

From the Wakatip Mail 6th July, 1876

A few years ago I was researching the death records in the Queenstown Court and came across the death of John McBride. It was the cause of death that made me sit up: Visitation by God. My imagination took flight. How did they know? Was there a bright light coming from his bedroom? Was there a heavenly choir? Did he leave a note?

To whom it may concern,

I have got God visiting at the moment and it is not going at all well. I thought you should know.

*Yours Faithfully,
John McBride*

Since then I have come across a report on the Coroner's Hearing in which all was revealed. At that time the Coroner was assisted by a jury, in this case twelve men but at times as few as four.

"An inquisition was held on Saturday at the Harp of Erin Hotel (the residence of deceased), before R. Beetham, Esq, coroner, and a jury of twelve (Mr J.F.Tully, foreman), touching the death of Mr John McBride. The following evidence was given:

Patrick Butler, being sworn, deposed – I am a boot maker, residing at Queenstown. I was in company with the deceased, John McBride, yesterday about noon. He complained of a great soreness; he said he felt as if wind was being blown up through his body; I asked him if he would have a doctor, and he said there was no need; I went and obtained a bottle of pain killer which was rubbed on his neck which he complained of being sore. I then left him and saw him again about half past 10pm. He seemed better then, and said he felt better. He said he had been sweating since 8pm. About twenty minutes to eleven he said that if he got up he thought he could scarcely stand., that he was frightened of taking anything after sweating. Mrs McBride asked him if she should get him some brandy and water. He said he would like a drink of something milder. Mrs McBride brought in a glass of port wine for the deceased and one for me. I don't know if he tasted. As I was sitting alongside the bed I heard a noise as of some one hurt. He then laid down and his eyes became staring. Mrs McBride and I bathed his hands with cold water and spoke to him but he did not answer. Then some one went for Dr. Jackson. I returned to the deceased. He was still alive. I stayed till the doctor came.

Carl Nelson, sworn, deposed- I am a Wardsman in the Wakatip Hospital. I saw McBride last alive between 4 and 5 o'clock yesterday morning. I called at McBride's and Mrs McBride told me that her husband was in bed ill. I saw him in his room and asked him what was the matter with him. He said he had caught a severe cold and had not been well for some days. Said he felt a pain through his body and a severe headache. I asked him if his bowels had been moved. He said he had taken some Holloway's pills, which had acted on the bowels. I told him that as the doctor was not coming in that night I would procure a powder for him at Hotop's. I went to Hotop's and got a Dovers powder – 12 grains. I told Mrs McBride to administer it in some hot grog. I also told her to put plenty of blankets on him so as to produce perspiration. Then I left. He complained about stiffness in the back of the neck. He did not ask me to prescribe for him. I offered to do so. I never prescribed for him before. I do not often prescribe for patients. I am a duly qualified chemist.

Lewis Hotop, sworn, deposed – I am a chemist residing in Queenstown. I have seen the body of the deceased. I remember the last witness, Nelson, asking for a Dovers powder for the deceased. I gave him a twelve-grain powder. Dovers' powder is a sedative or a narcotic. The deceased had frequently had the same powder before prescribed by medical men.

Michael J. Malaghan, sworn, deposed – I am a merchant residing at Queenstown. I went to the house of the deceased last evening. The deceased was dead when I went in. Dr Jackson, Father McKay, Mrs McBride and Mrs Crawford were present. I asked if it was true that John was dead. Father McKay said "Not quite, but very near". I then felt his pulse became of the opinion that he was dead.

Dr Cecil Jackson, sworn, deposed – I am a duly qualified medical man residing in Queenstown. I have heard the evidence given during this inquest. About 11 o'clock last night I was called to see McBride, the deceased. The man who spoke to me said he was lying in a fit. I went and found him lying in his bed. I saw at a glance that he was dead, but to satisfy myself I made an examination. I then enquired the history of the case. I learnt from Mrs McBride that Nelson had given the deceased a powder; that he had had some port wine afterwards, and had fallen back on his bed with some convulsed movements. I gathered that this occurred about ten minutes before I arrived. I am of opinion that he died from heart disease. The quantity of opium given in the powder would be too small to hasten his death. Mr McBride spoke me on one occasion about his heart. He said that he had a very bad pain in his left side and asked me if I would some day examine him and tell him

what was the matter.

In summing up, the Coroner said he had not considered it necessary to order a post mortem examination, but that if a jury, after hearing the evidence, should be of the opinion that a post mortem was necessary he would at once order one. He himself did not think there was the slightest necessity for it. It was a mistake very frequently made to suppose that a coroner's jury was concerned as to the exact nature or cause of the death of the deceased person. What they were called together to enquire into this was this. Was the death natural or were there any suspicious circumstances surrounding the death? It was a matter of the most profound indifference to the public whether a man died of heart disease or of a disease of the kidneys, but they were very directly concerned in ascertaining the fact that the death resulted from natural causes (or, as it was usually termed, by the Visitation of God), and no person was either directly or indirectly concerned in the death of the subject of the enquiry. No doubt there are many inquests held in the cases of sudden death which may in the opinion of many persons be quite unnecessary, but it should always be borne in mind that a knowledge of the fact that sudden deaths always formed the subject of an enquiry by a coroner's jury cannot fail to act as a deterrent to criminals, so far as the sanctity of human life is concerned.

The jury after a short deliberation, returned a verdict that the deceased died from the Visitation of God, and not otherwise."

So there we have it, no bright lights, no heavenly choirs, just a simple death of natural causes. From time to time a researcher will come across this "Visitation by God" cause of death and the local newspaper will do an article speculating on what it means. The Otago Daily Times ran such a story a year or so back.

It is interesting that although we no longer have a jury at a coronial hearing, the role of the coroner seems to be unchanged. In the case of the recent "Black Widow" murder in Christchurch, the Police completely missed the suspicious circumstances of the victim's death but the Coroner did not. Also of note is the fact that the inquest took place within 24 hours of John McBride's death.