

EXTRACT FROM
'THE ERA' (London England)
Sunday August 3, 1856

**ASSIZE INTELLIGENCE - Western Circuit – Bodmin
THE MURDER OF SERGEANT-MAJOR ROBINSON**

William Nevin, aged forty-four, late a corporal of the East India Company's service was charged with the wilful murder of Sergeant-Major Benjamin Robinson. The particulars of this cold-blooded murder may be stated as follows:- the scene was on board the hired convict ship *Runnymede*. The vessel, on the 1st June last was lying at Plymouth, and was bound on a voyage to Swan River, Western Australia with upwards of 250 convicts. With the purpose of saving expense, and a view to peopling the colonies, the Government for a few years past, has entrusted the safe keeping of the convicts outbound to discharged soldiers of the army, a non-commissioned officer, in all cases, taking command (who is subject, however, to the rules of the surgeon) and, in order that the guard might remain in the colonies, the men are allowed to take their families free of expense, and are expected to permanently remain there, receiving their pensions as if remaining in their native country.

In the present case, the guard was selected from Dartmoor, by Major Russell, staff officer of pensioners at Plymouth. The guard numbered thirty men and was under the command of the deceased who was late of the 74th Regiment. He was stated to be a good, efficient officer, about forty-six years of age, and from his long service he was selected to take command. He was deliberately shot by the prisoner on the afternoon of the 1st of June. At 3 o'clock of the afternoon he was on the poop of the ship, and whilst inspecting a firelock belonging to one of the men, the prisoner ascended the poop, and within a few yards of the deceased, discharged his loaded musket, killing the sergeant-major almost instantaneously. The only words he uttered were, "Oh God. I am shot!. Oh God, I am dead!" Nevin was immediately apprehended; and he had voluntarily said: "If he had done

it, he had been driven to it." It appeared the deceased had occasion to remonstrate with the prisoner for non-attention to his duties. This was whilst they were at Dartmoor. One of the witnesses, named Fenton Kenner, stated in his evidence that he heard the prisoner distinctly say at Dartmoor, after the deceased had remonstrated with him "That if he (the deceased) found fault with him again, he would put a bullet in his gun and blow his brains out." After the committal of the murder the prison said to Inspector Damerell, "If I did do it, it was an accident. I did not know my gun went off. It caught in the hen coop and went off by accident, but he (meaning deceased) had threatened to take away my pension. At the time this occurred I was not right, and at certain times I do not know what I do." At the conclusion of his lordship's summing up, the prisoner was somewhat tremulous, and apparently his anxiety had greatly increased since the commencement of the trial. The jury retired and was only absent about ten minutes, they returned into court, and on being asked in the usual form by the Clerk of the Arraigns, amidst the most solemn silence, whether they found the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty? The foreman replied "Guilty". The prisoner immediately looked upwards, clasping his hand together, uttered some words apparently of prayer, and just afterwards audibly breathed the words, "Lord have mercy on me". His lordship, amongst much mental emotion, proceeded to pass sentence. He said: William Nevin, you have been found guilty, after a lengthened trial, of the high offence of willful murder, It is my duty to say I quite concur in that verdict. I do not see how any other verdict could be returned. The learned judge then passed sentence in the usual form, and on coming to the words, "and may the Lord have mercy on your soul," his voice faltered, and it was with considerable difficulty his lordship completed

the sentence. The prisoner again clasped his hands and uttered the words "Lord have mercy on my soul". He was then removed from the dock.

The Convict Nevan.

William Nevan who was convicted of the murder of Benjamin Robinson, a sergeant in the Marines, at Saltash, at the recent Bodmin Assizes appears to be aware of the awful position in which he is placed, and appears to be conscious of his approaching fate.

He is a Roman Catholic, and since his condemnation, he has been daily visited by the Rev. Mr. Shortland, a priest of that Church. His demeanor is that of a meek and sorrowful penitent. He refers occasionally to his past life, and has openly confessed to the act of which he was found guilty. The other day he had an interview with his wife and four children, and the scene is described as most affecting. There appears to be no prospect of a reprieve, and it is therefore expected that he will undergo the extreme penalty of the law, this day (Monday) in front of Bodmin jail - Times.

With thanks to Joan Proud for the information and references.

Jean McDonald

Footnote: *The inquest was held on board the 'Runnymede' convict ship in the Sound, Plymouth on the body of Sergeant-Major Benjamin Robinson. The jury was selected from the crew of the vessel, and after brief charge from Mr. W. Rundle, the coroner of Saltash, then proceeded to view the body. On their return to court the following evidence was adduced.-*

Fenton Kenner said: I am a pensioner of the 56th Foot doing duty as guard on board the Runnymede convict ship. About three o'clock on Sunday afternoon I was sitting on the main deck when I heard the deceased (Sergeant-Major Robinson) call out for Corporal Nevin.

[It appears that some five month prior to the shooting, William Nevin had been on parade and was reprimanded by Sergeant Major Robinson for being dirty, did not have his

appointments, and that he was not to come on parade like it again. The Sergeant Major told Nevin he was more like a militiaman coming on duty than like a soldier. Nevin had mentioned that since he had come onboard ship, he had been put upon and drove about.]

Extract from "Glasgow Herald" Wednesday August 13th 1856.