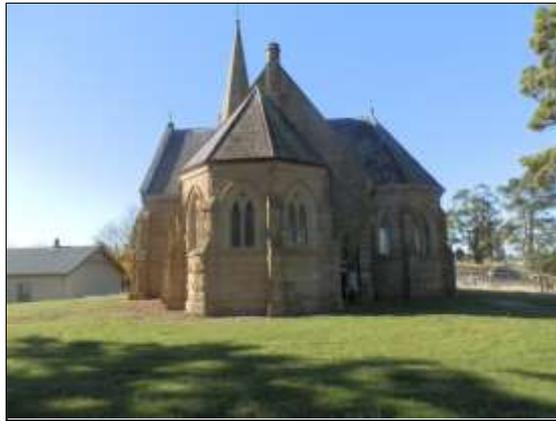


MURDER MOST FOUL AT ROSS

by

Reg. A. Watson



Historic church at Ross

Dedicated to Kate Watson, daughter, who likes a good crime story.

FOREWORD

Detective Inspector Peter Hodge AM (R'td)

This incredible episode occurred in the recent past. It was I who was in charge of the investigation. I am now retired. Reg contacted me to write a brief foreword to his story on the triple murders in the tranquil village of Ross in the midlands of Tasmania where nothing really happens.

Oh, how that changed in just over two terrible and long days. The case was most peculiar and has to go down as one of the strangest multiple murders in Tasmania's history.

I do not agree with Reg's handling of the story completely. I think he was being too unkind in reference to me. However, he off shot it with some complimentary comments. As a result I have over looked his opinion regarding my personality. I was a very competent detective and perhaps my confidence in my ability showed and I do not apologise for it.

Jealously can be a strong motive for murder as can revenge. Also protecting one's identity and in my experience people will go to any length to do so, including murder, even brutal murder.

One day a book shall be written on the case and I considering it. In the meantime Reg has given us a good summary of that happened in the village of Ross. As Scoop Walton described it: *Murder most foul!*

Peter Hodge January 2021

NOW THE STORY

Reg speaking in first tense

I had moved to the midlands village of Ross in Tasmania. My journalistic career had been over for some years. It was a career that spanned more than fifty, with its many ups and downs. My family had grown up, my wife had passed away and I would have to say, increasingly had most of my friends and contacts. Fortunately I still had good health and my faculties. Now, it was a time for a change. I was always historically minded, so during a visit to that well know historic village I saw a house in one of the branch streets of the main road for sale, I thought, *why not?*

The price was reasonable. It is lodged not far from the railway line, near to the Church of England (CofE) cemetery. The cemetery being so near worried me not in the least. Most of its occupants were very historical and besides all very harmless. Mine was one of those federation houses which one can see throughout Australia...a front verandah, weatherboard, a bay window to the side of the verandah, shutters adorning the windows and a sloping tin roof with a chimney. Internally it consisted of a lounge room adjoining an open planned kitchen, big enough to have a dining table and an eating bar with stools. There were three bedrooms, a reasonably modern kitchen and bathroom – and that was it, but big enough for me. It was in good shape. The previous owner was an ex-navy man, Lieutenant John Bowen Royal Navy, a man of the sea who, like me, had retired to the village as a single man. It is believed that the life style, while quaint, was rather boring for him and that being so, Bowen restored to the rum on far too many occasions. As a result, one evening while drunk and heading to the Man O’Ross Hotel to obtain more supplies, he in oblivion, was struck by an on-coming freight train which instantly put an end to the life of Lieutenant John Bowen. He is now a residence of the C of E cemetery mentioned before.

The weatherboards of the house were painted cream and the roof green, which was quite presentable to the eye. The floor boards of the verandah had been replaced by cement by the owner before Bowen and while it was not aesthetic, it was sensible as it cut out any required maintenance. I learnt that the particular person was a little old lady, called Mrs Walker, a widower, who was in a wheel chair and one could still see the dents in the entrances to the doors where her chair had chaffed the wood. Poor Mrs Walker who used to propel herself in the wheel chair lost control of it one morning after going into Ross to also obtain supplies. After buying lunch she moved down to the river near the historic bridge to eat it. However, being far too confident in her ability to control circumstances with

her arthritis and her age getting the better of her, she lost control of the chair and unable to stop went straight in to the river and sadly drowned. She was found some hours later, when a tourist spotted her bobbing chair.

I was aware of the tragic demise of the two previous occupants of the house, so I was determined to live a fruitful and long life being a resident of Ross. One could become superstitious, but being a practical man I would have none of that.

The house was on one acre of land, something which was a lot to manage for one in his 70s, though active as I am, but I was consoled by the fact the house was surrounded by a good bush garden made up of flowers that had seen better days and nothing more. I could manage that. The rest of the yard was just paddock grass with two very large gum trees. There was also located, a wooden shed, which was in abject dilapidation. I was determined to leave it as it was and if it was to collapse as I am sure it would, I would let to do so. The front of the house viewed the town itself which was only a five minutes walking distance, while the rear looked out on a very pastoral agriculture scene, very pleasant, which went way in the distance.

Knowing the fate of poor Lieutenant Bowen, I promised myself not to be bored, but to ingratiate myself into the local society, what there was of it. First I made an effort to eat at least twice a week at the local hotel, as described, which lies on the bend of the main road of Ross coming from Hobart then heading north, which would then join the main Midlands Highway taking one to Launceston. The licensee was Phillip Sweatman.

By frequenting his establishment I would become recognised by the locals and in return I would get to know them. I was not to isolate myself. As the weeks and months went by, I got involved with the local 500 Card Club which consisted of six or seven people, Mrs Susan Bisdee, Mrs Shirley Jones, both of whose husbands had died, Mr Arch Taylor (retired farmer), Mr Eugene and Mrs Ash Von Bribra, and Colonel Ross Byrnes (retired) who had brought a small property outside the village and worked it as a going concern, but by all accounts, not very successfully. He was a rather dumpy, short man, with balding white hair and a very round, pale face with an equally pale moustache. According to the Colonel part of his past career had been on secret missions in Iraq, although no one actually believed him. He constantly used to say during these evenings ... "I shall make it six trumps....why when I was in Iraq to pass the time away during a mission" Whatever; and by the way he went on, he would have had to been in Iraq on ten missions and being a man already in his 70s many judged that his age would have prevented him from doing the outlandish enormous adventures that he cited. Indeed was he a Colonel in reality?

There was also an ex Police Commissioner by the name of McSeadie whose reputation it was rumoured was not good, but he too had settled in the area with his son. Knowing what I knew as a journalist I wondered why they lived in a midlands town rather than on the sea which could be beneficial for their motor launches.

The final member of our club was another military man, this time Royal Australian Air Force, retired. It was Wing Commander Alan Robinson who lived with his wife in a small cottage centred in the village. Robinson was one of those people who knew everything or thought he did. He was too, even though a Catholic and one of only several in Ross, was a member of the Midlands's Freemason Lodge. Robinson knew another friend of mine, Nigel Groves, a fellow mason to Robinson. Robinson referred to Nigel as "Father Christmas" because of his weight. This rudeness did not endear me to him.

Robinson was also known as the village's womaniser and rumour abounded of his late night and secret adventures around town. Dubbed the village play boy, although well past his prime, one of the Burbury girls had a child by him, but it was hushed up by the Burbury family. The girl was sent away to England with baby and by all accounts lives there still. There were also spiteful accusations that his sexual appetite did not discriminate between women or men.

I also got to know some of the large pastoral owners in these parts and it was not uncommon for me to be invited to a grand dinner on their estates, such as the various Cameron families, the Taylors and O'Connors.

All in all, it was not a very exciting life, but tolerable. I have a rather large library so I took many an hour reading after converting one of the bedrooms to a study. I also began to write my memoirs which would be of interest to no one, but nonetheless, perhaps to someone. Who knows? It filled in part of the time.

Ross itself, lies five miles south of the larger township of Campbell Town, about an hour and a half from Hobart and about an hour and a quarter from Launceston. It's a fine historic town, dating to the 1820s. In the centre of the town is the local war memorial and its focal point being a Boer War small bore, but rapidly firing artillery piece. The Anglican Church had closed down which was a shame as it was a fine building, but the Uniting Church still held services which was located up the hill from the war memorial. An old Congregational church had once become a craft shop, which closed soon after opening while the Catholics and Anglicans who wished to go to church and there were not many, had to drive to Campbell Town or south to Oatlands. There was one small Pentecostal group, a branch of a church from Richmond further south. Jack, the town's toy maker (and he made superb wooden rocking horses) was once married to Samantha (Sam) who was in charge of this small church. Jack himself had wanted nothing to do with it and was found more than often enough in the pub, at least that's where I saw him on a regular basis.

Sam, his ex-wife, like many of those who lived on cloud nine, took under her arm a drunk, so much so, she allowed him to live in her and Jack's vacant cottage located in the middle of Ross. The reward for doing so was that the drunk trashed the cottage during one of his drinking binges to the point of thousands of dollars damage. That was the last straw for Jack, so they separated and divorced afterwards.

Ross had two bakery and pie shops, one which seem to be under constant sale. The restaurant *Scotch Thistle* had closed, a coffee shop still operated, but the antique shop and the second hand shop had also closed, as had the military museum. The pub as we know was still going, but struggled. There was a quaint postal office and a motel, which was as busy as Norman Bate's motel. Off the main road was the wool emporium which sold local woollen clothes, which although made from Australian wool the clothes were manufactured in Indonesia. The Scottish/Irish shop had closed and outside that, there was little more, beside the caravan park which did reasonable business during the tourist season.

Unlike previous years, there was no football team. The centre point of the village was the historic, convict sandstone-built bridge spanning the Macquarie River (named after Governor Macquarie) and an historic site where the convict female factory was located which few people visited. The term *factory* used to designate where women under sentence spent their time working on various trades.

So that was Ross in which I had settled. One had to travel five miles north to Campbell Town, a much larger Midlands village still on the main highway, while Ross was off the highway, to purchase groceries and visit the doctor – or to go to church. Ross was once an identity in itself, but now it was part of the Northern Midlands Municipality located at Longford which was a distance away. The old council building was used as a hall.

It was at one of my 500 Card Club sessions (with which I was becoming increasingly bored) when Shirley said while she trumped, "Heard a shocking row last night between Jack and that odd ex-wife of his, Sam." Shirley lived next door to Jack.

"Well yes they are still at each other's throat," interrupted Arch, but as though she did not hear him Shirley continued,

"They were screaming at each other and as she slammed the door she yelled *I could murder you!*"

"Goodness, no doubt arguing over the drunk she took under her arm," replied Lorraine.

Eugene let out a loud sigh, one of impatience ...and so it went.

I returned home after the game, much exhausted and it came to me that I had settled into an existence and while comfortable, it was incredibly boring. Something would be needed for me to be pushed out of my dullness.

For a companion I had brought a dog, a small .pug like creature whose stomach dragged on the ground when it walked and which I named Russell. It was intelligent enough, somewhat affectionate, especially when you fed it and was a reasonable companion. At least it gave me something to do and that was to take it for a walk early in the morning and again, later in the day.

It was on a Tuesday evening in July in the depths of winter when the following happened. Ross can be very cold and on this occasion it was about zero centigrade with the mist rising from the roads giving the whole atmosphere a ghost like image. It being cold, all residents were inside, the pub was quiet and there was no traffic.

I had clothed myself with a heavy coat and scarf. The dog Russell I had clad in a checked coat as well, but he seemed not to mind the cold as he tugged at the lead. He was taking me for a walk, rather than I taking him for a walk.

We passed the artillery piece in the centre of the village, walking towards the bridge, when all of a sudden I heard an almighty scream. It was difficult to determine what direction it came from because the mist muffled the sound. It was clearly a man's scream. I momentarily stopped, trying to work out the direction of the noise. I listened some more and heard rushed, but muffled steps from a person running through the dark. I looked with great intense and while I saw a figure but I could discern no great features. However I could determine that it ran along the bank of the river on the Ross village side. Russell began whimpering, and then began tagging on the lead. He surged forward and I allowed him to lead the way. Just before the entrance to the bridge Russell took me to the picnic spot to the left. Vision was very poor, but enough moon light to see a body on its back lying near the river bank. I leant over and turned it over. I let out a gasp – it was Jack, the village toy maker. Jack was clearly dead still with his leather apron on and what was also clear that his head had been brutally bashed in by the small boulder that lay close by.

I stood up, momentarily in shock. I had my mobile and dialled 000.

CHAPTER TWO

It actually took some time for First Constable Peter McGuinness to arrive from Campbell Town. McGuinness was near retirement and was stationed at the midlands town with the purpose that he could see out his days without much trouble. McGuinness had seen better days and was a very quietly spoken man, much to the point that one had to continually say, "pardon" over and over. I knew McGuinness as he occasionally attended our 500 Card Club. He had never married and was a stickler for procedure.

When he arrived at the scene of the terrible crime he in an authoritarian way took charge and I have to say, very professionally. One thing was noticed. It was a note pinned to the victim's chest. McGuinness bent over the corpse and read while not removing it. I was able to peer over his shoulder. Written in large print, 'SIN OH TERRIBLE SIN'.

A few of the villages had followed the speeding police cars with all their lights flashing to the river where the body of Jack lay. McGuinness knew he could do little, so he immediately called the Launceston CIB and reported the incident.

Launceston, as stated, was some distance away and by the time they got themselves organised and arrived, it was well after midnight. I, who of course, found the body, was asked to remain at the spot by McGuinness. Finally another police vehicle arrived, accompanied by a police van and an ambulance. By now word had spread throughout Ross of the tragic affair and a large number of villagers, some in their pyjamas had trottered down to the river with enormous curiosity. When word went around that it was Jack the toymaker, there were murmurs of "Sam" with Shirley saying, "It was just the other day, she said that she could kill him." Many oohs were heard with a number turning their necks to see if Sam was amongst them which was determined, no.

Another police van arrived and out stepped several men clad in white over-alls, who erected arc lights over the crime scene. This really entertained all who were in attendance. They then stretched out red and white plastic tape around the crime scene to keep everyone away.

Out of the leading police car came Detective Inspector Peter Hodge. Peter was a capable fellow, also an ex colonel in the army. I had known Peter from my days as a journalist. He was a slim man and what always took my attention that he had a very soft boy-like complexion. Like his fellow colonel, whom he knew, Ross Byrnes, he had a moustache. However, while Ross was somewhat humourless and had a self-importance about him, Peter could be somewhat jovial and friendly.

"Who discovered the body?" he asked.

"Watson over here," replied McGuinness.

Peter turned to me. "Hallo Watson old chap. Heard you had retired to Ross. So you found the body?"

I nodded and smiled. "Good to see you again Peter, but it's a shame it is under such circumstance,"

"Ha," he humped. "Good story for you though."

"Yes, already been on to The Mercury." They said they would run the story in the next edition with my exclusive by-line".

Hodge was not impressed. "Wished you had not done that old chap, but once a journalist always a journalist. Now let's see what we have here."

As he said out stepped ex-commissioner, McSeadie and offered to help with the case. Hodge replied, no doubt knowing of his corrupt reputation, "That's all right sir. Let you enjoy your retirement."

The body was eventually placed in the ambulance and taken to Launceston for storage, after which Hodge posed the thought that he should stay in Ross rather than return to the northern city.

“Bit late Hodge for accommodation at the hotel, but we could inquire I suppose. Better still why don’t you stay with me in my humble abode,” I suggested.

“Tops,” responded Hodge. “To be up again early in the morning and back on the job. Waste no time travelling and all that.”

It was decided and Hodge sat down with me in my home and before retiring, enjoyed a whisky and soda and both of us talking about the good old days, when I was reporting and he solving crimes, although few in number. He tended, if it was to be known, to blow his own trumpet so to speak.

We were both up reasonably early in the morning. I made for the kitchen and put on eggs and bacon for breakfast. Hodge came in as refreshed as anything. He was always a smart dresser as he believed in the old school when detectives wore a suit, shirt and tie.

“Just got a call from the coroner, John Wise, Watson,” he said. “On the mobile. Pretty simple really what happened to the toy maker. Banged on the head with that boulder. Smashed his brain out. Poor sod wouldn’t have known much. There you have it. A straight forward murder.”

“Well I would start with his ex-wife, Sam,” I put forward.

“Yes, that would be the first port of call. I caught someone last night saying she had intention of killing him...you know what for Watson?”

I explained the situation regarding the drunk, the religious disagreement, the trashed house and the subsequent divorce.

“Hmm, no love lost there,” he commented, “and we should look into the drunk. He may have had a revenge motive against him. A couple of possibilities. This should be an easy case, straight forward so to speak. Solve it and then get back home. Nice place this Ross and all that, but I wouldn’t like to live here. Do you know where this Sam lives? We’ll pop over there after we have our breakfast.”

“I certainly do. And don’t worry about the drunk, because of his alcoholism he was hit and killed by a car some months ago,” I said.

After having our first meal of the day I escorted Hodge together with my dog Russell who went everywhere with me, to where Sam lived, we walking and leaving Hodge’s car behind as it was such a short distance.

On arrival, all seemed quite. We banged on the door, but to no avail. On hearing the commotion the next door neighbour arrived, a man whom I had seen in the village and was commonly known as the town drunk. Kelvin Daly it was said had known better days. It was also said by Byrnes that he had once been a high school teacher, besides being an officer in the reserve army. Brynes also added that his real name was Alec Young, but changed it because of the following circumstances. Young, he said, had been growing marijuana and even distributing it, making a nice extra packet on the side. Informed on by a disgruntled customer who was not too keen on the quality of the product, the police got involved. It was all hushed up on the proviso that Young would leave the army and his teaching profession with no benefits and if so, no prosecution would take place. This he did and moved to Ross where he thought he would not be recognised under his assumed name. The disgrace and subsequent down fall, however, played on his poor mind that he took to drink. Most of his time during the day was spent walking around the village, swearing aloud to himself and as a result became known as the town drunk.

“She ought to be in there,” commented Young. “I saw her go there (hic) after midnight yesterday. There, if you look through the window you can still see a light on (hic).”

Both Hodge and I did and right enough there was a light on.

“So you saw her go in then?” questioned Hodge.

“Yes, always on a Tuesday she goes to her afternoon women’s prayer group. They pray a lot for me they do, but it hasn’t helped so far. Anyway (hic) she came home as usual and I haven’t seen her since. But she’s in there all right – haven’t seen her leave. Wednesday morning is her bible study, but she hasn’t gone out yet.”

With this information we banged again, but again no response from inside.

“Right Watson, stand back. I’m going to charge the door and make an entry.” Which Hodge successfully did, forcing the front door to open under a heavy push from the detective’s shoulder, which must have hurt Hodge as he gave a bit of a yell afterwards. Hodge was not getting any younger. We went in followed by Young and Russell.

We moved through the small nineteenth century cottage with a loud “Hallo” to no avail and there in the lounge room we saw her, sitting in the large, comfortable arm chair and slumped forward. Through her right ear was the long green plastic handle of a thin screw driver blade, the end bit sticking out of her left ear. She was clearly dead – another murder. The screw driver was thrust from one ear to the other and right through her brain. Young gasped, muttered “gawd” and collapsed.

Cool as a cucumber all Hodge uttered was, “no doubt about it, it must have been pushed through her head probably by a quick thrust. Ugly sight. I will get the corner on to it straight away. Excuse me Watson while I phone him”.

I approached the body and touched her. "Still warm," I said. "Must have been murdered only a few hours ago, if that. Well, did she murder Jack?"

Hodge was off the phone." Coroner Wise will be here as soon as he can. So you think she did it, eh? Do you think the two murders are connected?"

"I would say so. I mean two murders, ex husband and wife in the small town of Ross within a few hours not connected? Too much of a co-incidence."

By this time, Young had revived, but when he did so and viewed again the slumped body of the victim with a screw driver through her head, he fainted a second time.

"For goodness sake, let's get him out of here. Here comes Peter Guinness. Guinness drag him out will you? "

Peter too, viewed the body with much astonishment. "Not a pretty sight," he said, lifting Young who began to revive and was promptly taken away with Russell looking on with some agitation.

"Motive Watson?"

"Hmm good question. Ex-husband of wife murdered virtually together. It's obviously not theft as it doesn't look like anything has been stolen."

"Well, we're not too sure about that, but I reckon you're right. Go on."

"If it is not theft and the two were once married, and now divorced then all I can suggest they knew something really serious about someone within the village and it was a murder to keep them quiet. What else could it be?"

"Any number of things I suppose. Anyway there's nothing further we can do here. Let's lock it up and wait for Wise to come down."

"There's something I would like to add further Hodge. There was obviously no forced entry by the murderer and I know as a fact that Sam never locked her door."

"She knew him – or he or she just walked in? Yes, I would like to think you are right. When Young is able to talk perhaps he saw or heard something."

As Hodge, Russell and I left the cottage we were confronted by Scoop Andrew Walton. Andrew though still in his 20s was a high flyer in the journalist television world. He was now the leading anchor man for Seven News and having read The Mercury edition immediately left Hobart with his camera crew to cover this story. I actually knew Andrew as a boy and watched his meteoric career with admiration. I also knew he was ruthless and had gained the title *Scoop Walton* not without strong reasons. He had broken stories often looking for

controversial themes for he knew that where he would gain notoriety. On this occasion he was accompanied by cameraman another Andrew by the name of McCarthy.

Scoop Walton came to national fame when he exposed in a documentary the spurious historical claims by radical aboriginal activist Mitch Mansell. Mansell had claimed in an ABC Four Corners programme that the village of Ross in its present form had already existed before the coming of the white man. He even claimed that the several churches which once existed in Ross with their grand colonial architecture were inherited by the white man and used the buildings for their own purpose. Scoop Walton worked on a project with Keith Windschuttle and local historian Scott Seymour. They were able to expose the story as complete bunkum even though the history academics of the University of Tasmania refused to do so, knowing full well it too was bunkum, but being too frightened, because of political correctness, to say otherwise.

“Reg,” Andrew said, thrusting a mike under my nose, “Can you give us the latest? Is this another murder?”

“I don’t know more than what I reported in the paper this morning and yes, this is a second murder. Best to ask Inspector Hodge about this.”

Scoop Walton then moved his mike to Hodge, who glorified in any publicity. “I can tell you that yes, another murder has been committed and we know very little of it at this stage. I am of course investigating this terrible situation in this historic town of Ross to the best of my well known prowess and expect to have answers within a short period of time.”

I looked at Hodge knowing full well, we had little to go on. I separated myself from Hodge and used my mobile to contact Ross Gates, sub editor at The Mercury with whom I had worked on numerous stories, to report an up-date.

CHAPTER THREE

We retired to the Man O’ Ross Hotel where the licensee, Phillip Sweatman, a grovelling, weasel character, allowed us a room to operate from while we being followed by Scoop Walton, much to the delight of Hodge who enjoyed being filmed as we walked into the premises. Even Hodge, though, barred Walton from entry into our room which we were joined by McGuinness and my dog Russell.

Hodge spoke. “Two murders, ex husband and wife. The first the village toy maker, his head smashed in by a reasonably large boulder. Then there was the note pinned to his chest with the strange message, *sin oh terrible sin*. We don’t know what it meant or who it was written by. Believing it could be his ex-wife who was heard that she wanted to murder him, she in turn was murdered a short time afterwards”.

“And that rules her out,” added McGuinness with Hodge nodding.

“Not necessarily,” I put my piece in. “At this stage, yes, it would indeed seem unlikely, but not entirely. We just don’t know at this juncture.”

As we were discussing the case, a knock came at the door. McGuinness answered. “Coroner Wise Inspector Hodge”

“Show him in will you,” said Hodge.

John Wise was a rather short man, near retirement. John was another from my journalistic days and we greeted each other. He was a capable thorough individual who had the curious pastime of dressing up in colonial militaria uniforms and parade at various historical functions.

“The second body, the woman. There will be no need for an autopsy. Clear cut case how she was murdered,” he said.

“Awful way to go,” added Hodge. I shuddered. “Right through the right ear, through the brain and out the other ear. Perhaps the murderer had a warped sense of humour.”

“Perhaps,” Wise said. “I had a case once in South Launceston that of a Chinese laundry man, Yick was his name. He was found with his mouth stuffed with cotton wool and he died from asphyxiation. Anyway, what happened was, he was being threatened by stand over merchants from the Triad mob, who wanted protection money, which he refused to pay. Yick unfortunately told them that he would tell the police. By stuffing his mouth with the cotton was a way of saying to the rest of Yick’s community to keep quiet. As it turned out one of them did snitch and the perpetrators of the crime were eventually arrested and spent some time in the Pink Palace down at Risdon.

“Therefore, it is possible the screw driver through her ears was symbolic. Perhaps and I only say perhaps, the murderer or murderers was giving the message that Sam heard things that she should not have done and that the way she was killed was to stress that such matters should not have been heard. Just a theory.”

“Most interesting,” commented Hodge.

There was another knock at the door. It was Sweatman. “The reporter from Seven News wants to speak to you Inspector Hodge and also a reporter from The Examiner newspaper.”

“That reminds me,” I said. I should ring Ross Gates from The Mercury with the latest”.

“Watson I know you’re the reporter, but that should be my job.”

Knowing his vanity, “Don’t worry Hodge I make sure you are lime lighted in the report.”

“Tell Scoop Walton and the others I’ll be making a statement in a jiffy,” said Hodge.

As he said this his mobile rang.

“Hallo, who’s this? Father Terry?”

Father Terry was a likeable Catholic priest. Although there was no church of his faith in the village, the nearest being Oatlands which was south of Ross, he chose to live here and travelled to his church and other out-lying areas. Father Terry, was a man of small stature with a beaming Irish countenance and even though most were Protestants in the town, he was liked by all and was well accepted.

“Yes Father Terry. Where are we? In a room in the hotel. I guess you know where that is. Wot’s that? You want to come down straight away. Wot? Really? Well, we’ll be waiting.”

Hodge put the phone down. “Phew! That’s something, I can tell you. Apparently this Father Terry has had someone at confession. It is so dreadful that he is going to break his priestly vows of silence and tell us its content.

“He’s coming down straight away, so we will wait to what he has to say.”

We waited patiently and expectantly for twenty minutes. Hodge broke the silence, with Russell raising his head. “Shouldn’t he be here now? How far does he live?”

“From the pub which he frequents, six or seven minutes,” I answered.

“Then he should be here by now. I’ll give him a ring,” which Hodge did.

After a short time, Hodge put the phone down. “No answer. Perhaps he’s on his way without his mobile. Even so, I think we should call on him and if he’s is indeed on his way, and then we will bump into him. Lead the way Watson.”

We filed out of the room, Hodge, McGuinness, me and Russel through the hotel lobby watched with curiosity by Sweatman. The media pack followed led by Scoop Walton.

Within a few minutes we were at Father Terry’s cottage. Walking down the street was the town drunk, Alec Young, “saw someone go in (hic) not so long ago,” he uttered and staggered on, swearing to himself.

“Well that’s why he hasn’t yet come,” said Hodge. “He’s got an unexpected caller. But why didn’t he answer his phone?”

“Keep the media away McGuinness, then come in and lock the door behind you.” ordered Hodge.

We knocked, but no answer. We knocked again. Hodge looked at me and then pressed against the door. It opened slowly by itself with McGuinness locking it as we entered. We called out for Father Terry. There was no answer. We moved into the dark passage into the kitchen area; no Father Terry. We then moved in to the lounge room, again no Father Terry

and off the lounge room was an enclave which he used as his tiny office. We proceeded to enter it.

There we found him slumped in his still swivelling chair with his head battered in, blood still oozing from the dreadful wound. On the floor was his large brass crucifix covered in blood. He clearly had been battered by his own cross. Hodge inspected him.

“He’s dead. Killed by that there crucifix. Murdered just minutes ago. Murdered while we were waiting for him. But why? Who would kill the local priest thus making three murders in the village of Ross?”

“The parish priest knows what goes on within his environment. People tell him things. People confide in them. He told you that he just had a confession. Father Terry knew something important, no doubt pertaining to the current spate of murders. He was killed to keep quiet,” I said.

Then Hodge had a thought, “McGuinness, that town drunk that passed by....Young or whatever his name is. He said to us when we had arrived that he saw someone go in before. McGuinness grab that drunk and bring him in. In the meantime this is another job for John Wise.”

McGuinness sprang into action, an action of a man more than half his age. Within a moment Wise entered the cottage. “Whew!” he exclaimed, “Not another one. I might take up residence here, there’s enough work for me to do.” Hodge had already rang for an ambulance from Launceston.

Wise inspected the body, “no doubt about it, killed by the crucifix.”

We attempted to leave the cottage. Immediately Scoop Walton thrust a microphone under Hodge’s nose with the camera man McCarthy filming.

“Yes there’s been another murder, the local priest. But I can’t say much more than that,” he said enjoying the limelight, while waiting for the ambulance and back up to arrive.

“Come on Reg,” beckoned Walton, “We go back a long way. You’re a journalist, as one to another and as a family friend we go way back, give us more than what we have.”

Hodge put up his hand. “Watson you have been helping in the case. I ask you don’t say too much.”

The media pushed forward. “I can only say this that another murder has taken place in Ross and I am helping the police with inquiries.”

“Any clues who is the perpetrator of the hideous crime, murder most foul in Ross?”

Hodge intervened. “Not yet, but as soon as we know we will let you know.”

In the meantime McGuinness had returned with Young. Viewing the scene before us and as word had spread throughout the village that their beloved and harmless parish priest has been butchered many had congregated outside whispering furiously “Father Terry has been murdered,” “Another murder” “Who can be doing such evil?”, “This goes on I’m leaving,” and so on.

“Bring him inside McGuinness. We’ll go into the lounge room and lock that door behind you,” Hodge charged.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alec Young was escorted into the lounge room as directed by Hodge. He sat him down, surrounded by myself, Hodge, McGuinness, Wise and of course Russell who was standing there with great curiosity with his mouth open with tongue hanging, he puffing heavily.

Young looked somewhat bewildered. “Got a drink?” he asked. “Later,” replied Hodge. “First of all tell us who you saw coming out of Father Terry’s.”

Young hesitated, Hodge urged him on. “There’s a drink in it for you, a whole host of them.”

“Alan Robinson,” he blurted out.

“Robinson eh? Watson do you know where lives?”

I nodded. “Not far from me.”

“Right men, let’s go after him,” he said leaving Young behind panting for a drink.

As we walked quick paced I wondered whether Young was delirious, but the thought occurred to me, Robinson was one of the few Catholics in the village, most were Anglican, with a spattering of Uniting. Father Terry had said someone had been to his cottage for him to hear a confession; a confession so bad that he was to break his priestly vows and spill the beans to the police. Immediately after he was murdered. Outside of Colonel Ross Byrnes, Robinson was the only Catholic. It would be logical that it would have been one of the two who confessed to Father Terry, but if that is so, why confess then kill him? That was the question. It was clear that the person who murdered him wanted the information that the priest knew, kept quiet.

As we hurried pass the war memorial, the old Council Chambers along the road to the railway line where Robinson’s house was situated, the media pack became aware of our frenzy and rushed after us led by Scoop Walton.

As we reached his house, we saw Robinson rush out the back door, jump the fence and ran across a paddock with – a double-barrel shotgun under his arm.

We followed him. Robinson turned and aimed his shotgun at us, "You'll never take me," he yelled. "Watch out everyone," screamed Hodge he's going to fire. Hit the dirt."

We did as ordered. It was clear Robinson was not a good shot, beside he was in panic mood. Both shots went wide and without hesitation he was jumped upon by Hodge and McGuiness. The media had some dramatic film to say the least and they were as happy as Larry with their efforts. Scoop Walton was beaming from ear to ear with his cameraman Andrew McCarthy convinced he would be presented with a *best news film of the year award* at the annual Awards Night.

They bought a struggling Robinson back to the hotel and to the room Sweatman had allotted us. In the meantime, not only the media pack followed us, but most of the village.

II

Extra police had been brought down from Launceston and took Robinson away to the cells.

We all sat back. "Well Watson, I and McGuiness better return. Catching him was the start, now all the paper work, statements to sort out, getting the evidence ready for the trial and a million other things to be considered to be done."

Within an hour Ross was as still as it generally was in a late afternoon. Scoop Walton and the others had left, the people back into their houses, the authorities to Launceston with Robinson, Wise had the bodies taken away and it really left me to ponder it all on my walk home.

It is a strange, bizarre tale one of a brutal triple murder the first in a Tasmanian village since the Swansea one, a hundred years ago.

Robinson, whose sexual appetite for either sex was well known, as noted, in the district. Incredibly he desired the local toy maker and an affair ensued. On the night of the first murder they had met near the bridge by the river on the recreation area. Sam, the toy maker's wife, had suspected something and followed her ex-husband there. After all any dirt she could get on him would make her position more justified. *He was a cad, a philander, a no good nuthin nobody.*

Sam thought he would be meeting another woman, but when he saw the two together it was too much for this fundamentalists religious person. Creeping up to him, she picked up a manageable boulder and out of rage smashed it on the back of his head. He immediately slumped to the ground, killed instantly. Robinson saw the whole incident and ran from the site. It was Sam who wrote the note and pinned it on him, SIN OH TERRIBLE SIN. In her way of thinking she had done a good action.

Robinson, knowing where she lived, entered her home as she never locked her door as it would be a lack of faith, crept behind her as she was in her favourite chair. Picking up a

chisel on the table which had been left over from her ex-husband's toy making days, he immediately thrust the weapon in to her ear right through her brain and out of the other ear. John Wise considered that she would have hardly known what hit her.

It was clear as she was a witness he wanted her to be silenced and what she saw and heard had to be stopped, symbolically by the screw driver.

Robinson returned home, but overnight becoming remorseful of his dreadful deed went to Father Terry to confess. As noted, Father Terry was so horrified of Robinson's deed, he went against his priestly vows and phoned Hodge. That was Terry's mistake. Hardly was Robinson out of the house, he heard the priest make a phone call. Robinson stopped and listened. Before he could say too much, Robinson re-entered the cottage, grabbed the priest's crucifix and used it to club him. He then sprang home, ready to escape and as it is said, the rest is history.

In time Robinson was put on trial with his lawyer successfully pleading insanity at the time of the murders. Robinson placed in his Will that his brain be sent to the university, after his death, for research purposes to analyse criminal behaviour.

So ended the triple murders at Ross which will be talked about for many years. What I considered was somewhat of a dull existence in the village turned out for a very short space of time anything but. Now it would be back to my old routine. Then I pondered. This was the only time for the past several years I felt alive! If only there would be more....then I put the thought out of my mind. No, it must not happen again.

REG. A. WATSON

C/- P.O. ROSS.

December 2020.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

All characters in the story exist. This includes the town drunk and the village toy maker whom I knew. The episode where the drunk trashed their house in Ross is true as told to me by the toy maker. He and his ex wife have since moved from Ross. Most names are real with several exceptions where I have corrupted the original name.