

BAD SEED

BY

MARCUS CLARK

The Editor

Auston Monthly Magazine

12 June 1989

Dear Editor,

My name is Carl Rochester and I am writing to ask for your assistance in a matter that may well seem very strange to you. I want you to publish a letter in your magazine. I recently discovered the letter in my attic, inside a bible, where it has laid for the past 50 years; how it got there I do not know. I have enclosed a photocopy of this letter, and as you will see it is indeed extremely serious. It shames me and my entire family, but although the truth of this matter has been hidden all these years it must be brought out into the open. Here is the letter:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

14th February 1898

Rangeville, Victoria

I, Gordon Rochester, wish to make this deathbed confession, for I fear I shall not arise from this bed. I am of sound mind, although some might say only a madman would make such a confession after having escaped punishment all these years, yet I cannot go to my grave carrying this burden. Being a confession, just this side of the grave, I know you'll be believin' this even though it is shocking and evil.

These crimes have weighed upon my heart near thirty-six years, and never have I told a soul. Listen well, for it is the truth I swear by Almighty God. On the night of 17th of May 1862 I walked into Melbourne and were drinking in a well-known pub that now be torn down. Afterwards I came out and walked the streets. I had not a shilling to my name, no employment, and no prospects. Being near winter and a miserable night I was desperate for warm shelter and food.

I were angry walking along La Trobe Street cursing the fate that had me without prospects, with nothing to look forward to in life; no wife and children, no home, no job, no friends. I were mean and angry at my misfortune, angry at the good Lord that he had brought me to this place in life, and not yet twenty-three-years old. I had come to Melbourne hoping for a better life, steady work, and perhaps one day a little farm in the country.

But this night I was down on me luck, and when I saw a toff half drunk, dressed like as fine a dandy I'd ever seen in London, I decided I would follow him. It were indeed a spur of the moment thing. I sees him, I follows him, then as I starts to walk behind him in the dark street I began to think. He's got money in his pockets and yet he's headed for a fine home, a hot meal and a warm welcome by a wife and children. This man had everything while I had nothing but me clothes with their empty pockets. I made up my mind to rob him. I figured that wouldn't do him no harm, having so much, while I had so little. I got closer and closer, then I sprang on him from behind. I brought him to the ground, where I expected he'd lie down in fear and shock. But he fought back, and I got frightened of the noise he were making so I kicked him; I kicked him till he was dead. In God's truth I murdered the man.

My feelings, when I saw what I had done, were of terror. In the beginning I had only planned to rob him, and now he was dead. I couldn't bring myself to even touch his pockets. I always believed it were bad luck to touch a dead man. But his gold watch had fallen and lay on the footpath. I picked it up and ran off, but as I ran I began to feel angry. I had killed the man for a useless watch! I could not eat the watch, nor sell it that night for food, drink or lodging. Besides, I suddenly realised that it could link me to the murder. So I dropped it on the footpath as I ran.

Late that night I got a ride with a farmer heading down to Geelong. The farmer were kind to me and shared some cooked spuds. He told me of a man who needed some labour for fencing and the following day, tired and hungry, I got work on a farm.

It were a week before I heard the news about the murder. I saw in a newspaper that they had arrested a man named Jim Hamilton for the murder. He were a poor man like meself, with a small farm, a wife an kids. His trial were set for the next week.

Sure I felt sorry for Jim Hamilton, but it didn't concern me too much for I knew he were innocent and the court would have to let him go. They'd try him and find him innocent, for in God's name there were no evidence against him. For me to step forward and confess to the murder would only put me away. And now I had a steady job and a warm bunk it seemed a shame to throw away my life that were just beginning anew.

It's true I felt bad about killing the rich man, but nothing I could do would ever bring him back. No one could. So I kept me mouth shut and watched for the account of the trial.

Jim Hamilton told the court he were walking down La Trobe Street late at night, he saw a gold watch on the footpath, he picked it up and kept right on walking. Then he came to a man stretched out on the ground; he bent down to see if he were alive, wanting to help him. The man was too heavy to move so he called out: 'Help! Help! Someone help me!'

Neighbours came a running; they said they saw a stranger struggling on the ground with Mr Garnett. They seized the stranger, who struggled violently to escape like a guilty felon. When the constables arrived, they searched Jim Hamilton and found the stolen watch in his pocket. They took him away and charged him with murder.

The court found Jim Hamilton guilty of murder and sentenced him to death.

The first day I heard this news I consoled myself that it were not my job to prove Jim Hamilton innocent. The court had found him guilty, it were not me punishing Jim, it were the courts. But I couldn't take the feeling of dread in my heart, that an innocent man were to die for my crime. I decided I would step forward and say I had witnessed the crime, seeing a gang kill Mr Garnett. So I set off walking to Melbourne to see the police. When I got to West Footscray I heard the news, Jim Hamilton had been hanged that morning.

I turned around and walked home.

That all happened thirty-six years ago, and I never told a soul all this time. Not my wife, not my children, not my minister. This secret lay between me and my God. Now I am going to meet God in a few hours or days, my body worn out. I want people, especially the family of Jim Hamilton, to know he were an innocent man. I am the murderer.

All this I swear in God's name.

Gordon Rochester.

You can see from this confession of my great, great-grandfather that this letter must be brought into the open. I want to find Jim Hamilton's descendants and try to rectify this terrible miscarriage of justice as far as can be done. Would you please publish this letter so that I may eventually be able to contact his descendants.

yours sincerely,

Carl Rochester.

55 Melvon Avenue

Caldington. S.A.

* AUSTON MONTHLY MAGAZINE *

2 July 1989

Dear Carl Rochester,

I found the photocopy of the letter you sent quite interesting—but of course I could not possibly publish such a confession in its present form. How do I

know any of this story is true? How do I know you didn't write this letter yourself?

There must be supporting evidence before I could even consider publication. Even then there will be other considerations.

Yours sincerely,
Jack Coombes, editor
AUSTON MONTHLY MAGAZINE

14 September 1989
Editor,
Auston Monthly Magazine

Dear Mr Jack Coombes,
You'll see that I have been very busy over the past months. I have searched through hundreds of old records and newspapers for evidence to support the letter you now see before you.

1. I have enclosed the original deathbed confession. You may have this tested scientifically to prove its age.

2. You can see the newspaper clipping giving the full account of the murder of Mr Garnett and the trial of Jim Hamilton. You'll notice it mentions Jim Hamilton's wife and children. So there are descendants.

3. You can now also see the record of the hanging as described in the newspaper—along with "the crowd who jostled, gawked and cheered at the death of a vicious murderer." If you check the confession, you will of course find that the paper is nearly a hundred years old, the ink, the style of writing—I am certain it is genuine. But please have it checked. I would welcome proof that it is a forgery, for the shame belongs to my family.

yours sincerely,
Carl Rochester.
55 Melvon Avenue
Caldington. S.A.

* AUSTON MONTHLY MAGAZINE *

29 September 1989

Dear Carl Rochester,

I was very interested in your most recent letter. It looks like we are approaching enough evidence to enable publication of your relative's confession. My next step will be to send a reporter to the Geelong district to investigate in more detail the place where he lived out his life. I want the reporter to do some checking, and to find out some more background on Gordon Rochester. Things do look promising and perhaps we can have publication in a couple of months.

Yours sincerely,
Jack Coombes, editor
AUSTON MONTHLY MAGAZINE

4 November 1989

Jack Coombes

Dear Jack,

Some two months have passed without any word from you. What has happened to

your investigating reporter? Will you be going ahead with publication? This is a serious matter that involves the lives of a number of people. I ask you to give it your immediate attention.

yours sincerely,
Carl Rochester.

* AUSTON MONTHLY MAGAZINE *

15th November 1989

Dear Mr Carl Rochester,

Profound apologies for the delay in writing to you. I have been extremely busy of late and simply could not deal with your article till now.

The reporter went to the district of Rangeville, near Geelong, and conducted a thorough enquiry into Gordon Rochester's life. He found that all the evidence you put forward is genuine in every way. Nevertheless, regretfully we will not be able to go ahead with publication.

Gordon Rochester was a very hard-working man. And on his death he gave everything to his town. In fact, a large sum of money is still held in trust for scholarships and for sporting teams. University fees are paid to ten local students each year from his estate. The name Rochester is on the Town Hall, the school of Arts, and the main street is Rochester Avenue. Parks, halls, monuments have been provided and often named after Mr Rochester. The original and later descendants of Mr Rochester were very public minded.

Although there are now no Rochesters living in the district, as you would know, the name Rochester is part of the town history; and to do anything to discredit it would be seen as desecration. The council have advised that if we publish the murder confession they will sue us.

We therefore sought legal advice on this and we have been told not to go ahead. I'm sorry to have to give you this sad news. This murder and hanging all took place a long time ago. No good can come out of raking over the embers. Why not just forget about it?

Yours sincerely
Jack Coombes,

AUSTON MONTHLY MAGAZINE

21 Raxxin St
Rangeville, Victoria
2 December 1989

Dear Reverend Capel,

My name is Carl Rochester and I have been trying to trace the descendants of Jim Hamilton. Mrs Lawrence told me that your grandfather knew the family very well over a number of years.

Could you tell me anything about the family, and very importantly, where I can get in contact with the descendants.

yours sincerely,
Carl Rochester.
55 Melvon Avenue,
Caldington. S.A.

14th January 1990

Dear Mr Carl Rochester,

My Grandfather, and father have lived and served as clergymen in this district for about 90 years. The family that you mentioned, Hamilton, was well known to my grandfather and father, though not might I add, in respect to actual church attendance.

I have looked through my Grandfather's work diaries kept while he was the local clergyman.

The story is rather a sad one.

As you probably know, Jim Hamilton was hanged for the murder of Mr Garnett.

His children grew up in an atmosphere poisoned by guilt and hate. The townsfolk were very pious in those days and it was felt that the five children came from "bad seed", and that the sins of the father should be visited on the children, even to the third or fourth generation.

No one trusted the children, treating them as convicted criminals because of their father's crime. As each child became an adult, they fulfilled the towns' expectations of them—turning to lives of petty crime, usually with a strong dose of alcoholism and added violence. One after another, as they each reached their twenties, they disappeared into jail.

The two girls were constantly plagued by the local men, and eventually they both had a series of illegitimate children. (I must confess that I don't like that term, it is not the children that are illegitimate, but the state of wedlock).

The two girls eventually became prostitutes, bringing their own children up in an atmosphere of crime, squalor and drunkenness. Their children were pointed out by townsfolk as: "They came from bad seed. Their mothers are prostitutes, the grandfather a mad killer who was hanged for his crimes."

Eventually the entire family were scattered; their genealogical line was as lost and confused as their fathers' identities. All that was known of the family in the end was a small excerpt from the local paper in 1932.

FAMILY OF KILLERS

The last known relative of the infamous murderer, Jim Hamilton, a Mr Gary Hamilton, 43 years, was found dead in his cell. Police sergeant Judson told the News Weekly, that Gary Hamilton had been charged with the murder of another man after a fight over a bottle of beer. The family have lived in the district for many years and were notorious as violent criminals and murderers. One local farmer commented: "All the Hamilton's were bad. They were born from a vicious murderer, grew up in sin, and every one of those Hamiltons went bad. Townsfolk always kept their distance, and I don't reckon there'll be anyone turn up for the funeral."

25 January, 1990

Dear Jack Coombes,
editor,

Please, won't you reconsider publishing the confession or even a brief article of some kind? I desperately want to put things right, not just for the family, but for all of us. I know it's impossible to correct all the injustice, prejudice and hatred that have caused so much damage. Yet I particularly want to reach the descendants of Jim Hamilton wherever they are. I need someone to publish this story in a large magazine.

I want the descendants, those who are still alive, to know that they didn't inherit evil, that they are not locked into crime and despair. I want everyone to know that you must not accept your past. For my own family had the "seed of evil" yet because we didn't know, because the townsfolk didn't know, the Rochesters acted like charitable civic minded citizens.

It seems clear to me now, that we often become what people expect us to become. Our free will is influenced and shaped by our beliefs, no matter how wrong those beliefs might be.
Carl Rochester.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPING

Melbourne, 2 February. The editor of the Auston Monthly Magazine, Jack Coombes, was savagely bashed then kicked in the head after being knocked to the ground outside his office. He told police his attacker was Carl Rochester, who had become furious during an argument about his refusal to publish a series of letters.

Later the same night, police arrested Carl Rochester, and when Jack Coombes died in hospital, charged Rochester with his murder.

END

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