

## The Devil Visits Drummond Township Canada's First Mass Murder

At about 3:00 a.m. on the cold morning of Wednesday, December 10, 1828, John Tullis (1777-1832), who lived with his wife Margaret Jamieson (1777-1851) and their eight children on a farm at Drummond C-9/L-3(E)<sup>1</sup>, about a mile north of the village of Balderson's Corners, was awakened by distant shouts. His wife then saw an orange glow emanating from the shanty of their neighbor Thomas Easby on Drummond C-9/L-3(W). The Easby cabin was on fire and the Tullis' teenage sons John Jr. (1809-1885) and Sinclair (1811-1893) immediately ran across the intervening clearing to lend whatever assistance they could.

John Tullis Jr. later<sup>2</sup> recounted that as he approached the door of the cabin Easby called out "*Who comes there*". The Tullis boys identified themselves, saying they had come to help, but Easby told them he had "*mastered the fire himself*". The boys offered to remain at hand should there be a flare-up, but Easby told them that "*no danger could possibly arise as he meant to sit up till morning*" and they should go home.

At about dawn, John Tullis Jr. again saw flickering light in the shanty. Running back to the Easby property he found Easby "*sitting by the fire, who told him that his family had burnt to death, except the youngest child*". At the same time, "*Tullis heard a groan in the cellar, and observed to Easby that they were not all dead yet*", but Easby told him that "*they had all been dead for some hours*".

In the retelling of the tale over nearly two centuries most accounts have it that the Easby shanty was burned to the ground and completely destroyed. In fact the fire was brought under control and the cabin was still standing when the Tullis boys offered assistance at 3:00 a.m. and again at dawn (and indeed months later). When a Coroner's Inquest was convened the following day Thomas Easby testified that he had been;

*... started from sleep, being nearly suffocated with smoke, and perceived that the straw bed, opposite the fire, on which his wife and four children lay, was in a blaze. He immediately flew to the door and having opened it, the free circulation given to the air made the flames rise higher. When the door opened, he perceived his wife raise herself out of the flame, but she instantly tumbled back again. He then took hold of the bed with the intention of pulling it out the door; but the floor, which was loosely laid with short pieces of split bass wood, gave way, and they all tumbled into the cellar. He then flung water on the bed till he extinguished the fire. During the whole proceeding, no symptoms of life were shown by any of them except the one effort of the unfortunate mother.<sup>3</sup>*

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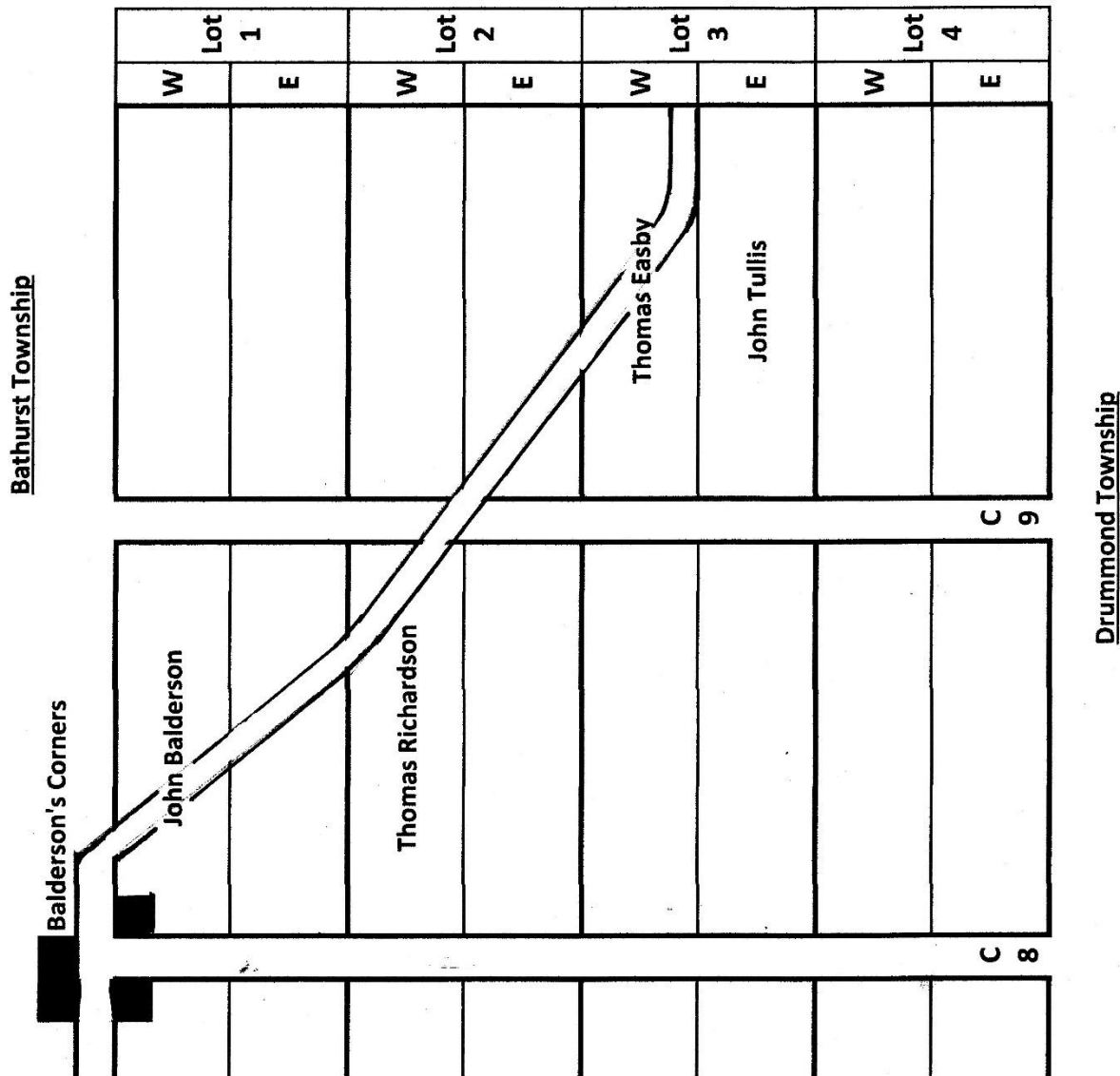
<sup>1</sup> John Tullis and his family arrived with the Lanark Society Settlers as members of the Hamilton Emigration Society via the Ship *Commerce* in 1821 and located on Dalhousie C-6/L-1(W). That property proved a particularly bad piece of land and in 1822 he purchased and moved to Drummond Township C-9/L-3(NE).

<sup>2</sup> Coroner's Inquest of February 12, 1829

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

The Coroner recorded that the bodies of Ann Easby and four of her children<sup>4</sup>, “were shockingly scorched, the bed and blankets were nearly all consumed [but] the shanty was not burned”. Thomas Easby and one son, four-year-old Joseph Easby, survived uninjured.

“Shockingly scorched” as they were, it would seem that the bodies were not carefully examined by the Coroner. A verdict of accidental death was returned and the bodies taken to Perth where, on Friday, December 12, 1828, two days after the fire, they were buried in the Old Burying Ground (Craig Street Cemetery). The funeral service was conducted by Anglican Reverend Michael Harris who “delivered a most eloquent and impressive sermon on the awfully melancholy occasion”.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>4</sup> The given names of Mrs. Easby and the four children are unknown.

<sup>5</sup> *Quebec Gazette*, January 1, 1829 – Reprinting a report from the *Perth Independent Examiner*

The Easby family's resident status on Drummond C-9/L-3(W) is not clear. A Perth Military Settlement Location Ticket was first issued for that property to Private John Southwell of the 76<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot in July 1816. Like more than half of the soldier-settlers, Southwell abandoned his land without completing settlement duties and it was re-ticketed to civilian immigrant Joseph F. Pitt<sup>6</sup> in August 1821. Pitt does not appear to have had any more success as a pioneer farmer than Southwell however. Available records indicate that title to Drummond C-9/L-3(W) remained with the Crown until purchased by William F. Craig in April 1873. Thomas Easby may have been renting from Pitt or he may have been squatting on Crown Land.

Following the funerals, widower Thomas Easby stayed for a time in Bytown and then returned to his still habitable cabin near Balderson's Corners. The next chapter of the tale has several slightly differing versions.

Most accounts say that the surviving child, Joseph Easby, was taken in by neighbors Thomas and Martha Richardson<sup>7</sup> who lived nearby at Drummond Township C-8/L-2(W).

Mrs. Richardson overheard Joseph "*mumbling to himself about Daddy hitting mommy with an axe*".<sup>8</sup>

When Mrs. Richardson was building a fire under a soap kettle, the child remarked "*That is what daddy did to mommy*".<sup>9</sup>

Upon seeing his foster family building a fire, Joseph exclaimed "*That was what Daddy did to Mammy!*"<sup>10</sup>

The little child "*began singing and muttering to itself how his daddy had hit mammy*".<sup>11</sup>

Joseph would "*often talk it over to himself when no one appeared to be listening – point to the spade – tell how his father struck his mother with such an instrument, show how he flung coals among them to burn them*".<sup>12</sup>

While some of the Richardson boys were cutting wood "*the little fellow picked up a club and in handling it talked after this style: 'This is the way my daddy done my mammy; this is the way daddy done to ...', mentioning each of the children*".<sup>13</sup>

In another telling the little boy was placed in the care of a 'Mrs. Matheson', apparently the wife of Deputy Sheriff and Coroner William Matheson.

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<sup>6</sup> Later documents give the name as Joseph T. Pitt.

<sup>7</sup> Englishman Thomas Richardson, with a wife, a son and two daughters, arrived in Canada in June 1816 via the ship *Fame* and was issued a location ticket for Drummond C-8/L-2(W) on July 19, 1816.

<sup>8</sup> *History of the Township of Drummond* - John C. Ebbs (1999) ISBN 1-894263-14-6

<sup>9</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 4, 1895

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopedia of Mass Murder: A Chilling Account of the World's Worst Cases* - Lane & Gregg (2004)

<sup>11</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 30, 1905

<sup>12</sup> *Quebec Gazette*, 19 Feb 1829 – Reprinting a report from the *Perth Independent Examiner*

<sup>13</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 8, 1895 – Letter to the editor signed 'M'

*Easby had murdered his wife and children and then set fire to the building. The little boy took alarm and hid himself under an outbuilding or he would have shared the same fate. Easby's story of accidental firing was accepted at first, the little boy was taken charge of by Mrs. William Matheson of Perth, and Easby went to Bytown. Shortly afterward as the little boy was playing in a room in which Mrs. Matheson was reclining in rest, he took a small stick of wood from the fire and attempted to set fire to her clothing. Having been chided for doing so he innocently said that that was what his father did ...<sup>14</sup>*

The details vary, but that a traumatized Joseph Easby behaved and spoke in such a way as to raise concerns in the mind of his foster mother is not in doubt. *"At first she [Mrs. Richardson] did not suspect Easby [but] the child's prattle worried her, and she finally consulted their neighbor John Balderson regarding her fears"*<sup>15</sup>. John Balderson (1784-1852)<sup>16</sup>, living nearby at Drummond C-8/L-1(SW), was a Bathurst District Magistrate (Justice of the Peace) and his suspicions were raised by the story. On Monday, February 10, 1829, Balderson called Coroner William Matheson (1778-1852)<sup>17</sup> back to the scene.

*Accompanied by two Magistrates, and a medical gentleman, he [Matheson] proceeded to the hut where Easby has resided alone since the interment of his family. After inspecting the hut, perceiving no injury done to it [damage from the fire was minimal], and hearing some additional testimony, being fully satisfied, that all could not have occurred as stated by Easby before the inquest, he thought fit to commit him for further examination.*

*On the following day all the five bodies were disinterred, and carried to the Court House, where they were minutely examined by all the medical men of the town<sup>18</sup>, in the presence of a numerous assembly, whom the alarm had collected. Such barbarous and brutal marks of violence were on the bodies of all, as brought full conviction to the minds of the medical gentlemen, that they were all murdered.*

*The woman's head was cut in five different parts and the hinder parts of the skull was all broken to mortar. The bodies of the four children bore similar marks of inhuman treatment. The skulls were fractured, and various wounds inflicted on the fleshy parts.<sup>19</sup>*

Although it is not mentioned in either of the Coroner's reports or in trial testimony, several secondary sources state that Ann Easby was pregnant at the time of her death. If so that may have been discovered at the time of the February 12<sup>th</sup> autopsy, and thus increased the number of victims from five to six.

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<sup>14</sup> *Perth Courier*, February 12, 1929.

<sup>15</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 4, 1895 – 'The Thomas Easby Murders in 1829 Foulest Ever in Lanark County'

<sup>16</sup> Soldier-settler John Balderson, a former Sergeant of the 76<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, was issued a Location Ticket for Drummond C-8/L-1(SW) on July 18, 1816.

<sup>17</sup> William Matheson was, at various times in his life, Coroner, Bathurst Deputy Sheriff, Jailer, Drummond Township Collector of Taxes, Street Surveyor for Perth, Pound Keeper, Hotel and Tavern Keeper and auctioneer.

<sup>18</sup> Probably Dr. Alexander Thom (1775-1845), Dr. James Wilson (1798-1881) and Apothecary George Hume Reade (1793-1854).

<sup>19</sup> *Quebec Gazette*, February 19, 1829 – Reprinting a report from the *Perth Independent Examiner*

*Thomas Easby was brought from his cell to view the bodies of his family; and, while the feelings of all around were agitated at the dreadful scene, he alone betrayed few symptoms of emotion or concern. On being asked to handle the fractured skull, he did so with apparent reluctance. When asked how he could account for such and such wounds, his reply was that he did not know.*<sup>20</sup>

Easby was returned to his jail cell and charged with murder; but with only a single count, that of his wife, Ann Easby. With no sense of pre-judgement or concern for poisoning the jury pool, the *Bathurst Independent Examiner* opined that;

*We will not say anything to harrow up feelings which must be already goaded to the quick. A few months and he must appear before the tribunal of this fellow mortals to satisfy the justice of his country, and finally before a Judge to whom the secrets of every heart and the motives of every action are known, who will award him his portion with unerring certainty. From man he can expect no mercy, but we cannot set limits to the mercy of Omnipotence, neither is it our part to draw aside the veil which conceals futurity from human ken.*

Although he had told the December 1828 inquest that the death of his family was an accident, arising from their straw mattress catching alight from the fireplace, and had told the February 1829 inquest that he could not account for the wounds found on the bodies of his wife and children, during his incarceration Thomas Easby confessed. Sometime in the spring of 1829 he admitted to Magistrate John Balderson and to jailer James Young that;

*... he killed them all with a huge club, and afterwards the straw in the shanty caught fire which scorched the bodies, that he had no motives under the heavens for doing it, that he had it in his mind for a month before he committed the deed, and that the Devil spurred him on so that he could not avoid it.*<sup>21</sup>

On August 17, 1829, the Bathurst District Assizes convened at Perth before Justice Levisus Peters Sherwood (1777-1850). Thomas Easby was brought to trial on Friday August 21<sup>st</sup>. The accused pleaded not guilty but testified that *"he must have been under the influence of insanity at the time"*.<sup>22</sup>

The trial took less than a day. *"The jury had little difficulty in reaching a verdict. They returned from the jury room in a matter of minutes and the foreman intoned guilty"*.<sup>23</sup> Justice Sherwood immediately sentenced Easby to death.

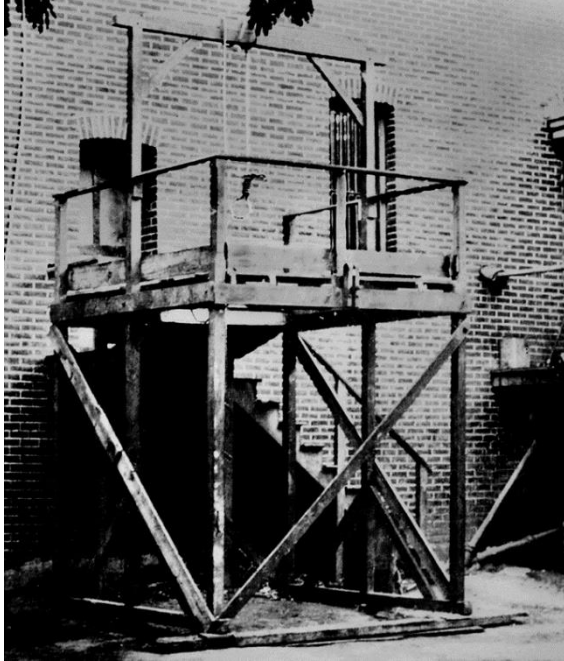
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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Lanark Legacy: Nineteenth Century Glimpses of an Ontario County* - Howard Morton Brown

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



At about mid-day the following Monday, August 24, 1829, Thomas Easby mounted a scaffold erected in front of the Bathurst District Jail, his arms bound and his face hooded. Asked if he had a final statement, he replied "*Justice has been done*".<sup>24</sup> The trap was sprung and Thomas Easby dangled in front of "*the greatest multitude of spectators that has perhaps ever been assembled at Perth*".<sup>25</sup> The event was the first execution in the short history of the Perth Settlement.<sup>26</sup>

*The day was a public holiday. Schools were closed, work of all kinds suspended, and settlers came from all parts of the District, bringing with them their families to witness an event which it was hoped would have a great moral influence on the community. The scaffold in this case was erected in front of the Court House and the roadway and every point of vantage was at a decided premium for hours before the time of execution.*<sup>27</sup>

During the six months Easby spent in the Perth lock up he seems to have eaten like his every meal was his last. By the time he mounted the scaffold in mid-August he is reported to have expanded to a remarkable bulk. In his diary, Reverend William Bell noted;

*Easby, the murderer of his wife and children, was hanged in front of the jail and courthouse. Never did I see a criminal discover less contrition for his offence. He grew as fat as a pig during his confinement.*

Although the tale may sound legendary, even contemporary accounts relate that the remains of Thomas Easby met a rather barbaric fate. The *Perth Independent Examiner* reported that;

*.... the body of this felon had been buried in the English Church Cemetery<sup>28</sup> but owing to the excitement and strong feeling evinced by the crowd which witnessed the execution, and the fear of reprisals, the remains were exhumed that night and handed over to Dr. Wilson and two medical students for dissection. They first skinned the body and the hide was tanned in a local tannery and cut up into small squares which were sold to the public bringing as much as \$2.<sup>29</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> *Rampage: Canadian Mass Murder and Spree Killing* – Lee Mellor (2013) ISBN 978-14597-0722-1

<sup>25</sup> *Brockville Gazette*, August 1829

<sup>26</sup> There had been one prior murder in 1821, but as the Perth Settlement still lay in the former Johnstown District the perpetrator, Michael O'Connor, was tried and executed at the Johnstown District seat in Brockville. The Bathurst/Lanark County Court House would be the scene of two more executions for murder; those of Francis Beare in 1851 and Rufus Weedmark in 1910. Canada ended capital punishment in 1976.

<sup>27</sup> 'Early Legal History of Bathurst District and Lanark County' - Undated, unsigned typescript, Perth Historical and Antiquarian Society c1898.

<sup>28</sup> In 1829 the 'English Church Cemetery' was a section of the Craig Street Cemetery.

<sup>29</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 4, 1895 – 'The Thomas Easby Murders in 1829 Foulest Ever in Lanark County' – Quoting the *Perth Independent Examiner*.

With some embellishment over the years the same story is repeated in later accounts from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1905 and 1962), no doubt the latter drawing upon the former;

*... the late Dr. Wilson secured the body and that the skin was taken from it and tanned, and I understand at the show of curios in Perth a few years ago a strip of this tanned skin was exhibited. The skeleton remained in the possession of Dr. Wilson till after his death and is, we believe, at present in the possession of a Perth boy in the far West.*<sup>30</sup>

*They took his body (Dr. James Wilson led the pack), skinned it, tanned the hide and exhibited the produce at the Perth Fair several years later. The murderer's skeleton went west with a Perth boy, old chronicles say.*<sup>31</sup>

The *Brockville Gazette* of August 1829 more laconically reported; “*We understand the body was given to the Surgeon for dissection*”.<sup>32</sup> That Easby's body was indeed turned over to Dr. James Wilson can be in little doubt. At the time medical schools and Doctors training interns were commonly provided the bodies of executed felons for use as instruction cadavers. In 1829 Dr. Wilson had two medical students under his instruction, William Tayler (1814-1846), son of Josias Tayler (1787-1844) the local Postmaster, and Alexander Cameron (1801-1835), brother of Malcolm Cameron (1808-1876) with whom he would found the *Bathurst Courier* in 1834. Tanning and selling the skin of such cadavers, however, was a bit of a departure from standard practice.

The 1828 events on the Easby farm place Drummond Township and Balderson at the top of a macabre list. According to Brockville author Lee Mellor, writing in *Rampage: Canadian Mass Murder and Spree Killing*<sup>33</sup> the Easby deaths represent Canada's “*first mass murder*”. To that dubious ‘honor’ is added the fact that Drummond Township was also the locale for the first murder of any kind at the Perth Military Settlement. Seven years earlier, in 1821, as the upshot of a religious argument, Michael O'Connor shot and killed his servant James Porter at the O'Connor shanty on Drummond C-2/L-11(E).

When Thomas Easby was executed, leaving his only surviving child, four-year-old Joseph, an orphan, William Morris (1786-1858), a prominent Perth merchant, then serving as Bathurst District representative in the Upper Canada Legislative Assembly, stepped forward. While attending sessions of the Assembly at Toronto, Morris was in the habit of lodging with one John Hay and prevailed upon the childless Hay and his wife to adopt<sup>34</sup> Joseph Easby. Joseph grew up in the Hay home in Toronto.

*Hay and his wife were extremely kind to the boy, and they did not expect or receive any compensation for their care of him. Their care and kindness were extended to him as long as he chose to remain with them and till he was old enough to earn something for himself.*<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 30, 1905

<sup>31</sup> *Perth Courier*, September 20, 1962 – ‘Balderson Was Once Known As Clarksville’

<sup>32</sup> *Brockville Gazette*, August 1829

<sup>33</sup> *Rampage: Canadian Mass Murder and Spree Killing* – by Lee Mellor (2013) ISBN 978-14597-0722-1

<sup>34</sup> The arrangement was actually informal as there was no legal framework for adoption in the Canadas at the time.

<sup>35</sup> Letter of January 27, 1857 from Archibald McLean, then member of the Upper Canada Legislative Council and Speaker of the House, to Toronto lawyer E. C. Jones, then Reporter to the Court of Common Pleas, concerning the estate of Joseph Easby.

But even the story of the last surviving Easby ended in tragedy. Joseph Easby fell off a schooner and drowned in Toronto Harbour in 1856.<sup>36</sup> He was 32 years of age and was unmarried.<sup>37</sup>

- **Ron W. Shaw (2016)**

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> In 1903 Robert Lorne Richardson (1860-1921), grandson of Thomas and Martha Richardson who had first sheltered surviving child Joseph Easby, published a novel entitled *Colin of the Ninth Concession*. Purported to be based upon the Easby murders there are actually very few similarities between that novel and the facts of the case.