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The Coffin Affair: A Miscarriage of Justice Revisited (Kathryn M. Campbell)

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The Coffin Affair: A Miscarriage of Justice Revisited

By Kathryn M. Campbell
(Apple Podcasts, 2023)

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Delivering all the suspense of a classic whodunnit, Kathryn M. Campbell's podcast, *The Coffin Affair*, is a taunt who-didn't-do-it about the case of Wilbert Coffin, a hapless mining prospector who, Campbell asserts, was wrongfully convicted of first-degree murder, and then sentenced to death and hanged in a Montreal prison on a cold winter night in 1956. Set in rural Quebec, the story begins a few years earlier when the bodies of three American tourists, in the region to hunt bears, were found dead in the woods, their month-old remains mauled and scattered likely by their intended prey. The authorities charged Coffin only with the murder of the youngest and most vulnerable of the ill-fated trio, 17-year-old Richard Lindsey. This may have been done to secure a conviction more easily as a jury would be able to see Coffin as capable of overpowering this slightly built lad.

Coffin was instructed not to tell his story at the trial, but in a statement taken shortly before his death, which is read aloud in a bonus episode, he claims that he was out prospecting when he came upon three Pennsylvanian hunters whose truck was disabled, so he stopped and offered to help. He drove the youngest member of the group to the nearby town to purchase a gas pump, and when they returned, two other men, Americans driving a yellow jeep, had joined the original two hunters. Coffin socialized for a while and then left the group, promising to return in a few days to make sure their truck was working. When he returned, he found the truck but not the hunters and thought they may have gotten a ride with the other Americans. After waiting several hours, Coffin decided to leave.

Before departing, however, he took a few items from the hunters' truck that were of little value but which he may have seen as compensation for his good deeds. Helping oneself to random articles in strangers' unlocked trucks was not uncommon in the region; in fact, it was dubbed "bush pilfering." Still, this petty act would help send Coffin to the gallows – "If you find the thief, you find the murderer!"¹ the prosecutor would later proclaim in court, an inflammatory statement that should never have been allowed. Campbell cites a long list of other errors committed by the trial judge including failing to instruct the jury on issues having to do with the weight that should be attached to certain types of evidence and admitting hearsay.

Moreover, potentially exculpatory evidence, such as a set of tire marks that were different from the tire marks of the Pennsylvanian hunters' truck as well as the vehicle the accused was

¹ Katherine M. Campbell, "The Coffin Affair" (2023) 4 at 9m:49s, online (podcast): thecoffinaffair.com.

driving, was not thoroughly investigated. Most absurdly, after the circumstantial case was presented by the Crown, Coffin's lawyer presented no defense. He did not even bother to ask the jury why, if the motive was robbery as the prosecution alleged, a guilty man would leave behind the valuable rifle found in the truck.

Perhaps most damning was the simple fact that Coffin was the last known person to see the hunters alive. As such, Campbell suggests that he was a ready-made target for a local justice system bent on "solving" the crime so as to protect its lucrative tourism industry. In support of this theory, she portrays a case riddled with the hallmarks of wrongful convictions — police tunnel vision, prosecutorial misconduct, and inept defence counsel among them.

Who was Wilbert Coffin? A black-and-white photo on the podcast's website depicts a man in his late thirties casually dressed in a loose-fitting plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and baggy pants tucked into unlaced boots. A lit cigarette dangles nonchalantly between two fingers seemingly seconds away from a practiced flick of his thumb. Although he is described as unconventional — he was a WWII vet, a cook, a prospector, and a jack of all trades who liked to drink and had a common law wife and son — in the picture, he looks like an ordinary guy but unaware of his extraordinary journey ahead.

Campbell fills 287 minutes spread over six episodes recounting that journey, a relatively modest amount of time given the detail provided, and yet, the listener feels no rush. Guided by her steady, almost matter-of-fact narration, the podcast unfolds in its own good time. Whereas a rush to judgment plagued Coffin, his story is given its due.

Maximizing the advantages of her medium, Campbell intersperses her narration with excerpts of interviews from local historians, as well as folks who knew Coffin or knew his story and are still alive today. As such, there is no need to rely on the website's gallery of photos to get a sense of time and place — the cast of real-life characters does it for you. For example, Fabien Synnett, who was around 20 when the murders occurred, is now in his late eighties and was a witness to possible exculpatory evidence but was never questioned about it by police. In a thick French-Canadian accent, he brings us back to the time of the murders when he recalls seeing a yellow jeep in the town of Gaspé with two strangers in it. His description of the events of that day help bring small-town rural Quebec, midway through the twentieth century, to life.

"... and there was two guys in the jeep. And there was a pool room, you know, on Main Street, and I was at the pool room, and I came out of the gallery, and just across the street there was a ... a kind of a booth serving meals and so one of them got up and went to get some, some lunch, and they stayed there a little while..."²

André Chretien, a former police officer and resident of Gaspé, outlines his theory of how the Quebec premier was more concerned with identifying a suspect than he was identifying the *right* suspect.

"It was unbelievable, eh? You know what happened, I think? Maurice Duplessis,

² Ibid, 2 at 15m:13s.

he had everybody with him ... he had the priest and the nuns and all that bunch of rascals with him ... and he wanted to keep on his relationship with the Americans, so he had to find somebody.”³

Judy Reeder, Coffin’s niece, whose eighth birthday fell on the day of her uncle’s execution, provides a poignant portrayal of family and community huddled together as the clock ran out.

“I was upstairs with the rest of my siblings and the house was full of people. I can hear them talking, very hushed, very quiet, very somber ... and then, I hear people crying. That’s all I remember.”⁴

Each of the six episodes shares a similar structure beginning with a recap of events thus far, followed by an overview of the episode’s content. They conclude with a summary of key takeaways and a glimpse of the next episode. This approach is ideal for listeners who are not able or prone to binge as it is easy to settle into the story even after a few days have passed since the last listen. Campbell’s wise choice to have each episode focus on a particular element of the case also helps keep listeners on track. For example, episode one sets the scene; episode two captures the investigation and arrest; episode three dives into the power and politics of the times; and so on.

A wistful, haunting piano melody bookends each episode and also keeps the moving pieces together. Sound effects are minimal; Campbell rightfully has faith in the facts. As a criminology professor and lawyer with more than twenty years of experience researching and writing about wrongful convictions, including six years researching this case, she likely sees bells and whistles as a distraction. Listen up, her subdued approach suggests, a grave miscarriage of justice is about to occur to which near-silence is often the soundtrack.

The Coffin Affair is a nuanced, captivating, and cautionary tale about the Canadian justice system failing a man shepherded by misfortunes and missteps. Almost seven decades after Coffin’s execution, Campbell’s podcast reminds us that tragically, while we cannot go back to a case wherein an innocent person was put to death and undo the error, hopefully, going back over the events which led to the miscarriage of justice will help reduce wrongful convictions in the future.

³ *Supra*, 3 at 11m:05s.

⁴ *Supra*, 5 at 27m:42s.