

Alice Wheeldon story in a nutshell

The “plot” to murder Lloyd George & Arthur Henderson, 1916-1917 in England during the Great War

In 1917, during WW1 Alice Wheeldon and her daughter Winnie Mason & son-in-law Alf Mason, our grandparents, were imprisoned for conspiracy to murder David Lloyd George, Prime Minister, Arthur Henderson, Chairman Labour Party. Hettie Wheeldon was acquitted. Leave to appeal the convictions was refused. They had been set-up by two undercover agents. The family argued that the murder plan was fabricated. A fantasy “a story so strange that it seems hardly to relate to the world of reality”¹.

Today the campaign to clear their names for this miscarriage of justice is being supported by Alice’s great granddaughters: www.alicewheeldon.org

What happened?

On Boxing Day 1916, Alice Wheeldon was at home in Derby with her husband, and daughters, Nellie and Hettie. Alexander MacDonald, a conscientious objector (CO) who was a family friend was also staying in their household.

Alice’s youngest daughter, Winnie had married Alf Mason in 1915 and had moved to Southampton; there they supported Will Wheeldon, Alice’s son, a CO due to appear again before a military tribunal.

That night, a man “Alex Gordon” came to the door, posing as a CO needing shelter. Over the next days during their conversation, Alice told him her worries about her CO son. “Alex Gordon” told her of an emigration route to the USA possible for use by COs. He raised his own problem of freeing his friends from a detention camp guarded by dogs. Alice entered into an agreement with “Alex Gordon” - he was to help her get her ‘three boys’ to America, and in return Alice was to obtain poison for him to use on the dogs at the detention camp. At Alice’s request, Winnie and Alf sent poison (curare) for dogs.

Two days later, “Alex Gordon” introduced his friend, Herbert Booth, another undercover agent, and wrote the letter of introduction for the emigration scheme, and Alice gave the poison to Gordon (on 4 January 1917).

In front of press cameras, the family were arrested at the end of January 1917 - instant “tabloid villains”. ‘Alex Gordon’ was not produced in court, only Herbert Booth.

The trial was widely publicised and used as propaganda to continue the war to the bitter end. Alice Wheeldon, Winnie and Alf Mason were convicted. In prison, Alice went on hunger strike protesting her innocence; she was released on licence and died in 1919.

Feedback welcome! - Chloë Mason chloemason@bigpond.com

- Networked Knowledge by Robert N. Moles - <http://netk.net.au/UK/UK171.asp>

¹ Report of Attorney-General’s opening address before Mayor of Derby, presiding: *Manchester Guardian* 5 Feb 1917.