



Dewar, James Murray

The 35-year criminal career of Robert Butler (or various aliases) came to an end when on Monday 17 July 1905 he was hanged in his native Australia. Butler was just 14 when he served his first sentence in Melbourne's Pentridge Jail.

He arrived in Otago in 1875, and had soon tricked the Catholic Church into hiring him as headmaster of their Cromwell School, then departed with their money. Later in Dunedin he did a number of burglaries including the residence of Catholic Bishop Moran. Butler then attempted to sell the music sheets of St Joseph's Church Choir to a pawnbroker. Quickly arrested he was soon back in prison.

After his release in 1880 there was a robbery and fire at the home of Dunedin lawyer John Stamper. Nobody was hurt, nor was there an arrest.

However, on 14 March there was another fire at the Cumberland Street cottage of butcher James Dewar. When the fire was put out Dewar's murdered body was discovered, along with that of his smoke-asphyxiated baby. His wife had also been attacked and died in hospital.

Butler was arrested, with the evidence against him strong but only circumstantial. His trial was the talk of Dunedin, with Butler conducting his own brilliant defence, including a six and half hour final address to the jury. Amazingly, the judge was sympathetic, as was the jury who were back in one hour with a 'not guilty' verdict. Dunedin citizens were outraged!

Even more amazingly, the next month Butler was convicted of that first fire and robbery at John Stamper's, and sent back to prison for 18 years. Released in 1896, he returned to Melbourne where

more burglaries saw him inside a Victorian prison for another decade. Upon his release in 1905, Butler traveled north to Queensland where he shot and killed a man during an attempted robbery.

The Dewars were an unassuming young couple who had been married by Dr Stuart of Knox Church in October 1878. It was he who also baptised their baby, Elizabeth Lindsay Dewar, in September 1879. Their cottage was in a densely-settled area on the west side of Cumberland Street between Union and St David Streets.

No motive for the burglary or animosity was ever uncovered, but Butler as a local ne'er-do-well was an obvious suspect and he was arrested the next day at Waikouaiti on his sudden way north.

Dr Stuart conducted the Dewar family funeral on 18 March 1880 and they were buried in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery. The still legible headstone was erected by The Ancient Order of Foresters, and the wording says the parents and baby had been 'brutally murdered'.

It is a strange feeling, to stand exactly where Dr Stuart once stood with the three coffins in front of him.

Details taken from "Knox News" November 2002 and Paul Hayward's No.4 booklet "Further Intriguing Dunedin Street Walks" .