**George Thompson – Scindian Convict #7**

George Thompson, a miner by trade, was just 23-years-old when he was convicted of the manslaughter of his friend Philip Wallace. The fateful event causing the death occurred on Christmas morning 1847 at the village of Bywell, Northumberland on the estate of Thomas Wentworth Beaumont, Esquire. The pair were out poaching (with an unnamed third party), possibly to acquire game for Christmas dinner. Philip Wallace and George Thompson were captured after an attempt to shoot the gamekeeper, Thomas Surtees; however, Thompson, meaning to shoot Surtees, wounded his own friend. Wallace died, Saturday 8 January 1848 in Morpeth Gaol, of lock-jaw caused by the gunshot wound. Testimony at Thompson’s trial for manslaughter, revealed that both men appeared to be very drunk. Sadly, a drunken decision to catch themselves some prey got quickly out of hand when they were discovered poaching. Much gunfire was exchanged and Thompson not only accidentally shot and mortally wounded his friend Philip Wallace, he also determined his own fate resulting in 15 years’ transportation.

Thompson was found to be guilty of manslaughter at the coroner’s inquest and also convicted for the same at his trial on 29 February 1848, Newcastle upon Tyne. The trial was reported as follows in *The Newcastle Courant*, Friday March 3, 1848 - *NORTHUMBERLAND AND NEWCASTLE SPRING ASSIZES:*

*“Yesterday morning in the Crown Court, Moot Hall, George Thompson, (23), was placed at the bar, charged with the wilful murder of Philip Wallace. Mr Ingham stated the case for the prosecution. He remarked that, although the prisoner was charged with murder, it would appear that Philip Wallace was not the man at whom the gun was fired, but was hit with a discharge that was aimed at another person. That circumstance did not affect the responsibility of the prisoner, as when any party was engaged in the prosecution of a criminal act, he was held penally answerable for all the consequences of that act, although they were neither intended or foreseen by him.”*

Surtees’ account of the altercation was particularly detailed and colourful:

*“I am gamekeeper to Mr Beaumont at Bywell; I have two watchers named Armstrong and Henderson; and they and I were out on the eve of Christmas-day; In the fore part of the night we heard two or three discharges; We separated a little after four in the morning, the watchers going home to Bywell. I went into the park to go to my house, and then heard the report of a gun towards Bearl Wood, upon which I fetched back Henderson and Armstrong, and we went towards the wood. When we went into the wood, we went up the east side and saw three men…When I got near to the men, they receded a little and each of them presented a gun, one of them saying, “Stand back, or I’ll blow your brains out.” I had a gun with me, and a dog which was chained to my left arm. I still went on, and the prisoner Thompson fired his gun, hitting and wounding the dog, which howled and threw itself back, pulling back my arm and getting free; the consequence was that my gun fell from under my arm. The other poacher, Wallace, still presented his gun and said, “Stand back.” I rushed right on; we struggled, and I threw Wallace, both of us falling together. Thompson then came up and struck me several times on my shoulder, breast, and thigh, with the stock of his gun. Wallace said “Strike at the head”... I threw myself a little from Wallace, who got up. I got up too, and rushed in upon Wallace, got hold of him, and threw him, with his face upon some corf rods and hazel stumps. I fell with my head upon the ride. I felt blood running from Wallace’s face onto my hand, and he called out “Just blow the \_\_\_\_\_\_’s head off.” I looked up and saw Thompson coming towards us, with his gun in his hand. I shouted “Oh no, don’t shoot me like a dog when I’m lying.”… He then made me quit my hold of Wallace, who got up, and kicked me over my left hip. I was still lying, when the prisoner again struck at me with his gun; it missed me and went into the ground. I called to Armstrong the watcher and he answered me, and the prisoner and Wallace ran away… I followed them into an adjoining field, and as the watchers were coming up, the prisoner and Wallace turned around, presented their guns and said either “they would blow their heads off,” or “shoot the first man”. I still went on and Wallace struck me with his gun over my shoulder, and broke the stock. The prisoner struck me with his gun and knocked me down. When I looked up I saw Wallace striking at Armstrong, with the barrel of his gun; I got up and hit Wallace on the head with my gun, knocking him down. I turned round to the prisoner, who threw down his gun and said “O Thomas, don’t strike at me, I’m taken.” The prisoner and Wallace were then taken, as both the watchers had come up. I was very sick from the blows I had received. While we were all together, I said to the prisoner, “For shame of you, you shot at me and missed me, and blew Wallace’s coat-lap off,” Wallace’s coat-lap was on fire. Wallace said there never was a gun fired. We took the prisoners to Mr Trotter’s at Bywell, where they were put into a policeman’s charge. Both the prisoners seemed to be drunk, Wallace particularly so...”*

The episode was particularly violent, mostly at the urging of Wallace who ultimately lost his life. After receiving his unfortunate sentence, Thompson remained in the Morpeth County Gaol for another couple of weeks before being moved to Millbank Prison in London on 17 March 1848. All prisoners sentenced to transportation spent a period of time in Millbank being assessed. Thompson spent 8 months there before being transferred on 30 November 1848 to the Wakefield House of Corrections in West Yorkshire. His final move to Portland Prison on 2 June 1849 was to await transportation to Western Australia, departing on 28 February 1850.

George Thompson arrived at the Swan River Colony aboard the first convict transport, the *Scindian,* on 1 June 1850. His physical description was given as: height, 5ft 8in, brown hair, blue eyes, prominent visage, fair and a little tanned, stout appearance, with a scar on corner of right eye, small scar on chin, small blue scar on inside of right ear. The Prison Chaplain’s notes indicate that he was aged 26 years on 2 February 1851. He received his ticket-of-leave a few months later on 29 May. The chaplain had some concerns: *“NB Rather unsettled in mind with much seeming indifference in matters connected with religion; and appearing careless in preparing for a steadier walk in future, which I much regret.”* The Chaplain’s concerns extended to Thompson’s companion, ticket-of-leave man Alexander Thomas (61), also convicted for manslaughter: *“This man and Alex Thomas [61] go out this day 29th May to seek work not having been engaged to masters - from their similarity of disposition, I would have liked it better had each one gone out at a different time; and still better, if spared the temptation of going out disengaged.”*

In January of the following year George Thompson found himself at the York Convict Depot. As noted in the correspondence of Governor Charles Fitzgerald, on January 21, 1852, Thompson and four other ticket of leave men - Dan Farrell (623), J. Frazer (867?), James Withers (361) and Edward Harrion (842) - were found guilty at York of unlawfully leaving their employment on the road and going to the race course. They were returned to the Convict Establishment. The violation was reported in the *Inquirer*, 21 January 1852:

*“York. A correspondent has kindly forwarded the following account of the Races… Just as the horses were about to start for the first race, Mr. Cowan rode up to the Stewards and told them that all the probationers from the depot had taken French leave, and had come up to see the races. The Steward immediately suspended the races, and resolved to support Mr. Cowan in his efforts to compel them to return to the depot; the police were sent off for the York garrison, but I am glad to say they were not required, for on Mr. Cowan and the Stewards going up to the men (who each had a good stick) and representing to them the impropriety of their conduct, they marched off quietly, much to the disappointment of the natives, who had armed themselves with good sticks in expectation of a row.”*

Within four years though Thompson was up in the Champion Bay region and assigned to Major Logue as a shepherd, possibly on Logue’s Ellendale property. Thompson seems to have steadied in nature and behaviour as his entry in the Dictionary of Western Australians notes that he had a wife and an adopted Aboriginal daughter. He became overseer at the Maitland River Station from 1884 to 1889 and then overseer and manager of Frank Wittenoom’s pastoral lease and sheep stations *Boolardy* and *Nookawarra* in the Murchison region north of Yalgoo and west of Cue. As a step-up from shepherding he oversaw the transition from this practice to fenced paddocks for livestock. He ended up buying and selling stock in partnership with a man named John ‘Jack’ Hearn, a drover/dealer.

It is difficult to determine whether or not the station manager of Boolardy is in fact the ex-convict George Thompson. On 8 January 1855 Thompson was received back in the Convict Establishment having received a magisterial sentence of one month with hard labour. The Superintendent Thomas H. Dixon noted that Thompson would *“be placed under regulated discipline.”* Thompson being a shepherd for Major Logue is detailed in the Convict Establishment records for 3 February 1855, on his discharge from Fremantle Prison - to Port Gregory on TL (ticket-of-leave) and then the half-yearly return for the Victoria District in June 1856 - shepherd for Major Logue. Beyond that it seems feasible that he may have worked his way up over the next thirty years to become the overseer and manager of major pastoral stations in the Midwest Murchison district. If the Boolardy station manager is the same man then he was still working at age 79.

If ex-*Scindian* convict George Thompson was at Boolardy station, unfortunately he was involved in another manslaughter case in 1896. The case was reported in various newspapers over several months leading up to the trial. On 28 January 1896, an Aboriginal man at Boolardy named ‘Micky’ was said to have been killed by Ernest Waugh, George Thompson and Frank Purtill. Micky had apparently had an altercation with Waugh while they were droving sheep from Mullewa to Boolardy. Waugh was hit by Micky and reported it to station manager Thompson. When Thompson went to speak with Micky about the incident apparently Micky bit him so Thompson hit him on the head with a stick. Later Micky was chained by the neck to a verandah post and was whipped by Waugh. Although it was reported that Thompson allowed Micky to be bathed and had ointment put on the whip cuts, Micky later died in bed. The three men charged with the manslaughter were later released seemingly due to indecision on the part of the jury. Two trials were held as the first one in Geraldton saw the jury dismissed. Some believed it acceptable for station masters to discipline their Aboriginal workers as they saw fit. Clearly the outcome was a terrible injustice for station hand Micky.

George Thompson was still managing Wittenoom’s Boolardy station into the early 1900s. John ‘Jack’ Hearn was managing Nookawarra station in the late 1890s and the fact that Wittenoom, Thompson and Hearn had property interests in common can be confirmed by an advertisement in November 1904 where the three are jointly claiming under the ‘Real Property Acts’ (of 1861 and 1877) to take over the title to the adjoining property ‘Murgoo Station’ after the proprietor Henry Mostyn Maloney died the previous year in July. Murgoo pastoral station had initially been established by Edward and Frank Wittenoom in 1873 and the homestead built in 1880. Later Hearn had been half-owner of the property with Maloney. John Francis Hearn, grazier of ‘Gabyon station’ had arrived in W.A. in 1895 and taken over as manager of Nookawarra, subsequently moving into sheep dealing for himself and was listed as a grazier when the claim was made in 1904. Thompson was identified as being Boolardy station manager. It is not known if the claim was successful, however the Murgoo station property passed into the ownership of the Atkins family company in 1905.

No BDM WA death record matching Thompson’s details has yet been located and no details for a wife and daughter have been able to be confirmed.

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