

WILL YE BUY, WILL YE BUY!!

On August 30, 1786, as the Old Bailey wound down from another long day of theft, larceny, coining, pick-pocketing and highway robbery, one Judge had saved enough voice for the twelve unfortunate knucklers and toby-men brought back up before him from the saltbox cells: *Prisoners at the bar, you have all been convicted upon satisfactory evidence, and by the verdicts of very merciful and attentive juries, of crimes which the laws of your country have thought necessary to punish with death; the dread of that punishment, the respect due to the laws of God and your Country, and even the dreadful examples which have been held forth to you by other unfortunate and wretched sufferers, in situations similar to yours, have unhappily for you been insufficient, to produce that effect on your minds, which should have deterred you from the commission of those crimes which have brought you into a like unfortunate situation: It would therefore be in vain for me to expect that anything I can say to you would make a deeper impression on you than those repeated examples. It therefore only remains for me (after earnestly praying that the little time which now will be allotted to you to live, should be so employed as to secure that pardon for you hereafter, which you cannot hope to receive here) to proceed to the last and most painful part of my duty, in pronouncing on you the dreadful sentence of the law, which is, that you, and each of you, be taken from hence to the place from whence you came, and from thence to the place of execution, there to be hanged by the neck until you are dead: and may the Lord have mercy upon your sinful souls.*ⁱ

THE BULLOCK-BOYS OF ROSEMARY LANE

Three of the twelve condemned men taking in that Judge's awful words were George Lee, Alex Seaton and George Connoway. Their truncated journey to the hereafter had started with two castrated bulls about a month previous. George Lee and Alexander Seaton were regulars at The Blue Anchor Inn on Rosemary Lane, in the heart of the Rag Fair. Here, spruiking shopfront merchants promised to fully clothe

you for fourteen pence, while convincing you to spend a penny and lucky dip for old wigs in a sack. It was a place of shabby energy, *covered with old boots and shoes; old clothes, both men's, women's, and children's; new lace, for edgings, and a variety of cheap prints and muslins, and often of the commonest kinds (also new); hats and bonnets; pots; tins; old knives and forks, old scissors, and old metal articles generally; here and there is a stall of cheap bread or American cheese, or what is announced as American; old glass; different descriptions of second-hand furniture, of the smaller size, such as children's chairs, bellows, &c. Mixed with these, but only very scantily, are a few brightlooking swag-barrows, with china ornaments, toys, &c. Some of the wares are spread on the ground, on wrappers, or pieces of matting or carpet; and some, as the pots, are occasionally placed on straw. The cotton prints are often heaped on the ground, where are also ranges or heaps of boots and shoes, and piles of old clothes, or hats or umbrellas. Other trades place their goods on stalls or barrows, or over an old chair or clothes-horse. And amidst all this motley display the buyers and sellers smoke, and shout, and doze, and bargain, and wrangle, and eat, and drink tea and coffee, and sometimes beer.*ⁱⁱ Loudest of all were the Whitechapel sharps, discreet enough, but always alert to the next bustle.



No. 3

While Lee and Seaton drank and gammoned, the third gang member, George Connaway, spooked Mr Hill's slaughterhouse in nearby Poplar. The price of livestock in the city had almost doubled in the year-to-date, so stolen bullocks to the right butcher might be sly for twenty pounds: a big step up from the gang's usual kiddy-fingering, and maybe the trick to forging some genuine family connections.

It seemed a simple bridge in theory: the boys would front as suppliers of live beasts to butchers, who would dress the flesh and sell it on. If that failed there were still edges of the city where Sunday, word-of-mouth bull-baiting for scratch still went on. In the end, the three man-boys tactless spruiking warned off potential buyers. The butcher's apprentice they finally lined up crowed straight to authorities.

Lee and Seaton contentedly shepherded two resigned bullocks through early morning London streets. Their forlorn, jacket-button eyes watched indifferently when constables jumped and chained the two young men. Connoway had already bolted but was found and arrested within a few days.

Lee, Seaton and Connoway's trial was rife with buffing and Blue Anchor Inn witnesses turned King's evidence to ensure a conviction against all three. The judge's dreadful sentence never eventuated, after a Royal Pardon and the Transportation Act saved them all from the drop. Prison quickly sorted the mentors, the judges, the thugs and the bullies from the rest, and those without cunning or coin quickly became factotums, mollies and hanks. Women without support sewed, cleaned, prepared food or spread their legs for those most likely to protect or dab it up. As a gang, Lee, Seaton and Connoway turned these arbitrary and institutionalised daily dramas and violence to their advantage.

A NIGHT ON THE EDGE OF THE CITY

It was around the time George Lee, Alex Seaton and George Connoway were concocting their failed bullock robbery. Across town, in the still notorious Green Park, Thomas Holmes and Mr Ellis are taking a short cut home after work and some inn hopping. When Holmes is grabbed by the collar, he thinks his tipsy companion is up for pranks but Mr Ellis is being dragged into a nearby bush by two masked figures. From this moment the recollected narrative shirks linear certainties. Time and events will now disconnect without regard for each other. For the victims these moments are a dreamscape in which later memory will become a fiction more real than any imagining.

Instead of Mr Ellis, Thomas Holmes is suddenly confronted by a third masked man, jamming a pistol in his cheek and demanding silver and coin. Holmes impulsively grabs his attacker's shoulder, hoping to wrestle the weapon free. The man keeps a firm hold of his pistol, so Holmes kicks out, but the masked man's legs are muscular and horse-solid. Holmes falls, but just as quickly feels his attacker lifting him with one

hand while the other maintains the pistol's cold barrel firmly against his cheek. The demand to hand over the shiny is now studded with awful threats. In these moments Mr Holmes imagines he is an insect trapped in a water bubble, his hearing muffled by a whack across the head. This is replaced by the physical sensation of warm urine dribbling down his leg ... and the click of a pulled trigger ... followed by the clean snap of a flintlock and then silence ... not even a flash in the dark ... a world of human statues.

The three footpads have been skirting the decrepit ex-pleasure garden since dark came on. Their patience is relentless and they can wait all night for a bounce. This patience also grounds their ruthlessness. They do what they do.

The gang splits working nights throughout central London. They are well prepared. They feel the night, which may seem instinctive, but the men know their patch. Geography is an awareness of shadows and blackness. They know how their own shadows blend in or stand out. The actual bounce is simple chance, and taking the most profitable-looking or rank shake that passes by. The bounce is about shock. You want a victim to feel they have just swallowed their heart, or, in the case of the unguarded Mr Holmes, have a carronade explode in their chest, so that time stops for a few fatal, exploitable seconds.

With the pistol barrel still drilled into Holmes' cheek, the gunman takes a second trigger-pull. The night is too wet. Thank the Lord it's too wet. Holmes, slightly emboldened by his reprieve, tries to again wrestle his attacker, but the pistol is now a hammer flailing aimlessly at his head before it breaks apart.

Mr Ellis is crawling around nearby, cowering and dazed. He refuses to look up, not that he will see much in the darkness. His ringing ears mix shuffling movement with indistinct, insinuating laughter. Ellis' pockets have been inverted. He realises the icy, agitated puffs are his own breath. Unsure of what's next, he freezes, prone on all fours.

One of Mr Ellis' attackers runs over to tackle Holmes and hold him down while the gunman siphons his pockets. The thieves disappear with *one silver watch, value 40 s. a steel chain, value 6 d. a seal, value 2 d. a man's hat, value 5 s. a guinea, value 21 s. and 18*

*d. in monies numbered.*ⁱⁱⁱ It's a plummy game for one hit, almost enough for a week of sweets, cunt and beer.

Holmes, for reasons he does not clearly understand, can only think of those superhuman legs, marble-cold and firm against his body. Their contours follow him around in his mind.

The following day, John Turwood, Daniel Chambers and James Gall are rounded up and arrested by Bow Street Runners. Chambers puts up a fight and tries swallowing some silver coins. Watches and shiny are recovered along with a pistol piece that neatly fits the half found left in the park. Gall is already well-known locally for leading a mob who tried to burn down an Irishman's house during the recent Gordon Riots, but it's his legs that make him a compelling match as Holmes' attacker.

Being faithful - in the family way - James Gall pleaded guilty to the assault and robbery charges. He claimed Turwood and Chambers *knew nothing of the robbery, it was two other men that was along with me, I know nothing of these men, only seeing them once at a public house, and that was all.*^{iv} Gall, who had, a few weeks previous attempted to shoot and kill a man, was now, just as defiantly, willing to die for another.

All three men were charged and sentenced to death, but only James Gall would swing as spectacle on the Newgate gallows. Turwood and Chambers received King's Pardons. While in gaol between their processing from prison to hulk to transport, Chambers recognises one of the Bullock Brothers. Chance is circumstance in the family way.

WILLIAM SUTTON: THE BISHOP OF LOST ALLEYS

Back on the 30th August 1786, at the Bullock Brothers' trial, one William Sutton was giving evidence in the matter of Robert Jones and the theft of a watch and silver. William Sutton explained he was doing business on Craven Street (just a rats dash from Rosemary Lane) *when I heard the cry of stop thief; I looked up Craven-street, and saw the prisoner running at a considerable distance, and several people were running, but I saw nobody speak or touch him; the others were running in pursuit of him at a*

considerable distance; I stopt the prisoner.^v Sutton told the court he saw none of the stolen items on Robert Jones' person. The ease with which Sutton had managed to calm and stop Jones had raised no suspicion.

A GOOD SAMARITIN

William Sutton was known around the Old Bailey as a broomstick who garnished certain prisoners in custody with food, gin, beer, tobacco or small coin. He had once signed as a bail provider for one of the Green park robbers, John Turwood. Sutton could appear quiet, presentable and caring without any hint of ignorance or brutality. In another life he might have passed for a gentleman. He worked as a Government Excise officer until he was dismissed - but never charged - over deception matters. He was once part of that human industry which maintained and inked the balance sheets, legal papers and bills of sale that confirmed the business of global empire. His nimble fingers now recorded the contracts, exchanges, loves and the cons of daily London living, into beautifully curled, ink-scripted proofs.

After his dismissal, Sutton built a career as a minor-crime bishop, providing a fee-for-service or loans to Whitechapel locals who found the language and rituals of business and law threatening and arcane. Sutton was soon, unsurprisingly, professionally thick with gamers like Turwood and Gall. He knew their youthful, bumptious mixture of greed, thuggery and braggartism. In the terms of his trade, Sutton was flash to every move on the board, the type of man even John Fitzwilliam might have gasped at in admiration.

Sutton worked his knowledge of tax evasion into his street-sharp of posing as a tax-collection officer, offering a discount to publicans willing to advance-pay the duty on their six-weekly, liquor licence fee. 'Mr Smith', was eventually undone when a receipt - issued to the owner of The Bunch of Grapes Inn at Cripplegate - was found to be a forgery. As the prosecution described it, Sutton *knew how to commit this fraud, because he knew very well that in general these publicans were sometimes in arrear in*

their payments, he knew likewise what was very true, that carrying these receipts in his pocket, would forward his design; says he, you see there are three receipts of the same kind; when persons are employed in this way it is necessary they should be careful of what is entrusted to them; he knew perfectly well the whole manner of conducting this business, he knew he could by an artful tale impose on the publicans, and by that defraud the public and the revenue; he knew perfectly well that the Excise office always give receipts with particular caution on the back of the licences, to avoid that he gives it on a distinct piece of paper.^{vi}

Sutton's frauds required subtlety, wit and composure, which the public knew as personal charm. William Sutton could treat a street beggar like King George. In London's dog-eat-dog boroughs he was a street poet playing the molly, the businessman, the philosopher or the knuckle-man, as circumstance dictated.

The dull inevitability of bureaucratic procedure caught Sutton up. Excise work was strictly demarcated into role and responsibility. On his arrest, constables found other prepared 'receipts' signed "J. Smith" in Sutton's handwriting. A check of current excise office personnel listed a Samuel Smith, who prepared the correct total for the daily certificates that would be distributed to collection officers. For an officer like Samuel Smith to sign or receipt a certificate would be a procedural rebellion close to anarchy.

Not even Sutton's defence lawyer, the celebrated William Garrow, could unsettle the prosaic government witnesses and the prosecution countered by noting that while Garrow claimed his client was ignorant of the family way, Sutton had demonstrated an innate appreciation of criminal language and its processes in his testimony. The jury was advised that the charge of forgery should be understood first-and-foremost as a crime against the state. William Sutton's felony was therefore *first to defraud the King; secondly to defraud Mr. Beardmore.*^{vii}

THE GANG'S ALL HERE

Another round of Royal Pardons saved William Sutton from the noose and in 1790 he disembarked at Port Jackson along with George Lee, Alex Seaton, George Connoway, John Turwood and Daniel Chambers. The group survived a Second Fleet voyage in which almost one in four convicts had died on route. Fraternity, history and now shared horror banded them more tightly as a group, which now, also included Robert Jones, the young watch stealer Sutton had saved from a rampaging London mob.

FROM WHITECHAPEL TO WHERE

Jones and Seaton had been moved on or separated from the group in the months following their arrival. The remaining men had somehow stayed together in convict barracks long enough to organise and steal a government boat at Rose Hill, near Parramatta. With them now was an ex-sailor, John Watson. After paddling the river undetected to Port Jackson harbour, they exchanged their punt for a small-masted sail boat. With a few weeks rations, blankets, cooking utensils and Watson's sailing experience, they headed north on a light breeze. The destination was Tahiti.

Despite six months on a transport, the London boys found the ocean a harsh reality in a small boat. The blood rush of the escape was now a stomach-squeezing, nauseous seasickness when a southerly shook them up the following dawn. Watson tacked shakily until sail damage forced them into the safety of Port Stephens harbour, just north of Newcastle.

The Port Stephens natives rationalised the appearance of these translucent-skinned men as the ancestor spirits of dead countrymen, returned across the ocean horizon, from the other side of living.

This preternatural arrival entitled the somewhat bewildered men to local laws and the renewed hospitality of kinship, which included one being shown his original cremation site.

William Sutton died soon after landing. The mast and sails were irreparable without European tools, while return to Sydney meant likely execution. It was late in 1790, and after their lives of prison ritual (and the experience aboard the transport *Scarborough*), the four Englishmen now existed as returned ghosts of dead loved ones. In an obtuse but practical way, incarceration and the family way had prepared them well for this moment.

They remained with the tribe almost five years. Five years could make a baby a child, a girl a woman, or see a nation fall. An ocean vessel could complete five circumnavigations of the globe. Five years was irrelevant to the timescale of their adopted world, which tuned itself to the annual migration and reappearance of certain creatures, or the arbitrary bushfires and floods. Their lives were still co-ordinated by the law and customs or tribal wars, meetings, initiations, but time was ownerless, an idea that also was very familiar to the native translator Wild Man Wilson, who was trudging through the Port Stephens bush in 1795, trying to keep his fellow colonists from shooting wildly at anything that moved.

WILD MAN WILSON

John Wilson was a First Fleet lag who stayed behind after his sentenced expired. He was a bolter like John Fitzwilliam, but found unique purpose and reason to the bush. He began reappearing in town cloaked in a kangaroo-skin that barely covered the native scarifications in his chest: this gnarled, honest barbarianism made a few NSW Corp officers seem as dandified as the King of Naples. Some native tribes accepted and taught Wilson to read the seemingly impossible bush and its signposted, obvious order, while bushcraft started to explain the land's indifference. During one expedition Wilson came across the remains of fifty odd dingo-chewed, calico-draped human skeletons, their rusting knives locked in tentacled finger-bones. They might have been

there for years, one of the early groups of bolters who expected China to be just beyond the mountains.

Wilson learned there was a reality to be found in listening to the bush, whether for hunting food or simply following the darting, zigzag projections of tiny finches seeking their daily water. It was this knowledge used on missions such as the 1795, coastal survey expedition in the sloop *Providence* that made a quick storm stopover into Port Stephens harbour.

A small landing party was not long in the bush when the surveyor Charles Grimes walked off alone and into a misconceived contact with local natives. Rushing to the shouting Grimes, who could be heard above the noise of wind-torn trees, Wilson found him surrounded by group of speared up, native men. They scattered after Wilson fired into the sky. While traipsing nervously back to the *Providence*, a crew member asked if anyone had noticed what looked like a white, naked body ghosting in the trees during the altercation. The survey vessel continued on north until bad weather returned and forced the *Providence* back to the safety of Port Stephens' clean, oval harbour. On Wilson's advice, they would keep weapons uncocked going ashore again, which is when they came upon a contented, disinterested tribe that included four, creole talking white men, who smiled while introducing their wives and children.

The return of the smoke-dried four to Sydney Town coincided with Governor Hunter's decree that all boats constructed in the colony were to be registered; a small administrative gesture in the exasperating fight against years of opportunistic convict piracy. Despite this Hunter pardoned the four convicts and for a while they were treated as half-man, half-savage curiosities. Like John Wilson, they were used as native translators, but found the various Sydney dialects difficult and sometimes impossible to understand. Their new diet of salted pork and watered-rum bloated their stomachs and shrunk their spirits. Watson and Chambers died from complications of the gut. It had been easier to swallow stolen, silver coins.

Two years later in 1797, John Turwood and George Lee were among the convict-pirates chased north by Lieutenant Shortland. It's not too fanciful to imagine Turwood and Lee returned like death cheaters to their joyful Port Stephens families, while Shortland was anchored just one harbour away.

Before the century was out, word reached the Governor that Wild Man Wilson had been executed by a native tribe after he illegally possessed a young woman for his 'exclusive accommodation'.

ⁱ OLD BAILEY PROCEEDINGS, Old Bailey Proceedings punishment summary, 30th August 1786. (s17860830-1), accessed 11 Nov. 2011.

ⁱⁱ Walter Thornbury. "Whitechapel." Old and New London: Volume 2 (1878): 142-146. *British History Online*. Web. 30 November 2011. <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=45084>>

ⁱⁱⁱ OLD BAILEY PROCEEDINGS: JAMES GALL, DANIEL CHAMBERS, JOHN TURWOOD, Violent Theft, Highway robbery, 19th July 1786. (t17860719-28), accessed 11 Nov. 2011.

^{iv} OLD BAILEY PROCEEDINGS: JAMES GALL, DANIEL CHAMBERS, JOHN TURWOOD, Violent Theft, Highway robbery, 19th July 1786. (t17860719-28), accessed 11 Nov. 2011.

^v OLD BAILEY PROCEEDINGS: ROBERT JONES, Theft, grand larceny, 30th August 1786. (t17860830-1), accessed 30 Nov. 2011.

^{vi} OLD BAILEY PROCEEDINGS: WILLIAM SUTTON, Deception, forgery, 8th July 1789. (t17890708-7), accessed 11 Nov. 2011

^{vii} OLD BAILEY PROCEEDINGS: WILLIAM SUTTON, Deception, forgery, 8th July 1789. (t17890708-7), accessed 11 Nov. 2011