discovered otherwise. This seems unlikely and the lawn bowling story is probably just another of the many myths involving Arthur Ellis.

"Arthur Ellis" ended up alone in a rooming house, so poor that he pawned his watch,¹¹⁴ and "existed only on the few dollars lent him from time to time by old friends such as the odd police official."¹¹⁵ He was discovered in a room in the attic of an Ontario street boarding house by a concerned police officer who noted that Ellis had not been at the station for a visit for some time and knew his address so went for a visit.¹¹⁶ A different report was that the landlady contacted the police officer about the poor condition of Ellis.¹¹⁷ In any event, Ellis was reportedly found starving to death, and the officer got him transferred to the hospital where he went into a coma and never regained consciousness.¹¹⁸ The rooming house lady said the man rented the room under the name "Russell" and always paid the rent and was a "real gentleman... always well dressed and very polite and charming."¹¹⁹

Another friend contacted Edith, his estranged wife, living at 3452 Lebrun Avenue, who came to the hospital. "He was a good man," sobbed the neatly dressed woman."¹²⁰ The cause of death was unknown, though one report quoted a hospital doctor as stating the cause of death was heart trouble,¹²¹ while other reports tentatively ascribed the cause as a cancer or tumour.¹²² Likely, alcohol poisoning and malnutrition had something to do

¹¹⁴ Andy O'Brien, "My Friend, The Hangman," *Free Press* (6 February 1971) at 112-115.

¹¹⁵ "Hangman is Found Starving in Attic," *Montreal Gazette* (21 July 1938) at 9.

¹¹⁶ "Hangman Ellis, Legendary Figure, Dies in Montreal," *Ottawa Journal* (22 July 1938) at 4.

¹¹⁷ "Hangman Reported Dying," *Montreal Star* (20 July 1938) at 3.

¹¹⁸ "Hangman Ellis, Legendary Figure, Dies in Montreal," *Ottawa Journal* (22 July 1938) at 4.

¹¹⁹ "Hangman Ellis is Thought Dying," *Edmonton Journal* (21 July 1938) at 3.

¹²⁰ "Death Calling Hangman Ellis," *Windsor Star* (21 July 1938) at 25.

¹²¹ "Hangman Ellis," *Toronto Star* (22 July 1938) at 17.

¹²² "Hangman's Career Ends," *Windsor Star* (22 July 1938) at 16; "Hangman Ellis," *Ottawa Journal* (22 July 1938) at 4.

with it. On his death, his estranged wife reportedly said, "I knew it, I knew it, it's a wonder it didn't happen long ago."¹²³

Unlike Radcliffe, Ellis never expressed remorse as to his hanging career. His mantra throughout was that "It was the law, not me," that hanged them.¹²⁴ There were only fourteen persons, including Edith and a friend, but mostly police officers, at the funeral, including C.P.R. police.¹²⁵ Despite the numerous times that the federal department of justice denied having anything to do with the appointment of a hangman, one woman and 49 men applied for the job after it was reported that Ellis had died.¹²⁶

Barely a month after her husband died, Edith Grimsdale English lost her mother, Elizabeth, who died on August 26, 1938.¹²⁷ Edith Grimsdale English, died in her 84th year on December 2, 1960.¹²⁸ She is buried beside the hangman at Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal.¹²⁹ We have a picture of the headstone from findagrave.com:

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ "Law Took Lives," *Calgary Herald* (22 July 1938) at 3.

¹²⁵ "Hangman Ellis Goes to Grave," *Windsor Star* (23 July 1938) at 23; "Few at the Funeral," *Victoria Times-Colonist* (23 July 1938) at 9; "Few Mourners," *Montreal Gazette* (25 July 1938) at 5.

¹²⁶ "Woman and 49 Men," *Toronto Star Weekly* (20 August 1938) at 1.

¹²⁷ Find a Grave.com.

¹²⁸ "Obit of Edith English," *Montreal Gazette* (5 December 1960) at 53.

¹²⁹ "Arthur Ellis" in Mark Leslie & Shayna Krishnasamy, *Macabre Montreal* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2018) at 43-50.



When he died, his estranged wife gave his age as 73, born in 1866, instead of his actual age of 69, born in 1869.