

The Closing Scene

At precisely 8 o'clock in the morning of March 13th, 1884, young William Robert Robertson, commonly known as Robbie, made his last public appearance. "He came to the scaffold apparently without realizing his terrible situation, ascending the ladder steadily, and made no demonstration whatever... There were present in the yard about a dozen spectators ... among these were a number of the unfortunate man's relatives," writes the *Columbian*.

That was the closing scene of a drama that started almost exactly a year earlier with the murder of Richard (Dick) Bailey. Throughout the trial young Robbie, who was only 18 years at that time, underlined that there were no hard feelings between him and Bailey. They had known each other since they were boys. "He and I were both half-breeds. We were good friends all the time. He would not do a bad turn to me or I to him."

In the afternoon of that fateful day, March 15th, 1883, Bailey and Robertson had both been in New Westminster. Also Jim and Peter were there; First Nations men clearly drunk. Robertson had little contact with the two, but he knew them both and it is likely that he or Bailey provided them with the liquor they drank and that they, as Natives, could not buy.

At eight in the evening, when the tide turned, Bailey headed for his home on Pitt River and for his untimely death. He had money with him and, among other things, two kegs of beer. He was said not to drink himself, but illegal selling of liquor to the "the Indians" was a lucrative business. He left the New Westminster shore accompanied by Jim and Peter in another canoe. They had a gun.

Robertson decided to go home as well and rented or borrowed a canoe and followed the others some time later, catching up with them some miles upstream on the moonlit river. That is where, he admitted, he witnessed the murder. The owner of the canoe Robertson used stated that "Robby had no gun and asked for none, there was no gun in the canoe."

Robertson spoke the language of the white men but Peter and Jim did not and they kept silent and did not admit that they were there at any time. Robbie's own word, however, placed him at the murder site, and a fisherman at the tip of Douglas Island heard only one canoe going upstream: Robertson's by his own admission. Jim and Peter left no trace. "On my oath," said Robertson during a gruelling six-hour examination, "I did not shoot Dick Bailey, it was Peter [who] shot him." The jury did not believe his often confusing and conflicting statements and acquitted Jim and Peter.

The jury found Robertson guilty of the murder of Dick Bailey but they seemed to share the opinion that Robertson could not possibly have been the only man involved in the murder. They

recommended mercy “on the ground of youth and that he was made a tool of to a certain extent in the hands of other Indians.”

Also the judge doubted that Robertson could have done this alone and regretted a lack of evidence. Still he recommended a firm hand as a deterrent to his “fellow Indians.” Therefore young William Robert Robertson was hanged that spring morning of 1884, on nothing more than his own confession that he had been at the scene of the murder.

The grieving relatives buried their Robbie in the little family cemetery on the hill on their property in Whonnock.