

Catherine Adams per *Sir Robert Seppings* (ID 11124) and the Dean Poisoning Case.



How many convict women appeared before a Royal Commission? How many were sketched in court, not once, but at least three times? Few I suspect. Because of Catherine's appearance in court, we know a lot about her colonial history after she left Van Diemen's Land, and more about the life course of her convict husband. Catherine also maintained contact with a number of former convicts in Victoria and NSW.

On Wednesday, 15 May 1895, William Ellis, known as 'Yorkie', appeared before the Dean Royal Commission in Sydney, NSW. He was there to talk about Catherine Adams, a convict who arrived in Van Diemen's Land on the *Sir Robert Seppings*.¹ How did it come to this?

George Dean stood accused of poisoning Mary his wife, the daughter of Catherine Adams. Poison had been found in Mary's food and Dean was charged in early March 1895.

Mary Dean's age fits with a birth in Victoria to Caroline Adams and Denis Gaynor. That child was registered as Sarah Annie Gaynor.² How she and her mother both came to be called Seymour remains a mystery.

George Dean, a master mariner with the North Shore Ferry Company, gave evidence to the charge of attempting to poison his wife. Twenty-seven-year-old Dean denied that he had been seeing another woman and that he may have wanted to marry her.³ He and his 20-year-old wife had only been married for 12 months.⁴ Mary had given birth to a daughter on 26 December 1894 at home in Miller Street, North Sydney.⁵ Not long later, the couple argued and Dean denied paternity.⁶ Dean also objected to his mother-in-law spending too much time with her daughter.⁷ Attempts were made in court to besmirch his mother-in-law's reputation by linking her to known criminals and brothel owners.⁸

When questioned in court Catherine Adams, now known as Catherine and/or Caroline Seymour, gave evidence of her past as well. She admitted that she had been convicted previously and that she had married a man named Aspberry. Mrs Seymour also gave evidence to living in Surrey Hills for 13 years and knowing Madame Rose, a brothel owner for nine years. She admitted to receiving payment for errands she ran for women at the brothel.⁹

Dean was found guilty, sentenced to death and sent to Darlinghurst Gaol.

His cause was taken up by members of the media and by politicians. The Attorney General, Mr Want, even made a statement in which he reported on a forged letter purporting to be from Mary Dean admitting her guilt. It was noted how ‘popular prejudice’ had ‘been inflamed so skillfully against Mrs. Dean and her mother, Mrs. Seymour’.¹⁰ Mr Want also released testimonies supporting the good character of Mary Dean and her mother. One read:

‘St David’s Parsonage, Arthur-street, Surrey Hills, Sydney, 13th April 1895. – I have known Mrs. Seymour, late of 413 Riley-street Surrey Hills, for the last 10 years or more. I also know well her daughter, Mary Dean, late Mary Seymour, whom I married to George Dean on 8th March 1894. Mary Seymour grew up a girl in our Sunday-school, and always bore a good character. I never heard a word against her character or that of her mother during her residence here.

Signed Joshua Hargrave.’

Other friends and neighbours wrote in testament to Catherine Seymour’s industrious hard working approach and her kindness to sick neighbours.¹¹

The Executive Council commuted Dean’s death penalty to life imprisonment.¹²

Public meetings were held around NSW urging the Executive to appoint a commission into Dean’s case.¹³ They were well organised and well attended and raised considerable capital. A Royal Commission was held.

At the Commission, William Ellis was called to outline the history of Mary Dean’s mother, Catherine Adams, whom he knew as Carrie Asprey.

Ellis told the court that he first met Carrie in Ballarat about 29 years before, and that she had come from Hobart Town where she had married a policeman named Jack Asprey. Ellis had lived with Lizzie Footer and she and Carrie were associates. Carrie was in Ballarat with Biddie Birch and Danny Gaynor and the three of them were shop lifters and pick pockets. Whilst Gaynor was in prison, Carrie lived with another man. Ellis explained that Carrie planned and carried out robberies. Once in a hotel in Richmond, the landlord’s back was only turned for ten seconds before Carrie was away with a cash box containing £38.

Later Carrie lived with a pickpocket named Billy Gamble until he died. Carrie was living in Surrey Hills and continued her association with criminal types. She began living with and working with Tommy Jones.; she stole, and he was her ‘fence’. About 1877, Carrie set up a shop selling fruits, lollies and cordials in Riley Street. Ellis suggested that it was frequented by criminals.

A witness, Kate Hughes, had known Mrs. Seymour for over 15 years and claimed that she had taken a young woman from Mrs Seymour’s residence to a house of ‘questionable character’.

Mrs Seymour had suggested that should Kate Hughes bring any 'nice young girls' to her house, then it would be worth Hughes while.¹⁴

Tommy Jones painted a very different picture of Mrs Seymour. Tommy, a tailor, was living at the Liverpool Asylum, but after he became too ill to work, Catherine had given him lodging for as long as she could afford. He described her as 'a most kind and motherly woman, and as staunch a friend, as ever broke the bread of life'. She had not forgotten him and took him woolen socks on her last visit.¹⁵ Tommy had lived with Mrs Seymour for 14 years in her house in Riley Street, Surrey Hills.¹⁶

One of the biggest surprises in the hearing was the appearance of John Asbury, or Asprey. He testified that Mrs Seymour was his wife. Asbury stated that he had gone to VDL in 1850, worked for Judge Horne and the Police Magistrate Burgess and later became a sergeant of police. He married Catherine on 2 May 1854. He then took over Webb's Hotel for seven months, the Derwent Hotel for two years, Garrick's Head Hotel for three years and then he spent 11 years at the Emu. His wife left him and went to Melbourne on 5 July 1865. Asbury followed in 1869.

Whilst he had been at the Emu he had owned arsenic and he had been violently ill. His suggestion was that perhaps his wife had poisoned him. He also claimed that while he was in New Zealand, his wife had been seeing a man named Burdett. Asbury and Catherine had a daughter born in 1854. She remained with her father when her mother left, but later in Melbourne, her mother claimed the child. By then Asbury was living with another woman. Asbury was convicted of receiving and spent time in prison in Melbourne. Since his release he had lived as a cook, shepherd and drover under the name John Jenkins. He was now living on the North Shore and saw an advertisement in the papers seeking his attention.

Mrs Seymour was stunned to see John Asbury as she had believed him dead for over 20 years. Although feeble and aged about 72, he gave evidence 'with considerable intelligence'.¹⁷

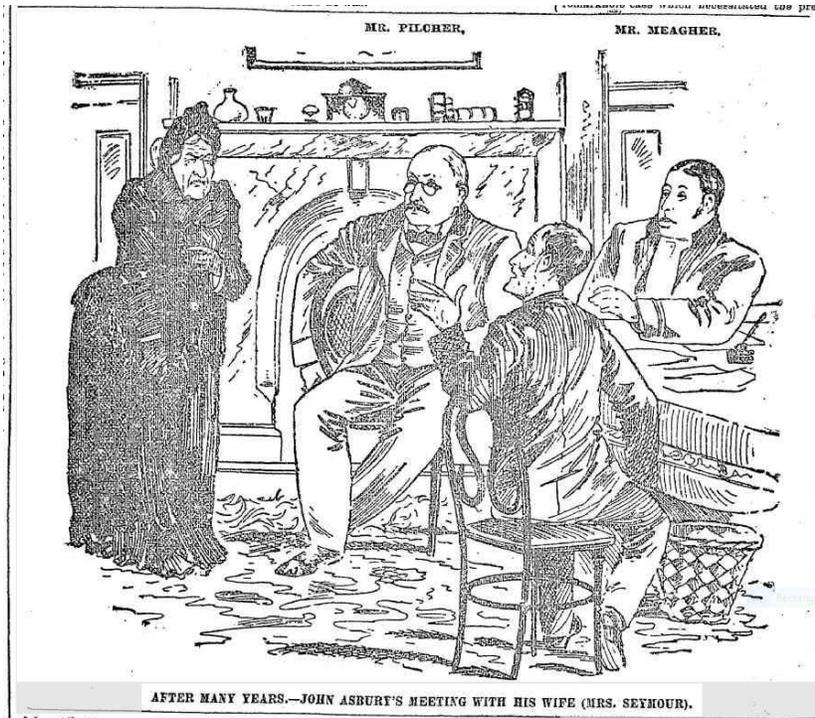
Mrs Seymour was also shocked to see Superintendent O'Callaghan of the Victorian Police who was brought before the Commission to testify to her character whilst she lived in Victoria. He confirmed her relationship with Dennis Gaynor, a pickpocket, and with shoplifters Mrs Green and Bidy Birch. He said,

I have seen Carrie Asbury taking men with her to brothels, and have afterwards seen the men, when they complained that she had 'bilked' them.

During all the time I knew Carry Asbury she had the character of being a very dangerous and vindictive woman, one who would not stop at any crime to gain her object. From my personal knowledge of her, I believe she well-deserved that character.¹⁸

The attempt to prove that Mrs Seymour was a woman of ill-repute, appeared to work.

Although previously sentenced to death, Dean was pardoned by the Royal Commission and released from Darlinghurst Gaol on 28 June 1895.¹⁹ A few weeks later, Mary Dean claimed maintenance from her husband and the court ordered that Dean pay her 12s and 6d per week for six months.²⁰



George Dean's name did not disappear from the colonial press. Dean petitioned parliament to affirm his innocence. But things did not go well for him. Dean was again arrested, he confessed and was imprisoned for 14 years for perjury. His lawyer, Richard Meagher, and others were also tried for attempting to pervert the course of justice. Convictions were quashed after an appeal.²² Even though George was in goal, questions were still asked about 'who poisoned Mary Dean?'. George was released from prison in 1904, remitted for good behaviour. He worked as an engineer at Canoon Station, Hay and died in 1933.²³

Whilst George Dean was in prison, Mary divorced him and gained custody of their daughter, Florence Emily.²⁴ In July 1896, Mrs Seymour and her daughter, Mary Dean, were still running a small grocery shop in Surrey Hills. Business was slow.²⁵ Mary remarried in 1900 and in 1902, Mary Ada Herbert and Benjamin William Bridge, a drover, baptised a son.²⁶ Mary Ada Bridge died in 1969 at Gosford.²⁷



What became of Mrs Seymour and her associates?

John Asbury appeared in court at Cooma in 1896 awaiting admission to the Benevolent Asylum.²⁹ John died on 6 Jan 1903 after falling down the stairs at 14 Victoria Street, Sydney, a lodging house where he had lived for about two years.³⁰

Catherine had been released from Melbourne Gaol on 29 December 1877. There she had shared time with Isabella McCall (ID 8459) who sailed on the *Martin Luther*. Isabella also called herself Mrs Asbury, as she had taken up with John Asbury. What a tangled web! Isabella did not accompany John Asbury to NSW.

William (Billy) Gamble died in Sydney in 1880.³¹ At the time of his death, he lived at 19 Norton Street, Surrey Hills, probably with Catherine.³² Was he one of the William Gambles transported to VDL?

Daniel (Danny) Gaynor was back in Pentridge in January 1891, yet again caught pickpocketing.³³ His aliases then were Denis Edwards and Denis Gaynor.³⁴ He also went by the names of George Adams and George James.³⁵ There is a wonderful image of him on his NSW gaol entrance register taken in 1899. Then he was going by the name George Edwards.³⁶ Perhaps he was the old aged pensioner, Denis Gaynor found dead near Lucknow, NSW, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head in July 1902.³⁷

Tommy Jones, who gave evidence at the Commission, died at the Liverpool Asylum in October 1895.³⁸ He had been visited by Mary Dean that week.

Perhaps these men were amongst those of the criminal classes who frequented Mrs Seymour's home. At least one of them considered her a dear friend.

Loyal to the last was Catherine's daughter Mary. Her elder daughter, Caroline Elizabeth, had died in Victoria in 1891.³⁹

Catherine died as Caroline Ashbury, the name Seymour long discarded. No mention was made in the papers of her convict past or the Dean Royal Commission. She died a loving mother and grandmother remembered fondly by her family.

ASBURY – December 28, 1921, at her daughter's residence, Kent, Rawson-street, Punchbowl, Caroline Asbury, dearly loved mother and mother-in-law of Ben and Mary Bridge, and loving grandma of Breta and Jack, aged 89 years. Sadly missed.⁴⁰

ASBURY.—In loving memory of my darling granny,
who fell asleep December 28, 1921.
Some day, some time, my eyes shall see
Your sweet face held in memory;
Some day your hand shall clasp my hand,
Far over in the better land.
Sadly missed by her sorrowing granddaughter, Breta.



Mrs Seymour taken at the time of the Dean Royal Commission.

Colette McAlpine

November 2019.

¹ Daily Telegraph, 16 May 1895, p.3 THE DEAN CASE

² VIC Birth 1874/10564

³ Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate, 6 April 1895 p.5 ALLEGED WIFE POISONING

⁴ Australasian Star, 19 Mar 1895 p. 5 ALLEGED INTENT TO MURDER

⁵ Sydney Morning Herald, 27 Dec 1894 p. 1. Family Notices

⁶ Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate, 20 Mar 1895 p. 5 ALLEGED WIFE POISONING

⁷ Australasian Star 23 Mar 1895 p. 3 THE POISONING CASE

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- ⁸ Sydney Morning Herald 25 Mar 1895 p. 7 POLICE COURTS
- ⁹ Australian Star 5 Apr 1895 p. 5 NORTH SYDNEY POISONING CASE
- ¹⁰ Daily Telegraph 18 Apr 1895 p. 6 SOME SENSATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE
- ¹¹ Sydney Morning Herald 18 Apr 1895 p. 5
- ¹² Daily Telegraph 18 Apr 1895 p. 1 SUMMARY
- ¹³ Sydney Morning Herald 18 Apr 1895 p. 4.
- ¹⁴ Daily Telegraph, 16 May 1895 p. 3. THE DEAN CASE
- ¹⁵ Truth 12 May 1895. P. 5
- ¹⁶ Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal 21 Oct 1895 p.2
- ¹⁷ Sydney Morning Herald 21 May 1895. p.3 THE DEAN CASE
- ¹⁸ Truth, 2 June 1895 p.1 AWFUL CHARACTER
- ¹⁹ Barrier Miner, 28 Jun 1895 p. 4 RELEASE OF DEAN
- ²⁰ Australian Workman, 21 Sep 1895 p. 2 GEORGE DEAN
- ²¹ Sunday Times 26 May 1895 p. 3 THE DEAN POISONING CASE
- ²² <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dean-george-5929>
- ²³ <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dean-george-5929>
- ²⁴ Daily Telegraph 28 May 1896 p. 3 THE DEAN DIVORCE CASE
- ²⁵ Molong Argus, 10 Jul 1896 p.2
- ²⁶ Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney; Sydney, New South Wales, Australia; *Baptism, Burial, Confirmation, Marriage and composite registers in the Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney Archives*
- ²⁷ NSW Death 1969/36374
- ²⁸ Australian Star 13 May 1895 p. 5 DEAN COMMISSION
- ²⁹ The Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven 3 Dec 1896 P. 2 The Dean Case again.
- ³⁰ Evening News 7 Jan 1903 p. 5 AN OLD AGE PENSIONER'S DEATH.
- ³¹ NSW Death 1880/623
- ³² Sydney Morning Herald, 8 Apr 1880 p. 10.
- ³³ *The Herald (Melbourne, 5 January 1891* p 1 Article
- ³⁴ VPRS 515/ P1 item 12, record Page 468
- ³⁵ Mercury and Weekly Courier 15 Feb 1879 p. 2
- ³⁶ State Archives NSW; Roll: 5090
- ³⁷ Mudgee Guardian and North Western Representative 31 Jul 1902 p. 8
- ³⁸ Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal 21 Oct 1895 p.2
- ³⁹ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/153397590>
- ⁴⁰ Sydney Morning Herald 31 Dec 1921 p. 8
- ⁴¹ Sydney Morning Herald 28 Dec 1922 p. 6
- ⁴² PIC/13388/1-13 LOC Box PIC/13388-Portraits of people involved with the Dean poisoning case, 1895 [\[picture\]](#)./Portrait of Catherine Seymour, mother of Mary Dean, 1895 [\[picture\]](#).