

The Great Tarland Mail Bag Robbery of 1866

*Based on extracts from contemporaneous newspaper
reports*

Researched by Peter Craig

The tale that follows is a strange one that generated much public interest and press comment during the months that elapsed between the robbery in January 1866 and the subsequent trial in May of that year. The extracts of contemporaneous press reports that follow summarise the sequence of events. Many more column inches were devoted to the trial itself. These are not copied here for reasons of space. All of the press reports can be viewed in micro-fiche form in the Reference section of Aberdeen Library.

Copied from the Aberdeen Herald of Saturday 13th January 1866. The identical report was subsequently published on page 8 of the Aberdeen Journal of Wednesday 17th January 1866.

ROBBERY OF THE TARLAND MAIL BAG

On Thursday morning a species of robbery, fortunately rare in this quarter, was committed on the turnpike road about a mile and a half from Tarland, which has caused no little wonderment in the locality. It was no less than the robbery of a sum of £878 from the Tarland mail bag under circumstances which, to say the least, are somewhat singular. It would appear that the post-runner, James M'Connach - who, it may be here stated, has been a runner in that district for some twenty-five years, has maintained a good character during that time; and was believed thoroughly trustworthy by those who knew him - generally leaves Tarland about half-past five A.M., to reach Aboyne in time for the first train to Aberdeen. On Thursday morning, he left at his usual time; and, according to his own story, had arrived opposite the farm of Strathmore, about a mile and a half from Tarland, when he observed a man some twenty yards ahead of him. This said man, after a time, either loitered on the road till M'Connach passed him, or turned and walked behind him; then he again turned and came up with the post-runner, walking with him for a little, "cracking" with him. Shortly, however, according to M'Connach, his "newsin" friend sprang upon him, threw him down, put his knee on his ribs with such force as to squeeze a tin box in his pocket flat, seized the letter bag, and made off toward Tarland. M'Connach adds that he shouted after the man to give him his bag, but finding his cry unheeded, proceeded to Strathmore, and roused the servants. On search being made, the letter bag was found on the road, slit open, one important letter, containing money, being gone, but all the other letters and papers remaining in the bag undisturbed. The missing letter contained bank notes to the amount stated - £878. It had been posted and duly registered by Mr Ross, banker, and consisted of mixed notes, which were being forwarded to the various head offices in Aberdeen. On the fact of the robbery becoming known to Mr Grant, postmaster at Tarland, he put himself into communication with the county police, and at once came on to Aberdeen, accompanied by M'Connach, whom, after due inquiry, it was deemed expedient to retain in custody, and who is still kept in durance. Yesterday, however, the constable at Tarland, named George Milne, was brought to Aberdeen in custody of the local police inspector, certain suspicious circumstances having led the authorities to suspect that he had something to do with the robbery. The rumour is that this constable was not "at home" when word was sent to his house about the robbery; and the story he tells of his absence at the particular time is not very credible. However this may be, the police authorities are energetically investigating the case, which seems a very strange one. The post-runner, it is said, states that he is unable to give any very definite description of the individual who came so near him and used him so roughly. The notes have not yet, we believe, been recovered; but a large body of police are now searching in the locality for them.

Copied from the Aberdeen Free Press and Buchan News dated Friday 19th January 1866.

The Robbery of the Tarland Mail-bag

The investigation into this singular and daring robbery, has been going on through the week. On Friday morning, the police constable at Tarland, George Milne, was taken into custody, suspicion pointing strongly toward him, from the fact that on one of the persons roused by McConnach, the letter-carrier at Strathmore, going direct to his lodgings, he was found to be out; his statement being, we believe, to the effect that he had been called out of bed in consequence of some alleged depredation at some distance off. Apparently, Milne had visited the locality he named, but it would seem that he has not been able to account satisfactorily for all his time up to 9 a.m., when he returned to Tarland. Be that as it may, McConnach whose innocence as we previously stated, is firmly believed in the locality where he has been so long known, was liberated on Wednesday and Milne fully committed for trial. He is a young man of about twenty-six or twenty-seven, very respectably connected, and of fully average intelligence for one in his position. He has been four or five years in the police force bearing a fair character. A body of police were up to yesterday actively continuing the search for the £878 of missing bank notes, but by latest accounts without success. We believe the Bank is to offer a liberal reward for their restoration.

Copied from the Aberdeen Free Press and Buchan News dated 4th May 1866.

The Tarland Robbery

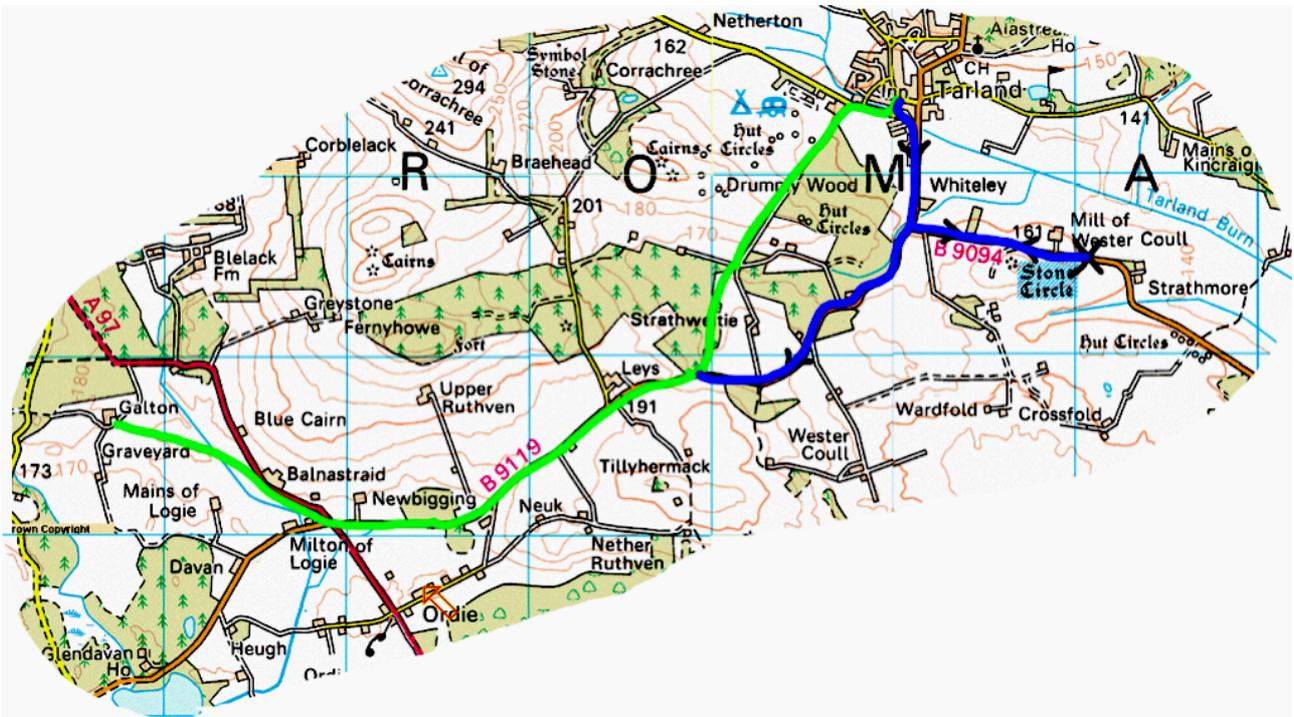
The only case of absorbing general interest at the Circuit Court, last week, was that of the Tarland Mail-bag Robbery, which occupied the whole of Saturday, up to nearly eight o'clock at night, and issued in the unsatisfactory verdict of "Not Proven". The case (the report of which occupied a large space in our issue of Tuesday) was a very serious one (the Mail-bag having been robbed of a bank parcel containing £878), and the failure in securing the ends of justice is much to be regretted. The difficulty of bringing home the crime arose partly, no doubt, from the immediate conveyance of the post-man to Aberdeen on suspicion, and still more from its being no other than the policeman on the beat who was put on trial for the crime. Detection was made more difficult - first, by suspicion fixing on the wrong person, and then by detection being brought to bear on the detective. But, though the County authorities and their officers were thus at first placed in a disadvantageous position, we can hardly think that the whole cause of failure lay here. Of course the views indicated by the Judge have an important bearing on the verdict given by the Jury. We do not affirm that, in this case, it would have been different if a more careful summary of the evidence had been presented from the Bench. Yet, we must say that the address of Lord Ardmillan was heard with some surprise by not a few who had listened to that evidence, not less for points that he dwelt on than for others he seemed to ignore. It was rather strange that he should begin by assuming a presumption in the prisoner's favour, in the fact that, not only had the money not been found with him, but that he appeared nowise fuller of that commodity after the robbery than before. In the first place, so large a sum would at once prompt concealment of it, whoever the culprit was; then, Milne found himself suspected almost immediately on his return from Galton, and from that time he was under strict surveillance till he was, next day, taken into custody. The Judge made a great deal of the failure to trace Milne's footsteps from his lodging in Tarland towards the scene of the robbery, though he might have taken a circuitous route, or his footsteps obliterated by the numbers, flocking from the village along the direct road to the spot where it was noised that the robbery had been committed. But Lord Ardmillan passed very lightly

over Milne's false statements regarding his journey in the morning, and the more than doubt whether any one had called him by tapping at his window, seeing there was no mark in the snow within two feet of it. Indeed, the story of the summons to Galton had not a shred of evidence to sustain it, and the leading statements made by Milne in regard to it were clearly proved to be false. It is not for us to pronounce on the amount of legal force there might be in this, but, in a case depending on circumstantial evidence, it ought to have had greater importance than was assigned it by the Judge. Again, the evidential force of the identification (and the tracing, though not complete) of Milne's foot marks on the snow, seemed to be not at all duly appreciated by Lord Ardmillan. In short, his Lordship betrayed a somewhat defective power of detecting the finer elements of circumstantial proof, and in a hurried, rough-and-ready address, rather too distinctly indicated to the Jury the sort of verdict they should return. If Juries are not to be thought worthy of a little more scope, if not in following the intricacies of evidence at least in estimating the force of facts, their services might as well be dispensed with.

The Charge:

George Milne, (27) formerly a constable in the Aberdeenshire police force, was accused of robbery, in so far as on Thursday 11th January, on or near the public-road leading from the Village of Tarland to Aboyne, and at that part of the said road which is distant 180 yards or thereby, in a westerly direction, from the dwelling-house or premises at or near Strathmore, in the parish of Coull, occupied by John Craib, senior, farmer, the said George Milne did, wickedly and feloniously, attack and assault James M'Condach or M'Connach, post-runner, Tarland, and did seize hold of him, and throw or force him to the ground, and did press on his breast or side with his knees and did, then and there, wickedly and feloniously, and did by force and violence, take from his person or custody, and did rob him of a Canvas or other Pouch; a Canvas or other Bag; Eighty-one or thereby Letters; Seven or thereby Newspapers; a schedule or Sub-Postmaster's Letter Bill; two or thereby Schedules or Rural Messengers' Bills, and Two or thereby Receipts for Registered Letters, the property or in the lawful possession of Her Majesty's Postmaster-General, or of the said James M'Condach or M'Connach; As also Eighteen or thereby Bank or Banker's Notes for £20 sterling each; Seventy -two or thereby Bank or Banker's Notes for £5 sterling each, and One Hundred and Fifty eight or thereby Bank or Banker's Notes for £1 sterling each, the property or in the lawful possession of the Union Bank of Scotland, or of Her Majesty's Postmaster General, or of the said James M'Condach or M'Connach.

The prisoner on being called to plead, answered "Not Guilty," firmly.



Copied from page 8 of the Aberdeen Journal, Wednesday 9th May 1866 (note top of page dated May 2nd!)

A Repentant Thief

There is something very picturesque, very simple, and very odd - leaving alone other characteristics - about the Tarland robbery, the last of which, we suppose, is told in our columns today. In the happy and unsophisticated region which lies under the shadow of Morven, and for that matter, we doubt not, in many other places, robbery has been undreamt of, till a robber made his appearance. Bolts and bars must have been strange things in Cromar, locks and keys for gold and silver, as unnecessary as iron safes for apples and jelly jars. A picker up of unconsidered trifles would have been a fool, as well as a scoundrel, who troubled himself housebreaking, when a weak old man was to be found once a week with a thousand pounds in a bag, in a dreary, solitary road, with no protection but the honesty of the district. Happy region! How many more such regions are there over the length and breadth of the land. It is a pleasure to think that such places were and are, till the presence of a robber has darkened the night with his shadow, and the souls of the people with suspicion. But it is no pleasure to think that temptation was so openly thrown in the way of any weak and worthless fellow who chanced to turn up, and become acquainted with the simple plans of the rural banks.

An old man with a thousand pounds in his pocket, and sometimes two, on the dreary and solitary road, which lies between Tarland and Aboyne, on a dark winter morning when there was no moon! He might know, or he might not, that there was "a bank", as he called it, in his bag. The little old postman is as picturesque and significant in his jaunty confidence as Solon's golden bracelets hanging on finger posts at the cross roads. We wonder how many such old worthies there are - faithful, fearless, and simple. "*Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator.*" A fellow without a sixpence will sing in the face of a robber. But here was an old postman chaffing a suspicious-looking figure, which hovered before him, and passed him, turned and followed him, and asked the way to a town 50 miles distant. No wonder. He had gone the road day and night for thirty years, and none had laid a finger on him. Even "the bank" in his bag did not shake his nerves. He did not believe in violence and robbery, except as far off acts, like foreign wars of which he heard of only in faint echoes in the peaceful region of Cromar. The figure was seen a-head of him and disappeared, then passed him, then turned and followed him, then walked by his side. But the old postman thought as little of robbers on his old accustomed route, as of the ghosts of old Castle of Coul, which he had to pass. So he sung before him, or, at least, chaffed him - with "the bank" in his bag, till he found himself doubled up on the wet road, and his bag gone. Then the singing before the robber was changed into hallooing behind him. Poor old postman! It was all quite natural. But he was not so brave a guardian of his bag as the old postwoman who carried the mails to the secluded village of Auchindoir some thirty years ago. She was attacked on her wonted route, laden with bags and baskets. "But," said the heroic post, describing the adventure, "I pu'd oot my muckle dore key and held it oot till him like a pistol. 'Stand at yer apparel, ye villan,' says I, 'would you rob His Majesty's mail', and wi' that he jumpit into the wud, and aff like a startit deer, an' I niver saw sic anither afore or sin syne." The Tarland mail runner had no pistol. Who would carry arms, who, with his bag full of bank notes, could crack jokes with so suspicious looking a night bird, who had mistaken Tarland for Keith?

Yet strange and unprecedented in the locality as was this robbery on the highway, the robber, whoever he is, has hitherto escaped punishment. As if to complete the unique character of the whole case, suspicion fell on the district constable. He was away a few miles at a place called Galton, which he had been called to by a mysterious voice at his window. The voice had told him that the merchant's shop at Galton had been broken into. Vigilant guardian of the peace and property of the parish! The voice might be the echo of a dream. It might be a foolish wayfarer up too early or up too late, trifling with the zeal of the local Dogberry. But up he starts in the darkness, and the cold, and the storm, and off four miles. No wonder if no thieves were dreamt of in Tarland when the constable was as alert as a weasel which sleeps only on one eye at a time. The only wonder is that, with property as secure as in the golden age, and a helpless old man wandering weekly down the dark solitude with a thousand pounds in his pocket, he did not trust to the placid uniformity of things, and go to sleep again. He might have, without breach of duty,

waited for a more precise intimation. Alas that zeal in the discharge of duty should be misconstrued, and that the message from Galton, where the golden age still reigned the same as before, should have thrown suspicion on the protector of the peace, who was by all accounts a man of fair character. But so it was. They traced him here, and traced him there, to a probable knowledge of the presence of "the bank" in the post bag. The postman took his measure as answering to the robber's height. Some people followed the robber's footprints, and taking the measure of them too, found them wonderfully like the constable's. He was at Galton at seven o' clock. But the robbery was before six, and, the people said, left him time enough to go there. Nevertheless, the case against the constable was found not proven. The jaunty old postrunner seemed anything but anxious to prove it. He had some misgivings at having mentioned the constable's name in connection with the matter. It was in his wrath. Many a one, as well as King David, says rash things in his wrath. When he found that no bones were broken, that his body was not bruised, and that nothing was damaged but his snuff mill, his native kindness returned and he repented him of his unguarded language. He could say nothing of his assailant, but that he was a tall fellow. He saw nothing to distinguish him by. Yet he is clear sighted. For in the dark winter morning he knew his muffler to have red stripes, or, as he calls it, "mazarine". Red is red, he says, with the emphasis of a man who has a hold of at least one fact, and is determined to stick by it. He was likely, therefore, to know if it was any one with whom he was well acquainted. Howbeit, the case against the policeman was a failure, whether he was guilty or not guilty. He left the dock amid the cheers of the audience. That was something. Had he been found guilty, that would have been something more. But, as it is, if the golden age in Cromar has been disturbed by violence, it has been partially restored by repentance of the thief, and the restitution of the notes. Repentance? Well fear, then. It is not much, except to the bank. A mysterious parcel of damp notes, which had never been opened since it was made up in Tarland, was handed in to the Union Banking Office in Aberdeen. But, alas! the *status quo* in money is not the moral *status quo*. That is gone. The sense of security, the tradition of honesty, the faith of neighbourhood - all like the light of innocence from the thief's soul. Let us hope that, if these things be gone, at least the temptation to robbery of bank parcels may be made somewhat less.