

# **Murder on the Woronora**

On 12 February 1920 policeman Leslie Clive Worrell, 25, took his 23-year-old wife, Martha to Como where they hired a boat to sail up the Woronora River. The boat proprietor at Como reported later that the boat had been returned at 4.30 pm with just one man in it.

Ten days later a man cutting saplings on the Woronora River discovered the body of Martha Worrell. She had been shot through the head.

Clive Worrell was arrested for her murder. The trial began at the Central Criminal Court on 24 May 1920 where Worrell pleaded not guilty. He said he had the gun with him at Como for a bit of practice, and that his wife had taken his gun from him and accidentally shot herself. He claimed he feared that if he reported her death he would be blamed. Yet he left her body in the bush, after which he had gone to a dance.

In addressing the jury, Worrell's lawyer said that his three years of war service should be taken into account regarding his strange actions after the tragedy. The jury took 48 minutes to find him guilty of murder. Justice Wade pronounced the death sentence.

However, in June 1920 Worrell's sentence was commuted to 'life in prison' as the NSW government at that time was opposed to capital punishment.

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At the Central Criminal Court on Tuesday, 25 May 1920, 25-year-old policeman, Leslie Clive Worrell, appeared before Mr Justice Wade, charged with having feloniously and maliciously murdered his wife, Martha Maud Worrell, at Como on February 12. He pleaded not guilty.

Worrell said that he had known his late wife about four years and had married her on 26 December 1919. He admitted he went to Como with his wife on February 12 to hire the boat. When they got out of the boat at Woronora he reported his wife saying she hated him for having married a woman in England also in 1919. She seemed to have become violently jealous and took his loaded revolver, which he had brought with him to Como for a bit of practice. When she threatened to shoot herself, he tried to take the gun from her, but using her left hand she fired the gun at her head. It later emerged that she was right handed.

He said he kissed his dead wife, then put the revolver in his bag and went back to the little boat leaving her unburied body in the bush. He intended to report his wife's death, but feared that he would be blamed. He went to a dance that night, and without telling anyone of his wife's death, resumed duty at No. 2 Police Station.

In addressing the jury, Worrell's lawyer, Mr Abigail, said that his client's three years' war service and possible shell shock should be taken into account before he was condemned for his strange actions after the tragedy.

The Crown Prosecutor, Mr Coyle told the jury that Worrell's new story of his wife having taken her own life could not be accepted by anyone who had heard the evidence. The suicide invention appeared to be Worrell's last resource after he had failed in his lies about his wife having left him or having gone to see her sick mother – who was not sick – at Manilla.

Not until the net of condemning evidence had closed upon him did the accused say one word about his wife having shot herself. Mr Coyle concluded that the murdered woman was wearing her wedding shoes when she was done to death by the man on whom she had lavished all her affection.' His Honour summed up and the jury retired at 10 minutes to 5. They returned at 5.38 with a verdict of murder. His Honour then pronounced the death sentence.

However, in June the death sentence passed on Leslie Clive Worrell for the murder of his wife was commuted to life imprisonment. The new ALP government in NSW opposed capital punishment and commuted death sentences as a matter of policy. The Premier noted that Worrell should remain a prisoner until the end of his life.

### References:

- *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday, 26 May 1920 p 9. 'Worrell Guilty. The Como Tragedy.'
- *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, Thursday, 17 June 1920