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# HISTORY OF NEWCASTLE

AND THE  
NORTHERN DISTRICT.

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## THE MEANEST HUNTER RIVER MURDER ON RECORD.

A considerable portion of public attention was attracted to the diabolical murder of an old Scotch farmer, Andrew Menzies, by a middle-aged farmer, William Shea, at Hillsborough, near Maitland, on 20th December, 1845. The murder revealed circumstances and incidents which in a romance would be deemed extravagant. It was not anger, hatred, or revenge that prompted the foul deed, but deep-rooted, low, guilty avarice, the avarice of becoming possessed of Menzies' few head of cattle and few bushels of wheat, scarcely worth ten pounds altogether. For this paltry gain Shea imbued his hands in Menzies' blood, and displayed a wicked, depraved, and malignant heart and spirit regardless of social duty, and bent upon mischief. - Everyone was amazed at the great cunning and atrocity of Shea's crime, and how utterly inadequate and disproportion-

tionate was his motive to the enormity of the crime of cold-blooded murder. In 1845 the country between Newcastle and Singleton was very sparsely settled, and that not by the most honourable class of people. It is true there were many comfortable homesteads inhabited by many naval and military veterans and influential people from Sydney and Hobart, but these evidently were in a sad minority. It is true the country itself was magnificent, but if there was anything magnificent in the majority of the settlers it was that they had originally been in Government employ, and had settled down in the district after they had gained their tickets of leave or pardons. As the landed gentry held immense estates comprising thousands of acres, it was the common practice to subdivide the estates into farms and let them out on clearing leases. Between Greta and Maitland there was a place called Hillsborough, and here Mr. Beresford Hudson had an estate of 2000 acres granted to him in the twenties by Governor Darling. In March, 1845, Shea and Menzies entered into partnership in a 27-acre farm rented from Mr. Hudson under a clearing lease. They worked together with the utmost good will and amity, each confident that in a few years they would have earned enough money to buy a homestead. William Shea was a tall, well-formed, healthy, good-looking man of 30 years, but there was an expression in his features which bespoke a fierce and cruel disposition. The sun and frosts of scarce 30 years had passed over the head of his wife, who had borne him several fine children, some of whom were old enough to assist in the housework. Mrs. Shea was much attached to her husband and children, while among her neighbours she acquired the reputation of being a shrewd and industrious housewife. Andrew Menzies, who occupied a small tenement next to their cottage, was a hale, hearty, genial-tempered Scotchman, of about 50 years of age. Although he was poor, he was always performing acts of

kindness to others, and there was about him a quiet energy joined with a sweet and even temper which appealed strongly to both head and heart. At the time at which the tragic event took place their dwellings nestled amid the wildest luxuriance of scenery and amid sunny slopes whose sides patches of cultivated fields, contrasted with the dark foliage of the old woods which the axes of the pioneers of civilization had spared. Before their doors the River Hunter murmured pleasantly on its course, the sound mingling with the melodious notes of the birds and the humming of bees. The air was scented with the sweet and cheering fragrance of the wattle trees, while the charming place was the scene of a successful wheat and maize farm and tobacco plantation.

#### MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF ANDREW MENZIES.

Towards sundown on the 20th December, 1845, Shea and Menzies were employed planting tobacco, when they were accosted by Malcolm Gillies (who lived about 200 yards from their huts) as to whether they had any more tobacco plants. Menzies replied that they would have some more in a month or two. This reply somewhat surprised Gillies, as Shea had some days previously spread a rumour abroad that Menzies was about to leave the district. Gillies was not aware at that time that Menzies when questioned by his brother (Edward Gillies) as to Shea's report had denied the truth of rumour by saying: "It is because I sold my dray to John Parsons that Shea talks like that, and thinks I am going away." However, at sundown, Gillies heard Shea refuse to leave off work, and he left the two men planting tobacco. After going into his hut, which was 213 yards from the spot where Shea and Menzies were working, he heard the noise of two or three heavy blows coming from that direction. Next day Shea was seen pulling down Menzies' hut, and Menzies was nowhere to be seen. When asked where was his partner (Menzies), Shea replied that he had gone away, but he did not know where to. Shea told

several anxious inquirers that Menzies had sold him for £10 his four bullocks with yokes and chain, also an old harrow and a fan, the terms being £5 in hand and credit for the remainder until he got a crop of wheat off. The story was too improbable to be credited, and for six weeks the neighbours talked the matter over seriously. as Menzies was on visiting terms with them, that he had never expressed any intention of leaving, and that it would be impossible for him to go away without saying "good-bye" to some of them, and especially to his boon companions, the Gillies. John Parsons said he suspected foul play, for 10 days before Christmas Menzies sold him his dray on terms, 30s down and the balance in January, but Menzies never came back to ask for the balance. Shea protested against their suspicions and declared that Mrs. Parsons had been informed by an old man at Farrell's that Menzies was seen passing through Lamb's Valley, and that old Jim Crow had informed him (Shea) that he met Menzies on his road to Port Stephens. Mrs. Parsons repudiated Shea's statement, and then Beresford Hudson reported to police magistrate Edward Denny Day such facts as were rumoured about Menzies' unaccountable disappearance. This took place on the 23rd of February, 1846, and the following day Shea was arrested on suspicion of having caused Menzies' death. The police magistrate took down in writing a long rambling statement by Shea as to what dealings and conversations he had with Menzies before the time of his disappearance.

#### WONDERFUL ABORIGINAL SAGACITY; AND MURDER WILL OUT.

The mysterious disappearance of Menzies was the talk of Newcastle as well as Maitland and the Hunter district, as the industrious man was well known in all these places. We are told that "murder, though it hath no tongue, doth speak with most miraculous organ," and the following account unravelling the mystery may be characterised as one of the greatest curiosities of "murder will out." As foul play was suspected the neigh-

hours determined to make a search for Menzies' body with the aid of black trackers, whose instinctive quickness to trace and discover crime had in similar cases been invariably successful. On 25th February, 1846, Police-magistrate Day went to Shea's farm, accompanied by Chief-constable Wood, Constable Boylan, and four aboriginal trackers. A farmer named Matthew Thompson then summoned all the neighbours and the search commenced at Shea's hut. Mrs. Shea, who believed in her husband's innocence, was surrounded by her children, and watched the search party curiously. From the hut the black trackers began their work of tracking, and suddenly they began to create a terrible row around a burnt-out stump of one of the biggest giants of the forest. The Police Magistrate and the police were summoned to the spot, and one of the blacks exhibited to them on his finger a big white maggot, uttering the words, "white man's maggot." The blacks pointed out a stump hole 9 or 10 feet in diameter, filled up to within 12 or 13 inches of the level of the ground, with spade marks round the edges of it, as if the soil had been dug into the hole. The blacks then pointed to a hole in the ground or soil where large black ants were going up and down. They explained that they saw the ants bring up the big white maggot, and repeated the words, pointing to the hole, "White man's body down there." Believing in the sagacity of the blacks the Police Magistrate had the earth dug up when the remains of a human body were found three or four feet below the surface of the surrounding ground and about two feet below the earth which was immediately over it. The body appeared to have been laid on its face with its thighs higher than the rest. A shirt, trousers, and braces were on the body, which was much decomposed. As soon as the body was lifted out of the hole it was found to be headless. On searching for the separated head it was found under a portion of the root of the burned stump, which had been left in the hole. There were long grey hairs on the head, which tallied with the long grey hairs which grew

MAY

to an unusual length over Menzies' forehead. The body was removed to the hut, where a tomahawk was found. The finding of the tomahawk was a most curious coincidence. In the eye of the tomahawk there was a long grey hair which corresponded to Menzies' hair, while the handle, which had been soiled with blood, had been scraped to elude detection. The clothes on the body were the same as worn by Menzies on the evening he was last seen, and other marks completely established the identity of the body as Menzies'. Mrs. Shea, overcome by horror and fright at the terrible recital of the discovery she had heard, proclaimed that her husband was innocent, and urged it was a terrible mistake or misunderstanding for anyone to think her husband would kill the kind-hearted Menzies.