

The Demise of Bicycle George

A Life of Crime

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Kirstie Close completed her honours degree in history at La Trobe University in 2006. She went on to a Master of Arts at the University of Melbourne, which she completed by coursework and research in 2009. Kirstie is currently working on her PhD project at Deakin University, which looks at the independence of the Fijian Methodist Church. This piece was written for an undergraduate class at La Trobe and involved Kirstie's first archival experience, at PROV. She has since gone on to study in personal as well as other public archives, mainly the Queensland State archives for her Masters thesis on a mission in Northern Queensland. Kirstie is currently also on the Committee of Management of the Professional Historians Association, and tutors in history subjects at the Australian Catholic University.

Abstract

This short piece looks at the life of a murderer, George Blunderfield (alias Arthur Oldring), who was hanged in Melbourne in 1918. Melburnians, or visitors to the city, may have seen his image on the wall at the Old Melbourne Gaol. Blunderfield's life started out normally enough, and then descended into horrific crime. His story includes bicycle racing, escape from an island prison, and then recruitment for service with the Australian Imperial Forces in wartime Victoria. In the last years of his life, Blunderfield wreaked havoc from the western to the eastern coasts of Australia. This in turn had a dramatic effect on his immediate family, which is also detailed here. This story draws on the archives at PROV as well as on State Records Office of Western Australia material, with help from Ms Jean Bellamy, a distant relative of George Blunderfield.

The man looked like a ferret. At least, that's what the *Age* printed on 23 February 1918. With bent head, he accepted his fate, and still the newspaper mocked him.[1]

Who was George Blunderfield, the man standing before the Supreme Court? What led him down the gruesome path of rape and murder? Forty-seven years of age when he swung from the gallows, George was one of Australia's most brutal criminals.

The Blunderfields – three sons (of which George was one), three daughters and their parents – migrated from England to South Africa when George was eleven years old. The journey across the Atlantic Ocean was rough and the family was keen to disembark and make their home in Cape Town. Soon after the family arrived, young George was struck down with enteric fever (typhoid). He writhed in a pool of sweat and agony for a number of days before recovering. This was the first in a number of incidents George later considered had affected his brain. At his trial for murder, he said: 'Ever since [the bout of typhoid] I have suffered from pains in the head and loss of memory, and I become eccentric at times, lasting for a fortnight or more'.[2] Most days, while George was still bedridden, his young sister Jessie would keep him company, entertaining him with stories she created or had heard, as sisters often do. He enjoyed her stories about bicycle races the most, and tales of her escapades around town. George longed to ride a bicycle of his own one day.

Once he had recuperated, the Blunderfields set off again, this time from the Cape to Australia.[3] On this voyage, George's father instilled in him the skills to survive in the wilderness, imparting his interest in constellations and navigation. George learnt that it was much easier to see at night if the moon was full. [4] These lunar cycles coincided with many of the major events in his life.



Photograph of George Blunderfield taken in Western Australia circa 1900, from PROV, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917.

The Blunderfields arrived in Adelaide around 1885. George was aged fourteen. Five years later, in 1890, the dazzling tales of the goldfields drew him and two of his three sisters to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia.[5]

It was not long before George discovered the bicycle club in Kalgoorlie, which became his delight.[6] Bicycles were very popular, as they were the most convenient mode of transport for miners in outback towns such as Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie.[7] George was swept up in the craze, competing for prize money in races from Perth to Queensland. Miners from the surrounding districts entrusted him with the care and repair of their bicycles.[8] Thus George surrounded himself with bicycle parts – gears, spokes, bolts and chains.

Sadly, George's happiness in the bicycle business did not last long, with a severe accident meaning he had to retire from racing. It was while racing that George had his accident. He had flown straight over the handlebars, landing on his head. He suffered a fractured skull.[9] This only exacerbated ongoing problems George had had with his head since suffering typhoid many years before.

This was when George's life took a dramatic turn; he spiralled downward and took others with him. His first crime was not terribly serious, as he was caught on 22 September 1899 riding a stolen bicycle. He had pulled up beside his friend on said bicycle and grinned broadly, telling about the thrilling ride he had just had. He boasted that he had beaten the train coming from Coolgardie to Kalgoorlie.[10] George could never keep his exploits to himself. The friend he bragged to

reported him to the police after hearing that a bicycle had been stolen. George's response reveals much about him. He was agitated, blaming everyone but himself. His head was buzzing. He set out to coerce the witnesses into meeting with him and devising an alibi. Many of them were friends George had known for some years and with whom he lived in close quarters. They agreed to meet with him, and, as the group gathered, it was getting dark. The night brought a chill; the moon was slim, offering little light. George's close friend, Campbell, decided to light a fire. Terrified that this fire would alert the police to their meeting, George panicked, even though they were well out of sight of the police station. Self-preservation was his one desire; but fear and paranoia contorted his reasoning of how to obtain it.

As Campbell knelt to light the fire, he felt a heavy blow to the back of his head. Then came another. He recovered his balance, and staggered away from George, who had suddenly set himself into a rage. 'Murder!' the stunned Campbell screamed as he lurched down the hill.[11]

George was left atop the hill, watching his friend scuttle to safety, scrambling away from him. Somehow, George was acquitted of assault charges. However, he was found guilty of stealing the bicycle, and fined five pounds after a hearing at the Kalgoorlie Police Court.[12] After this incident, although George was far less popular around the town, he continued to live in Kalgoorlie.

His next crime was far more despicable: the rape of six-year-old Lucy Chalmer. Lucy's mother, Sarah, had often seen George loitering around their home. He had even offered his services as a babysitter.[13] This responsibility was instead given to Mrs Harriet Kirkwood, the Chalmers' next-door neighbour. Feeling rejected and resentful, George snuck in the back door of the Chalmers' house and raped Lucy after offering her jujube lollies. When Sarah returned from the shops, she saw George emerging from her house. Sarah went directly to bed, and did not realise anything was wrong with Lucy until her brother asked for a glass of water at 3 am the next morning. Sarah saw the blood on Lucy's bedclothes.

When the police questioned George about the rape, they reported that 'he appeared very nervous and excited'.[14] He twitched and scratched himself irritably, giving the police the impression of an insecure man, but one who was also not necessarily aggressive. He attributed his actions to the head injuries he had suffered.

George appeared in court on 24 March 1900. The *West Australian* newspaper reported that George was 'not affected in the slightest degree by the verdict'. The Blunderfield family was dismayed. His sister fainted when the conviction was announced.[15] But George, said to be feeling relieved, walked jauntily as he was taken from the courtroom directly to his cell at Fremantle Gaol.

He was released seven years later, on 14 August 1907. George could not return to Kalgoorlie. He travelled to Hopetoun, a fishing town on the south coast of Western Australia. There he moved into Peter Durrand's boarding house and worked on the docks. George developed an interest in firearms and ammunition during his time in Hopetoun. Not aware of his past, many of the locals opened their hearts and homes to him, including the Effords, who lived and worked in the Hopetoun Post Office. This was the scene of his next crime.

It had been a fairly average evening; George was in his usual high spirits whilst down at the local pub. [16] After a few drinks, George ambled along a Hopetoun street, bathed in moonlight. He entered his friend's home. He pulled a gun from his pocket and the darkness opened with a crack. The bullet grazed Mr Efford's cheek and pierced his pillow. Mrs Efford jumped out of bed in a state of panic. George beat her with an iron bar. Recoiling, he then watched from the corner as Mr Efford, bleeding profusely from his face, hauled his bewildered wife out of the window.

Mr and Mrs Efford could not make out their attacker in the dark. He was just a shadowy figure. But their children, Ivy and Sam, caught sight of George as they fled outside with their parents. Ivy paused and saw George peer out through her parents' bedroom window with wide staring eyes. Ivy recognised him; she and Sam had played with him several times. The full moon illuminated George's face. Sam started running after Ivy, and George followed them out of the window.[17]

George told the police that it was not until he was outside that he realised what he was doing. Then he said he thanked God that he had 'controlled his feelings in time'. It was 3.30 am.[18]

George's defence, when he appeared in court, was that he had suffered a skull fracture twelve years prior, and that he still felt its effects. George was prodded and poked by medical practitioners in the lead up to the trial, but they concluded that there was nothing physically wrong with him. The doctor said of George:

The eyes were wildly dilated and could see movement of small muscles of the face. He was rational. He answered hardly any questions. No evident loss of memory. A great fright could have produced this effect.[19]

George said that his previous doctor, who knew he was mentally incapacitated, had passed away, so he could not provide evidence. Clearly, George was conscious enough of his actions to be aware that they were wrong. It would not be surprising if the doctor he had seen previously was actually still alive at the time, but would only have confirmed his patient's psychopathic state.

George was found guilty of attempted murder. He went to the prison on Wadjemup (now called Rottnest Island). Wadjemup had long been a place where the colonial government sent Indigenous prisoners from the west coast of Australia.[20] George was one of only a few white inmates there. He arrived by boat at Wadjemup, thoroughly flea ridden and unkempt. The island offered nothing but isolation and a lonely death. At night while he watched the cycles of the moon, he dreamed of escape.

George was prison cook in 1914.[21] What happened on 6 April of that year has been told in many ways. His sister Jessie believed George set his prison cell alight, and as his wardens extinguished the flames, he escaped from Wadjemup.[22] The wardens on duty at the time of his disappearance reported a story even more enigmatic. They said that George had gone fishing with two other prisoners in the morning. He left them at Porpoise Bay and said he was returning to the prison compound. He never made it back. The two men arrived back at the prison and were surprised not to find him there preparing the evening meal. Search parties were set up. Aboriginal trackers were sent out. Hours later, the trackers found George's clothing on the beach, with footprints leading to the water's edge. It was incomprehensible that he could have swum to the safety and freedom of the mainland, which is twenty kilometres away. The guards concluded that George had drowned, or more likely had been eaten by the sharks that traverse the West Australian coast, as no body was found. They did not think it possible that he could have swum to the mainland.[23]

But George was lucky, and he escaped. His getaway was premeditated. The evidence of his scheming was not only in the daylight deception, but also in his use of the full moon. Some sort of boat met him to deliver him to the mainland. Perhaps he managed to charm or con his way onto the ferry. Either way, upon reaching the mainland, George must have used the moonlight to travel at night, making his way further from the coast. His ability to do this demonstrates that he was not as ill as he would have the magistrates believe, and he was likely to commit another horrendous act.

George next emerges in the historical records in Adelaide in 1916, where his family was still based. When his sister Jessie opened the door, she could not believe her eyes. George had been a disgrace to the family for decades. Their father had been so destroyed by George's behaviour that he had set himself in the path of a train, ending his life. Jessie threw whatever she could find at George: a pot plant, a gardening hoe. She did not stop until he was out of sight. Then she collapsed on the footpath with exhaustion, pummelling her face with her hands.

Realising that he could not keep his name after escaping Wadjemup, George changed his name to Arthur Geoffrey Oldring.[24] No doubt his sister disowning him contributed to the decision to change his name. George clung to the hope that his other siblings would not be so harsh. He discovered that his brothers were fighting overseas with the Australian Imperial Forces. He longed to find his brothers and have a second chance. They would always back him up, he reckoned. George concocted another plan. He enlisted in Adelaide as a member of the Australian Imperial Forces. Shortly after, he went to Mitcham in Victoria to have his medical exam. Despite his supposed head injuries, he was cleared.[25] This further cements the argument that his head injuries were not a sufficient explanation for his actions, but that he tried to use them to his advantage to avoid imprisonment.

George then proceeded to military training in Seymour, Victoria. Walking down a street in North Melbourne, during some time off, he noticed a woman trying to catch his eye. Margaret Taylor was a widow with a twelve-year-old daughter, Rosie. George was soon acquainted with Margaret in every way. However, he was just having a fling. She was good company for him, but George was never going to let Margaret stall his plans for Europe. Margaret welcomed him into her home, unaware of his sordid past in Western Australia.

Margaret was keen to woo this handsome rogue. She created elaborate schemes in order to follow him up to the Seymour training camp. She would say she was visiting a sister in nearby Kerrisdale so that she would have an excuse to be near him. She beseeched George a number of times to desert the army and marry her. He always refused. George just wanted to get to Europe, to be with his brothers. Going to the frontline, he felt he would be able to wipe out the past.[26] Yet, Margaret persisted.

On Sunday 11 November 1917, Margaret and Rosie met with George at Trawool Bridge on the Goulburn River.



Photograph of Margaret Taylor, from PROV, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917.

The police found Rosie Taylor's body the following Sunday, 17 November, bobbing listlessly in the river, her body snagged on an overhanging branch. Margaret's body was found three days later. Both had had their skulls smashed in by heavy blows, and they were dead before they were thrown into the flooded waters. The murder weapon was Margaret's own tomahawk, found at the bridge where George was seen meeting with them not a week before.[27]

There was little doubt that George was the murderer. He had stayed that weekend at the Meyer Hotel in Trawool.

In addition to the murders, the autopsy of young Rosie also found that she had been 'interfered with'. It can be guessed that George was responsible.[28]



Photograph of Trawool Bridge circa 1917, from PROV, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917.

After committing the murder George had returned to the army camp. His battalion was due to embark within the week. On Monday 18 November, an army mate mentioned the murders, alerting him to the recovery of Rosie's body. With haste, George exchanged his uniform for civilian garb, and deserted. But this time, he did not have time to plan his escape by the sequence of the moon. He stumbled blindly through the scrub.

George stayed the night at a hotel before applying for a job at a Lancaster fruit farm on Saturday 23 November. Labour was short in these times of war. The farm owner employed the bedraggled George. But watching his new employee carefully from his kitchen window during the week, the farmer finally asked his wife on 27 November to ride into Tatura to get the police. The police were on the lookout for a man fitting this fellow's description. The farmer was not prepared to take any chances.[29]

There was a brief hearing at the Seymour Courthouse. It was too small to seat all those who came to hear the proceedings.[30] Arraigned for murder, George was then sent to the watch house in Melbourne, where he awaited his Supreme Court hearing.[31]

George claimed that he could not remember killing Rosie and Margaret. He blamed the typhoid he had experienced as a boy, as well as the other head injuries he had suffered throughout his life. On trial at the Supreme Court in Melbourne, he also mentioned being struck in the head with a limb while logging in the forest some years before.[32] George's representatives in court suggested he had epilepsy.[33] But the doctors could not find evidence of any physical abnormalities.

The police visited George's sister Jessie one night to get a statement. She had moved to Melbourne with her husband and young family. She said George became an alcoholic and was aggressive after his bicycle accident back in Kalgoorlie.[34] And Margaret's surviving daughters, Violet and Elizabeth, had thought him to be a drunkard when they had met him previously.

George pleaded 'mental derangement' at his trial. It did not help him. He was convicted and sentenced to hang.

George was kept in prison cell 10, 'the condemned cell', at Melbourne Gaol until the day of his execution, on 14 April 1918. He was ostracised from his family and friends, a long way from the days when he had friends and the freedom of bicycles, although they had been the start of his troubles. How he must have longed to be back among the bicycle parts and bulldust of Kalgoorlie. Instead, he found himself in the cramped, stuffy bluestone cell.

As George sat in his lonely cell, his sister also examined the moonlight filtering into her bedroom. She fingered the delicate embroidery on her bedspread, but she did not feel it. All her senses could identify was George. He was not there but she could see, smell and hear him. He pervaded her every thought. She re-read the letter that he had sent her most recently, which showed that he was still fooling himself and trying to fool her, claiming that he had 'run a straight game since arriving in Victoria'.[35] Her thoughts were muffled by intense resentment and despair. She took the pills from her bedside table and took more than enough, one after the other. She was found dead the next morning.[36]

George's executioner was elderly, hard of hearing and his sight was not very keen.[37] George felt the man's bony hands against his neck as the noose was tightened. But the doddering hangman failed to compensate for the rope stretching during George's fall. The rope lengthened further than anticipated. George suffered horrific damage, a near decapitation. He dropped knowing he had caused his family immense trauma. On this day a madman was executed.

Endnotes

[1] 'The Trawool tragedy. Trial of Oldring concluded. Statement by accused. Verdict of guilty. Death sentence passed', *Age*, 23 February 1918, p. 12h-i; 'The Trawool tragedy. What was the motive? Trial of Oldring', *Age*, 20 February 1918, p. 11a.

[2] 'Trawool tragedy. Inquest concluded. Remarkable statement. Oldring committed for trial', *Argus*, 15 December 1917, p. 20f.

[3] PROV, VA 2825 Attorney-General's Department, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917 (hereafter cited as PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file).

[4] G Blainey, *Black kettle and full moon: daily life in a vanished Australia*, Penguin, Camberwell, Victoria, 2003, *passim*.

[5] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file.

[6] Jessie Brown's statement to Victorian Police, in PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file.

[7] B Carroll, 'Beasts of burden', in Sheena Coupe (ed.), *Frontier country: Australian outback heritage*, 2 vols, Weldon Russell Publishing, Willoughby, NSW, 1989, vol. 2, p. 30.

[8] State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA), Police Court Minute Book 18 September 1899 – 11 January 1900, Cons/Acc No. 1340, Item No. 11, 7 October 1899, statement of John Campbell.

[9] SROWA, Criminal Court 20 April 1909 – 4 March 1910, Cons/Acc No. 4459, Item No. 543, 8 December 1909.

[10] SROWA, Police Court Minute Book, 7 October 1899, statement of John Campbell.

[11] *ibid.*, 30 October 1899, statement of John Campbell.

[12] *ibid.*, 30 September 1899.

[13] SROWA, Supreme Court Criminal Sittings, No. 29 of 1900, 6 March 1900 (statement of Sarah Jane 'Chalmer'). 'Chalmer' is a pseudonym that has been used only in this article to protect the real identities of the victims which can be found unaltered in the original records held at SROWA.

[14] *ibid.* (statement of James Porter).

[15] 'The Blunderfield case. Prisoner convicted. Sentenced to twelve years' penal servitude', *West Australian*, 29 March 1900, p. 3c.

[16] SROWA, Criminal Court, 8 December 1909, statement of David Patterson.

[17] *ibid.*, statement of Ivy Efford.

[18] *ibid.*, statement of George Blunderfield, alias George Farrow.

[19] SROWA, Criminal Court, 8 December 1909, statement of Thomas Wilson.

[20] B Kwaymullina, 'Wadjemup: holiday paradise or prison hell-hole', *Studies in Western Australian history*, No. 22, 2001, p. 109.

[21] 'The missing prisoner. Supposed case of drowning', *West Australian*, 8 April 1914, p. 8c.

[22] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, statement of Jessie Brown.

[23] SROWA, WAA-219 Rottnest Gaol, Item No. 269/14, 6 April 1914, report of Warden Buckmaster.

[24] Arthur Geoffrey Oldring is listed in the First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers 1914-920 (National Archives of Australia, Series no. B2455/1, Item 11545213).

[25] *ibid.*

[26] 'Verdict of guilty. Death sentence passed', *Age*, 23 February 1918.

[27] 'The Trawool tragedy. Police inquiries', *Argus*, 21 November 1917, p. 8g; 'Trawool tragedy. Mystery deepens. Woman's body found. Military kit in river', *Argus*, 22 November 1917, p. 7a; *Victoria Police gazette*, 22 November 1917, No. 47, p. 607.

[28] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, autopsy report on Rosie Taylor.

[29] Newspaper excerpt (n.d.), accessed at Old Melbourne Gaol.

[30] 'Trawool tragedy. Inquest opened', *Argus*, 14 December 1917, p. 8e.

[31] Newspaper excerpt (n.d.), accessed at Old Melbourne Gaol.

[32] 'The Trawool tragedy. Trial of Oldring. Case for the defence. A plea of mental derangement', *Age*, 22 February 1918, p. 9e.

[33] *ibid.*

[34] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, statement of Jessie Brown; *Victoria Police gazette*, 22 November 1917, p. 607.

[35] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, statement of Jessie Brown.

[36] 'The Trawool traged. Oldring's sister dies', *Adelaide advertiser*, 27 November 1917, p. 6g.

[37] K Morgan, *The particulars of executions 1894-1967: the hidden truth about capital punishment at the Old Melbourne Gaol and Pentridge Prison*, Old Melbourne Gaol, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), Melbourne, 2004, p. 22.