

THE DUEL AT CHUBB'S SPRING IN 1809

The following is an account of the happenings on 20th March 1809, over 200 years ago, when duelling was still the way for some young men to solve even the most trivial disputes. This is the sad tale of a young man – Stephen Young by name - who met an early death as a result of a simple argument

Lieutenants Robert Wright and Stephen Young are described as friends in the Records, in the service of the United Company of Merchants of England trading to the East Indies; they had served together many years including in South America prior to coming to St. Helena as attested by their Commanding Officer. However in 1809, things began to go wrong. Here is part of Lieut. Wright's explanation of how the duel came about, transcribed from the Records of his written evidence at the trial:-

“The circumstances that led to this deplorable event, I will now endeavour to lay before you. On Thursday 16th March last, Lieut. Young had promised to do the duty of Orderly officer of the Co. we belonged to, for me, but disappointed me and mounted the Barrack Guard for another Officer, without ever acquainting me. When I saw him the next day, he told me he had unintentionally deceived me, as his promise to me had escaped his memory. I was accordingly satisfied and thought no more about it, and we passed that evening in each other's company, with all our accustomed friendship. Knowing it was my wish to go into the country the ensuing day, Saturday, he volunteered to take my duty, and pledged to me his honour he would not disappoint me again. I thanked him and accepted his offer, but I was very much surprised to find that, instead of keeping his engagement with me, he had himself gone into the country, subjecting me in this, as in the former incident, to a Court Martial, had I not, by hearing of both his failures in time, been ready for the duty myself.

Gentlemen, I confess this behaviour exceedingly hurt me, but reflecting on it with all the allowance of friendship, I had no doubt that he would explain to me when we next met, the cause of disappointing me. Under this idea, whatever irritation was in my mind subsided entirely. The following Monday 20th, we were at morning Parade together with the officers as usual, and I fully expected he would then have spoken to me on the subject, but he did not.”¹

Matters came to a head when Lieut. Wright, irritated now and fearing his reputation would suffer if he did not complain, wrote a letter to Lieut. Young “*expostulating with him for his breach of promise and requesting him to let me know what could induce him so to do, it being the second time he had done so, and either to send me his reasons or talk the matter over in the presence of a friend.*” The letter was sent by his servant a little after 2 o'clock, to which Young sent an immediate reply, which said:-

Lieut. R. Wright

“Agreeable to your desire, I am at your Service and will meet you towards the Line immediately, from thence you can take any steps you think proper.”

Stephen Young

Presumably they met and did not resolve the situation, since a duel ensued.

The place chosen was Chubbs Spring, the Seconds were Lieutenants Onesipherus Beale and Francis Seale, the weapons were pistols, and Lieut. Stephen Young was killed instantly, to the apparent horror of all involved. The seconds were running around distracted as described by the policeman who saw the incident from above and scrambled down the hill to reach the dead man. The body was lying 200 yards from Chubb's Spring, above Mr. Cooper's Garden, or as described by another witness, “The Run below Chubb's Spring about 200-300 yards.”

¹ St Helena Records 20th March 1809

Wright's testimony insisted they were friends, and that he was devastated at what had happened. Local gossip however had a different story, only revealed in Wm. Burchell's Diary, where he reports the policeman who arrived on the scene saying that Wright seemed unmoved by the murder with which he was later charged, along with the two Lieutenants acting as Seconds.

Stephen Young was to be buried in the churchyard at St. James the next day and the grave was already dug, but Rev. Jones refused to perform the burial and ordered the grave filled in. An angry crowd gathered outside Captain Lester's house, opposite Stephen Young's house from which his widow's heartrending lamentations could be heard. Caught up in the heat of the moment, William Burchell, the resident Government naturalist, decided they should go ahead with the burial without the priest, (who had got out of the way by going to Plantation, where even an appeal from Governor Beatson did not move him to change his mind) even recommending breaking into the church if it were locked. However Church Warden Greentree produced the key and the service went ahead led by Major Hodson whom the Governor had appointed instead of the intransigent Rev Jones. Burchell could not get the music for the Funeral Hymn, as the former organist was jealous of having been replaced by him, and would not let him have it! - but he played "something mournful". The church was, as you might expect, full to overflowing. He was buried with full Military Honours. He was only 31 years old, and left a widow and 3 children under 5 years of age, destitute. Burchell says he never saw a burial attended by more real sorrow

Presumably the grave was re-dug and he was buried in St. James Churchyard as planned. The gravestone is still there against the wall of the church, in the little garden. While I was Secretary of the Heritage Society some years ago, a Mrs. Weinberg from Sweden sent some valuable mementoes of her family on St. Helena, for the museum, fearing that her children might throw them away when she died. One of these was a watch on the dial of which the name "Stephen Young" replaces the numbers of the hours. It was damaged as if it had been hit and I like to think it was the watch he was wearing when he was killed.

After this the whole island resolved not to go to church and several petitions were signed by many to the Court of Directors in England asking them to get rid of Rev. Jones! Only 4 people attended church on the following Sunday, which was Easter Sunday. Passions died down after a time and things got back to normal. Jones remained awkward but stayed on the island till 1816, although for some time the church had a very small congregation. During the funeral the Seconds had escaped from house arrest, but were persuaded to return to avoid prejudicing their trial. They were taken to the jail the next day to await their trial, along with Lieut. Wright, as it had to be prepared for them as "no persons of their description had ever been put there before."

The Court eventually gave a verdict of "Not Guilty" to Wilful Murder to all three charged.

Compiled by Barbara B. George. October 2011
(Refs: St. Helena Records; Diary of Wm. Burchell)

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However, I later read Burchell's diary and it tells a very different story about Lieut. Wright's attitude and another account from a witness also considers it was his intention to kill Stephen Young. In the UK Friends of St. Helena Magazine, there are two articles written recently where it shows that he was involved in other Court cases for ill treating his slaves in 1818/9