

Roger Tichborne

Have you hear about The Great Tichborne Trial? It is possibly the most famous event ever connected with Wagga. It put Wagga on the world map in the late 1800s when a Wagga butcher named Tom Castro, claimed he was the long lost Sir Roger Tichborne, heir to a large fortune in Hampshire, England.



Ten Titillating Tichborne Tidbits

1. The Claimant's Defence Counsel, Irishman Edward Vaughan Hyde Kenealy, was disbarred following the Criminal Trial which ended when his client was jailed for perjury. Kenealy modestly believed that he was the "Twelfth Messenger" of God, in a line that began with Adam and included Jesus, Mohammed and Genghis Khan!

2. Cheap figurines were manufactured for sale during the Trials using materials ranging from painted and unpainted plaster, earthenware and terracotta. For the wealthier collector, china and porcelain statuettes were created. 19th century children's author Randolph Caldecott designed a very special set of figurines (probably as a one-off creation). His group of figurines all sported the heads of animals - Judge, Lord Chief Justice Cockburn and Justices Mellor and Lush are owls; the Claimant is a turtle and Mr Hawkins and Dr Kenealy a hawk and cock respectively.

3. At least 20 novels have been based on the Tichborne affair. Author Lewis Carroll followed the Trial with great interest, recording in his diary on 28 February 1874, the final verdict of guilty and the Claimant's sentence of 14 years for perjury. Nonsense writer Edward Lear also commented (in letters) about the Tichborne case, and was convinced that the Claimant was in reality Sir Roger. Lear felt that he was subjected to indecent bullying by the Court, and wondered how 'old people' were expected to recollect infinite dates?

4. The Tichborne Trials have even influenced modern popular culture. The Simpson's episode The Principal and the Pauper is based upon the Tichborne story.

5. The Claimant happily sat for Madame Tussaud as she sculpted his likeness in wax for inclusion in her London Waxworks. He even provided a set of his own clothes for the finished model to be dressed in. When it was displayed, the public's desire to see it was such that it was one of the first occasions when a queue extended out the front doors of the museum. The Claimant had a second likeness made after his release from prison in 1884 - in 1920 John Theodore Tussaud reminisced the Claimant's "ponderous bulk was so reduced by prison fare that we should not have known him."

6. Castro's first wife, Mary Ann (nee Bryant), once claimed that she would rather prefer the life of a vagrant to living with her former husband, who was a terrible drunk. Mary was disowned by her eldest daughter, and ended up working as a member of staff in the Southampton workhouse where she assisted female tramps take a bath. She remained in the workhouse until her death in 1926, still insisting she be called Lady Tichborne, but was often addressed as 'Mrs T.'

7. One of Victorian England's greatest painters, Walter Sickert (1860-1942) met the Claimant when the latter was appearing as a music hall performer (following his 1884 release from Dartmoor Prison). Sickert was fascinated by criminal mysteries, and was so obsessed with the Tichborne case that in 1930, he executed a painting of the Claimant. Sickert also started writing a book on the subject, but unfortunately, this was never published.

8. The Tichborne Claimant was convicted of two counts of perjury, but originally there were approximately 30 levelled against him.

9. The Tichborne Trials (and perceived persecution of poor Tom Castro) became a focus for many radical causes, including demands for triennial parliaments, opposition to the income tax, and even votes for women. Even after the Claimant's death, his cause lived on - with one of his daughters trying to shoot Joseph Tichborne on his wedding day!

10. One of the most important people to identify the Claimant prior to the Trials taking place was one of the Tichborne family's physicians, Dr. Lipscombe. He declared he found present every known scar, blemish, tattoo and defect he had seen prior to Roger's departure for South America. Interestingly both the Claimant and Tichborne shared a very rare genital abnormality.

Written by Michelle Maddison, Curator of the Museum of the Riverina, 2008