

George Wilson – Scindian Convict #74

George Wilson was, according to the observations of the judge who presided over his trial and the chaplain of the Fremantle Prison, a well-educated, well-bred, intelligent young man. During his short time in the colony he worked as a clerk for the overseer of the Convict Establishment. Why then was he in the Epping Union house in Essex as a casual pauper on the night of 2 August 1847? He was found guilty of arson, having set the trampers' room of the poorhouse alight, endangering the lives of other pauper inmates.

Large Union workhouses were erected following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act as part of a national system for dealing with poverty. Conditions in the workhouses were made intentionally uninviting, designed to deter all but the truly destitute from applying for relief. The Epping Union workhouse was erected during 1837/38 and was intended to house 220 inmates in secure confinement at low cost. Food provided in the workhouses was meagre and according to some sources insufficient to sustain a working man. Was this the reason a disgruntled pair of trampers set fire to the Epping Union workhouse on 2 August 1847 or was it a negligent accident? Whatever the factors behind the act, it was reason enough to see both George Wilson and John Smith convicted of arson and sentenced to 15 years' transportation.

The trial at the Essex Lent Assizes was reported in *The Chelmsford Chronicle*, on Friday, March 10, 1848:

"The prisoner Wilson, who was described as being able to read and write well, put in a written defence which displayed no small intelligence and set forth the improbability of their setting fire to premises in which they were confined, an act calculated to cause their own death. He further stated it was in looking for some thread and money that he pulled from his pocket when the straw caught light, and in order to prevent the fire extending he took some of the straw in his arms and placed it under the window; if culpability rested upon anyone it was upon Wilson and his fellow prisoner; Smith was quite exonerated from blame.

His lordship commented upon the evidence and the jury returned a verdict of guilty against both prisoners.

In passing sentence his lordship, addressing the prisoners, said – you have been found guilty of this offence upon evidence so clear that no other verdict could possibly have been returned, notwithstanding the very ingenious defence which has been read to the court, and which appeared to carry some plausibility with it. This is one of the most shocking cases of the kind that has come before me for some years, and betrays a most depraved state of mind; you Wilson, from the contents of the paper you have written, have shown that you are a youth of superior mind, and knowing, as you must have done, the punishment your crime would most certainly meet, and remembering that you had lost your character by a previous conviction, your guilt is aggravated and great, and the offence one of the most atrocious and painful character. You might have destroyed yourselves, and human life might have been sacrificed; one man was severely burnt, and his wife and child, who were in an adjoining part of the premises, narrowly escaped, and that their lives were spared is not attributable to you. A number of unfortunate paupers, without any means of subsistence, were thus imperilled, and

you who lived upon the hard-earned rates of many who are nearly as badly circumstanced as yourselves, dare to tell them that you would burn down the very refuge which they have raised for you. With you it is necessary that the law should take its full course. Something has been said to-day about persons who are sentenced to transportation being removed but a few miles from London, but there are distinctions made, and by your being sent to one of the very worst penal settlements, you will be taught that the best condition there is infinitely inferior to the worst state of an Englishman. The sentence is that you be transported for 15 years.

The prisoner Wilson sank down in the dock and wept bitterly, and was supported away by the prison officers."

The judge mentioned that Wilson had a previous conviction. It is difficult to pinpoint a record that links directly to him, however, there was a larceny conviction in April 1847 in Lincolnshire, for which one-months' imprisonment was served, which appears the most likely. Unfortunately for Wilson the severity with which arson was viewed by the law in conjunction with having a previous conviction saw him dealt a heavy sentence. Confusingly the Wakefield Prison register records that it was his first conviction.

Wilson was transferred from Wakefield Prison in West Yorkshire to Portland Prison on 1 June 1849. He was collected from there to board the first convict transport to Western Australia, the *Scindian*, on 28 February 1850, and arrived in the Swan River Colony on 1 June 1850. His physical description not long after his arrival was: height, 5' 5 3/4", with sandy-coloured hair, grey eyes, a long visage, fresh complexion, and slight appearance. His appearance was due to the fact that he was afflicted with consumption.

George Wilson's poor health, physical frailty and his intelligence and education saw him appointed to a position within the Convict Establishment system, as a clerk for the overseer. He did this work until issued with his ticket-of-leave on 3 June 1851, almost a year to the day that the *Scindian* had arrived in Western Australia. Unfortunately for George his condition had worsened and he died just eleven days later. The Fremantle Convict Establishment Chaplain recorded his observations about George Wilson before his death and this notation was written on 30 April 1852:

"Young George Wilson

George Wilson has been for many months sinking under consumption. He had worked as a clerk in the overseer's office. He obtained his ticket-of-leave two weeks before he died. The Chaplain talked to him on religion, but found him firm in his adherence to deistical views; these, he told me, he had imbibed from his father in early years. On attempting to reason with him on the subject, he at once cut the matter short by declining to enter into any controversy alleging that such only awakened painful recollections; moreover, that it would not avail with him.

His general respectfulness of manner and good breeding attached me to him, and I would gladly have afforded any attention or patient explanation of Christian doctrine in my power to offer, but he professed himself an unbeliever in revealed religion. He admitted the authenticity of Scripture, but denied its genuineness; to use his own words, he thought each book was written by its respected author, but regarded the statements therein contained as the mere imaginings of the respective writers.

When at length in hospital and evidently sinking fast, I said, "I hope you see things in a different light now", he replied, quite with an air of surprise at my address, "Nothing of the kind!" I then expressed my regret that he voluntarily closed his eyes to those prospects of joy in another world which I could sometimes hold forth, with blessed and comforting assurance to believers in Christ and His resurrection, adding (for I still felt desirous of shaking his steadfastness) "if I am right in supporting you a disbeliever in a hereafter?" He calmly answered, such was his opinion; but he felt better, and hoped soon to be well."

George Wilson died on 14 June 1851 at the age of 24 years.

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