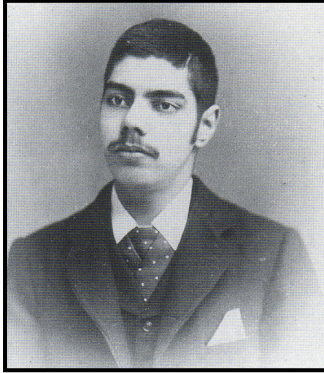


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## THE CASE OF GEORGE EDALJI

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George Edalji

In 1903, local authorities in Great Wyrley, near Birmingham arrested George Edalji on charges of mutilating animals and writing threatening letters, which strangely enough accused Edalji himself of the mutilations. Edalji, the oldest of three children, was at the time a twenty-seven-year old solicitor still living with his parents, and commuting by train to Birmingham to practice law. Although his father was vicar, who had converted to Church of England, the family had suffered a great deal of racial abuse for many years from their rural neighbours because the vicar was a Parsee Indian married to an Englishwoman.

Over a period of six months, 16 animals were found slashed to death with shallow slits along their stomach. George Edalji was convicted specifically for an injured pony discovered in a field not far from the Edalji home mutilated in the middle of the night, and it was inferred that he was also responsible for the other slayings. Although his father testified that George was fast asleep at the time of the crime, his testimony was disregarded. Instead, dubious circumstantial evidence such as razor blades found in George's possession and so-called blood on his coat were counted as evidence that he had committed the crime. That the animal slayings continued after George Edalji's imprisonment was discounted by the local authorities, who by now had come up with a theory that a cult was continuing the work Edalji had started.

A petition organized by Judge Yelverton signed by 10,000 barristers and solicitors was sent to the Home Office because with the lack of evidence in the case, they all believed there had been great miscarriage of justice with Edalji's trial. Because of the widespread publicity of the case, public pressure to the Home Office appeared to pay off. In October 1906, Edalji was released, although no reason was given and his name was not cleared. Unable to practice law, Edalji pleaded his side of the story in the magazine *Truth*, and other papers began reporting the case as well.

However, the public paid even more attention when Arthur Conan Doyle got involved in the case himself. He and several other prominent members of society started an Edalji Committee demanding to know why Edalji was not officially pardoned. Using his previous experience as an eye doctor, Conan Doyle argued quite articulately and logically that George Edalji, who was near sighted, could in no way have committed the crime of which he was convicted. He would not be able to navigate his way to the crime scene at that time of night or have the necessary hand-eye motor skills for mutilation. On top of that, Conan Doyle began his own Sherlockian investigation on who the actual animal mutilators were and his suspicions fell on two brothers, Royden and Wallace Sharpe. Royden particularly had a history of violence and cruelty to animals. He had been a butcher's apprentice and not only owned the tools, but had been witnessed ripping up railway carriage seats in a similar fashion to the animal mutilations. He also had a reputation for forging letters. The Great Wyrley local authorities however refused to pursue any research that Conan Doyle presented to them, since it would undermine their already shaky reputation, and warned Conan Doyle that publishing his findings would result in libel charges. Conan Doyle did publish this new evidence on the case, though he was careful to alter the names of the Sharpe brothers in his pamphlets, it was clear to the Great Wyrley locals who he was accusing.

Eventually the Home Office did review the case and its conclusion was mixed. The Home Office's official findings were that: Edalji was innocent of animal mutilations, but upheld the Great Wyrley lower court's decision that he was guilty of writing the threatening letters. Conan Doyle and other Edalji supporters never got a retrial, but all the ruckus they caused led to the establishment of the Court of Criminal Appeal.

**THE CHARGE OF MAIMING CATTLE.**—The trial of George Ernest Edalji, solicitor, for mutilating a horse at Great Wyrley, was resumed on Wednesday and yesterday at the Staffordshire Quarter Sessions.

from: *The Times*, Friday, Oct 23, 1903; pg. 10

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