



Constable John William Clarkson

# KILLED IN THE LINE OF DUTY

*By John Burchill*

*Between Rathwell and Treherne, on Road 43 North, about 115 kilometers south west of Winnipeg is the Woodlands Cemetery. Buried beneath a barely legible headstone, weathered with the passage of time, in section 2, row 10, plot 14, lies John William Clarkson – murdered on duty – November 17, 1905.*

*John William Clarkson's headstone.  
Courtesy of Scott Smart, Woodlands Cemetery.*

**B**efore coming to Canada in May 1904 John had been a member of the 1st Life Guards in England. Originally formed in 1660 as the Horse Guards, the Life Guards are a military unit within the Household Cavalry and is the official bodyguard unit for the King or Queen at Windsor. The troops were reorganized in 1788 into the 1st and 2nd Regiments of Life Guards, and remained as such until 1922, when they were amalgamated into one regiment known as The Life Guards.

Trooper John William Clarkson, 2276, born in Manchester on November 16, 1883 joined the 1st Life Guards on September 18, 1900 during the last year of Queen Victoria's reign. He served the next three years under King Edward VIII before seeking his discharge at Windsor on payment of £18.

His reasons for leaving the 1st Life Guards are unknown, but perhaps seeking greater adventure

within the British Empire John left England in May 1904, traveling to Winnipeg via Quebec City, on board the ship "Dominion". He visited Treherne where he worked for a short time before joining the Winnipeg Police in December 1904. At 6'2", well built and with cavalry experience, he would have been an interesting addition to the growing police force.

Whether it was the rough and tumble Winnipeg lifestyle he didn't like, or a lack of excitement (the Winnipeg Police arrest books show that he only brought in about a dozen drunks while walking the beat), or simply having to start at the bottom after working in the Life Guards, John decided to hang up his Winnipeg uniform in the summer of 1905. He returned to Treherne where he became the town constable, deputy sheriff and deputy bailiff.

I discovered John's murder by accident. I wasn't tipped off by a local historian. I did not find him



*Life Guards on Duty circa 1905. (Under Edward VIII)*

in the Treherne council minutes, all of which were destroyed prior to 1942 by fire and floods anyway, but in the bylines of the Minnedosa Tribune ...

**JACK W. CLARKSON, CONSTABLE OF TREHERNE  
MURDERED EARLY THIS MORNING BY ELI GROBB**

I came looking for Provincial Police officers who had worked the area at the time (none of whom were murdered) for a book I am writing with Jack Templeman, and found John William Clarkson instead ... A town constable who had been gunned down at the age of 26 while serving court documents -- and a former Winnipeg police officer no less.

I had never heard of John William Clarkson. His name is not one of those we recognize every September at the Memorial for Fallen Police and Peace Officers at the Legislative Grounds. Nor does his name appear on the Honour Roll at the Canadian Police and Peace Officer's Memorial in Ottawa.

Perhaps with no family in Canada and little time to establish long lasting relationships, he was taken to his grave by neighbourhood boys who acted

as pallbearers. No family came from his home in Blackpool, England, for his burial however his mother was reportedly present for the special hearings into Grobb's sanity in March 1906.

John had gone to Eli Grobb's farm on November 17, 1905 with Robert McQuaig, County Court Bailiff. Grobb had been delinquent in paying his debts and the two officers had gone to his farm to serve court documents and seize goods under the Seed Grain Mortgage Act. Grobb was not home so McQuaig went to look for him while Clarkson remained behind at the farm. When Grobb returned, finding Clarkson on his property, he wasn't happy with him trespassing and let him have two blasts of "Triple A" shot from his shotgun at close range.

Grobb cleaned his gun, tried to mop up the scene and then loaded Clarkson's body face down into a wheelbarrow, depositing him and the wheelbarrow in the yard near the granary. Grobb then went to Treherne and gave himself up. He admitted to shooting Clarkson, but felt it was justified.



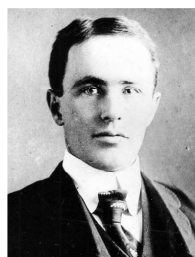
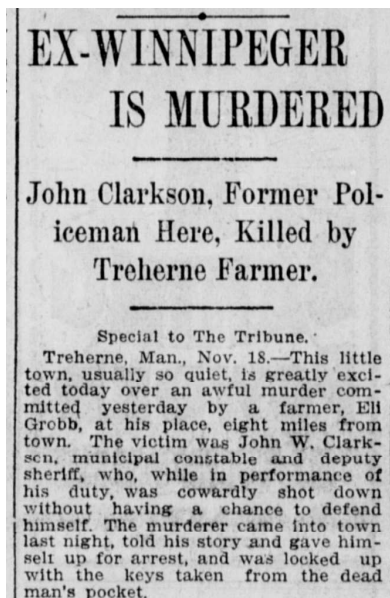
*Treherne 1905. Jury member H.W. Reeves' Shoe Store is in the background.*

The scene was examined by the Coroner, Dr. George (G.W.) Staples, along with William Staples, the local Member of Parliament; and J. Coulter, Justice of the Peace. It was determined that most of the first shot went into the large muscle of the upper arm, breaking the bone. "The second shot, from the choke barrel, which was evidently fired before Clarkson fell, entered the back of the left shoulder blade, behind the arm, tore through his left lung, incinerated the tubes over the heart, lodging in his left lung ... the gun wad was found in the right pleura cavity. [Clarkson] fell just inside the door, killed instantly".

A coroner's jury was empanelled and an inquest held at the Treherne municipal detention house.

The jury members were H.W. Reeves, James Dawson, C. Roux, W.J. Irwin, J.H. Ferguson, W.O. Barkwell, W.J. Scott, J.P. Straube, S. Colvert, D.S. Harvie, and George Gorle. The preliminary hearing was held the following morning and Grobb was bound over for trial. A number of town residents believed that Grobb was insane and expressed remorse – not for Clarkson – but for Grobb's father who was a 'good man' (and whom Eli had apparently tried to kill the year before).

Grobb was taken to Portage la Prairie and held for trial. He was examined by a number of medical doctors over the coming months, some who felt he was insane and others that he was not (split almost evenly between the Crown and defence). At a special hearing to determine his fitness to stand trial before Justice Richards "Dr. Young, medical superintendent of the Selkirk Asylum, and Dr. James Patterson, of Winnipeg, testified that in their opinion the prisoner was insane, while Dr. Anderson, superintendent of



*Arthur Meighen,  
Grobb's Defence  
Attorney and  
future Prime  
Minister of Canada*

of September 24, 1906, the Court of Appeal found that the issue of sanity would be an open one in the discretion of the trial Judge and the matter proceeded to trial in October.<sup>1</sup>

The trial was overseen by Justice William Perdue, Justice Richards having been promoted to the Court of Appeal on July 23, 1906 (Perdue would be appointed to the Court of Appeal himself a few months later). The Crown was represented by Mr. Edward Anderson and the defence by Arthur Meighen, future Member of Parliament for Portage la Prairie (1908-1921, 1926) and Prime Minister of Canada (1920-1921, 1926).

On November 2, 1906, after hearing all the evidence and all the experts, the jury found that Grobb was not guilty by reason of insanity. He was spared the death penalty and he was sentenced by Justice Perdue to an indefinite period to be served at the pleasure of the Crown.

When I looked further, the murder and trial were well covered in the local newspapers. However, without a local police force in Treherne to remind us of Clarkson's murder, it became lost with the passage of time. He gave his life for King and Country, lest we forget.

the Brandon Asylum, Dr. Keele and Dr. Gordon, of Portage la Prairie, testified that they believed him to be sane". On March 15, 1906 the special jury subsequently found Grobb fit to stand trial for murder.

However the jury's decision was appealed to the newly created Court of Appeal (formed July 23, 1906) as Dr. G.W. Staples, of Treherne, who was called as a general witness by the Crown, also expressed his personal opinion that Grobb was sane. As Staples was not speaking as an expert, the issue was if his opinion may have tainted the jury. In its decision

1. *R. v. Grobb (1906), 17 Man.R. 191, 13 C.C.C. 92*