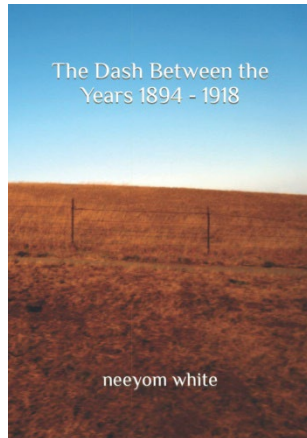


The Dash Between the Years 1894 – 1918

By: Neeyom White

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We've often looked at the headstones of the dead; those markers etched with someone's name and the years within which they existed. But what happened between the year of their birth and the year of their death – "*the dash between the years*"?

Neeyom White looks at the short life of Thomas Fletcher between the years of 1894 and 1918. The dash between those years contains the story of an unwanted and orphaned child from Wolverhampton who sought a new lease on life in the small community of Carberry, Manitoba. It is the story of death and betrayal, unrequited love and murder, and the impact he had on the lives of many of the community's residents.

Thomas Hubert Fletcher originally came to Canada as one of the thousands of home children to arrive here between 1869 and 1932. He had been sponsored by the Salvation Army and placed as a farmhand with Simon Spence and his family in Carberry. Thomas formed a close relationship with his new family until they took in 9-year-old Gordon Rasmussen in the fall of 1916 after his father had passed away and his mother could no longer care for him and his six siblings.

Feeling displaced, jealousy slowly overtook Thomas, and on April 14, 1917, he took young Gordon rabbit hunting. As they entered an isolated bush, Thomas raised his rifle and killed the younger boy. Thomas returned to the farm alone and confessed to killing Gordon but indicated it had been an accident. Gordon would later tell Major Ernest Simms of the Salvation Army that he had planned on killing the entire Spence family, except their 15-year-old daughter, with whom he was in love.

Throughout the book, we meet many Carberry residents, from Alexander McMaster and Carlyle Humeston, the provincial constables who arrested Thomas; Doctors Reuben Waugh and Alexander Lawson, who examined Gordon's body; Joseph Paynter who photographed the evidence of the crime; to Prosecutor William Card and Magistrate Wilfred Balfour, who committed Thomas to stand trial in Portage la Prairie.



While awaiting trial, Thomas escaped from the Portage la Prairie Jail, but with no plan or family to connect with, he was quickly recaptured by the police. Thomas's trial ran during the week of November 20, 1917, in Portage la Prairie. He was represented by Carberry lawyer Harold Hooper, who maintained that Thomas had accidentally killed Gordon. However, the Crown successfully argued it was a case of premeditated murder committed out of jealousy. The jury agreed, and Justice Daniel Alexander Macdonald sentenced Thomas to death by hanging in the yard at the Portage la Prairie Jail.

At 8:05 a.m. on February 26, 1918, Thomas went to the gallows in Portage. However, the executioner recruited by Sheriff Robert Home miscalculated the length of rope necessary for the hanging, and Thomas ended up landing on the floor of the gallows. Although his neck was broken, it was another 34 minutes before his heart stopped beating.



Carlyle Humeston

After Thomas' body was taken down, it was buried in an unmarked grave at the southwest corner of the Portage la Prairie Jail yard as required by Canadian criminal law. He was buried near John Baran, who was executed in 1913 for the murder of provincial police officer Charles Rooke, and Tymko Nackonyshyn, who was hung in 1916 for the murder of Paul Jura.

At the time of the murder Carberry was a prosperous town that had become an important agricultural supply centre in southwestern Manitoba. Although serious crime was rare, none of the history books available on Carberry talk about the murder of Gordon Rasmussen. As a result this book fills in a gap between the years about Carberry itself.

While the book is written in the style of a novel, the author had access to the evidence and transcripts from Thomas' trial in Portage la Prairie. In addition to newspaper clippings and her own family records about life in Carberry, she connected with Gordon Rasmussen's extended family during her research.

Neyyom White (a *nom de plume*) is the granddaughter of Carlyle Humeston, one of the constables who investigated the murder. I had the good fortune of connecting with Neyyom during my research for a book on the Manitoba Provincial Police.

John Burchill, President
Winnipeg Police Museum