

PILOD ESSAY: Shooting at North Wonthaggi

On the 6th of March 1926, at about 4:30 pm, Sarah Maine, a married woman who lived in North Wonthaggi saw two men she did not know walking together in a paddock near her house carrying guns at the ready. She learned later they were double barrel breach loading guns, but it didn't alarm her because it was not an unusual sight in an area known as a good hunting spot, especially for hares.

"I heard two shots fired and looked up. They'd shot a hare," she said. "They were about 40 to 50 yards from my place at the time. It was clear where they shot the hare. I saw them go over to the hare and the one dressed in green picked it up and hung it on his belt. I could see that he looped his belt through the tendons of the back legs of the hare like most hunters do, and that meant the feet stuck up a few inches above his belt, so he buttoned his coat over it before they walked on. The two men appeared to be very pleased with the kill and very good friends. Then they walked together into the thick tea tree scrub. That was the last I saw of them for about five or ten minutes until I heard another shot and then the man in green calling out. I looked up and saw him coming out into the clearing at a great pace."

She continued: "The gentleman yelled, 'Help! Help! A man shot!'. He saw me and said, 'Bring someone quick. There is a man shot!' I sent my boy for someone. The gentleman yelled, 'Come quick; I think he is dead!'"

Sarah Maine did not go to the man who was shot. Rather, she waited for help.

The next person to see the two hunters was Senior Constable of Police, James Nicholas Slater, stationed at Wonthaggi. He arrived at the scene of the shooting in company of Constable Donaldson within a half an hour of it happening. He later testified, "In a paddock there in the tea tree scrub I saw the body of a man, whom I was later told was Michael Dunne. The body lay on its back. Nearby, was a double barrel gun. Both hammers were cocked and both barrels were fully loaded. About 12 feet away lay another double barrel gun, which I examined and found the left barrel contained an empty cartridge. It appeared to have been recently discharged. The other barrel was loaded with a live cartridge. The hammer was cocked. I examined the body of the deceased. Under the left shoulder blade, I found a large wound from which blood was discharging."

Once Sr Constable Slater arrived on the scene all testimony, including that of Sarah Maine, became official. Of course, the man in green, Dunne's shooting partner, Henry James Hitchings, was taken into custody and very quickly witnesses or close relatives were sought and consulted. Anyone who spoke about the incident had to do so in the company of the police, where notes were taken. Finally, everyone questioned by police after the shooting was expected to give formal testimony at the Coroner's Inquest called an *Inquisition without Jury* which would be held on 24 March 1926 in the Coroner's Office in Wonthaggi, eighteen days after Dunne's death. The purpose of the Inquest was to determine whether or not Dunne was murdered or died by accident and misfortune.

Dr Lancelot Robert Sleeman, a legally qualified medical practitioner residing in Wonthaggi, made a post-mortem examination on the body of Michael Dunne at the Hospital Morgue the day after the shooting, the 7th day of March 1926. He found the following:

A large circular wound 2½" x 2½" below and to the left of the left shoulder blade, with, muscle and heart tissue protruding from same along with loose fragments of bone present in the wound... The wound entered the chest cavity where large fragments of rib were lying in the left pulmonary cavity, which was filled with blood, the lower half of left lung lacerated into pulp, left ventricle of heart completely lacerated, pellets of shot lying on surface of heart and under the anterior layers of perineum and also the stomach.

At the later Inquisition Dr Sleeman testified that: "In my opinion, the causes of death are due to injuries described above and I should think that death was instantaneous. The force of the blow may have turned

the deceased partly around. I do not think he would have been able to turn with his own volition. I think he could have called out immediately upon receiving the impact. The shot was fired at close range.”

Two days after Dr Sleeman examined the corpse, on 9 March 1926, Senior Detective James Norman Bruce came from Melbourne to interrogate the arrested man, Henry Hitchings. Later at the Inquest on the 26th of March he gave testimony about his interrogation that read like the dialogue of a play:

I said to him: I am Detective Bruce, and I am making enquiries concerning the death of Michael Dunne who you were with when he was shot. I want you to tell me all about it.

He said: We continued to walk along and when we got into the scrub, Dunne was a little ahead of me and he threw his hands up like that (demonstrates) and it happened.

I said: What happened?

He said: The accident.

I said: How did the gun go off?

He said: I do not know.

I said: You was there, and you don't know?

He said: I wish I could tell you.

I said: Did you stumble?

He said: No!

I said: Did you move the gun about under your arm?

He said: No!

I said: This is a very serious matter and you have taken a man's life and you have given no explanation about how you did it. Show me how you was holding the gun.

[He got the gun and put it under his arm and said he was holding the gun like that.]

I said: Did you have your hand near the trigger?

He said: No!

I said: Surely you know a gun will not go off unless the trigger is pulled.

He said: I do not know how it went off. My finger was not near the trigger.

I said: Did you jerk the gun under your arm?

He said: No!

I said: Good god, man, do you mean to tell me that you were holding a gun within three feet of your nose and you didn't know it went off?

He said: I had a faint recollection of an explosion. I do not know how the gun went off and it is no good you pressing me. That is all I can say. I can say no more. I only knew the gun went off when he [Dunne] threw his hands up and fell.

At the Inquest Michael Dunne's widow, Evelyn Dunne, gave testimony that, "Both Michael and Henry went out with the intention of going shooting. My husband was in usual good health and spirits when he left. So far as I am aware, they were good friends. They have known each other intimately for three or four months. I cannot say exactly how long they have known one another. They never had any arguments. They have been shooting before. They have been out often together. They were on most friendly terms."

Dunne's brother, John, testified that he had seen his brother at the hospital morgue and agreed it was him. He agreed with Evelyn that the two men, Michael and Henry, were very friendly, that they had met in England during the war, that they were pals and that he knew of no disagreement between them.

Finally, Henry James Hitchings, on oath as everyone else had been, got to testify on his own behalf: *I am a surface hand engaged at the State Coal Mine and reside at Cameron Street. On the 6th of the present month, the deceased, Michael Dunne, and I were out shooting. We both had double barrel breach loading guns. We walked to North Wonthaggi, and there we went to a paddock in search of hares. When in the paddock a hare jumped up in front of me, I fired two shots at the hare. I hit him and loaded up again. Dunne also fired a shot about the same time as me. We walked together, picked up the hare. Another hare then got up about 100 and fifty yards away. We then commenced to look for more hare. We then walked through the*

tea tree side by side. The deceased said he would break away to the left. I said, all right. The next thing I knew was the deceased calling out, "Oh, good God." He walked a yard and fell and turned face upward.

I was carrying the gun under my right arm. Both hammers were locked. I can recollect hearing the report of a gun when I heard Dunne call out.

When I realised what had happened, I dropped my gun and went and called for help. I have had experience with a shot gun for many years. I have never known a gun to go off on its own accord. As far as I can say it was purely accidental. I make this statement of my own free will without any threat or inducement held out.

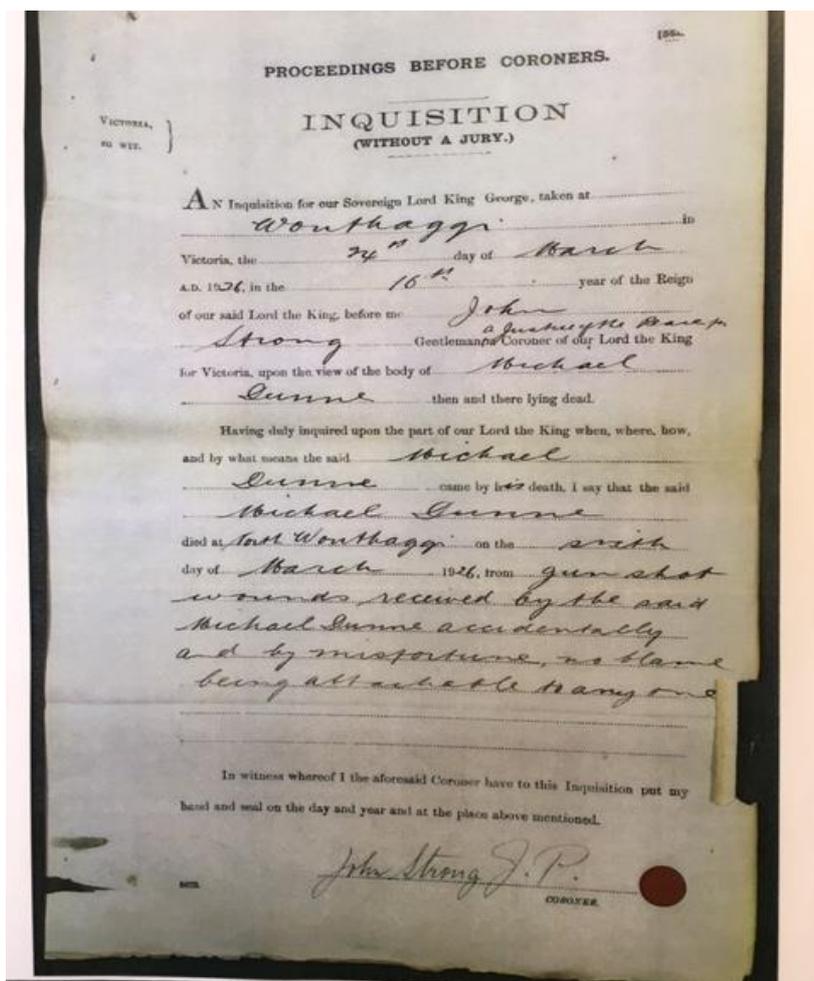
That was the last of the testimonies. The presiding coroner could finally make his judgement and sign his name to the formal document:

An Inquisition for our Sovereign Lord King George, taken at Wonthaggi in Victoria, the 24th day of March A.D. 1926 in the 16th year of the reign our said Lord the King, before me, John Strong, Gentleman Coroner and Justice of the Peace for our Lord the King for Victoria, upon view of the body of Michael Dunne, then and there lying dead.

*Having duly inquired upon the part of our Lord the King when, where, how and by what means the said Michael Dunne came by his death, I say that the said Michael Dunne died at North Wonthaggi on the sixth day of March 1926, from gunshot wounds received by the said Michael Dunne **accidentally and by misfortune, no blame being attachable to anyone.***

In witness thereof, I, the aforesaid Coroner have to this Inquisition put my hand and seal of the day and year and at the place above mentioned.

Signed, John Strong, J.P. Coroner



Henry Hitchings stayed in Wonthaggi for the rest of his life. He bought a farm in North Wonthaggi where he raised a prosperous family, and which is still in the family three generations later.

In spite of living a vigorous and productive life, Henry was haunted by the horror of Michael Dunne's death. He never shared his experience or his thoughts on the matter with anyone including members of his own family, who knew nothing about it until recently when Henry's great grandson, Tim, was browsing Trove on the Internet and uncovered the testimonies recorded at the Coroner's Inquisition, in 1926. He also discovered a long article in the *Argus* and two short articles, one in the *Powlett Express* and another in the *Sentinel*.

Ian Hitchings recently lent the papers to the Historical Society after Tim discovered them. The Society has copied the papers so that they can be added to our Archives. These documents have become the basis of this PLOD essay