

The death penalty

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The last execution in New Zealand: Walter Bolton, 18 February 1957

Walter Bolton was the last person to be executed in New Zealand when he was convicted of poisoning his wife Beatrice. He was hanged for her murder at Mount Eden prison. The death penalty for murder was abolished in New Zealand in 1961, and there were claims that this was due partly to the circumstances surrounding Bolton's case.

Bolton's execution raised the usual questions about the death penalty. Some people believed that capital punishment was legalised murder and that it was morally wrong to take another human's life in this way. Others opposed capital punishment on religious grounds or on the grounds that mistakes were made.

Traces of arsenic had been found in small doses in Beatrice's tea. The quantity consumed over the best part of a year was enough to kill her. Water on the Bolton's farm was tested and found to contain arsenic, and traces of arsenic were also found in Walter and one of his daughters. The defence argued that sheep dip had inadvertently got into the farm's water supply. The prosecution's case was strengthened by evidence that Bolton had admitted to having had an affair with his wife's sister, Florence. The idea that Beatrice's death was a result of accidental poisoning lost credibility. After deliberating for two hours and ten minutes, the jury returned a guilty verdict. When the judge asked Bolton why there was any reason he shouldn't pronounce the death sentence, Walter Bolton replied, 'I plead not guilty, sir.'

A newspaper story later claimed that Bolton's execution had gone horribly wrong. This highlighted another concern of opponents of the death penalty – that executions were cruel and inhumane. Rather than having his neck broken the instant the trapdoor opened, Bolton, allegedly, slowly strangled to death. There is, of course, no turning back after an execution if it is subsequently proven that a person was innocent of the crime – and there are some who still claim that Bolton was an innocent man. What if an innocent man had been so cruelly killed on behalf of the people of New Zealand?

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