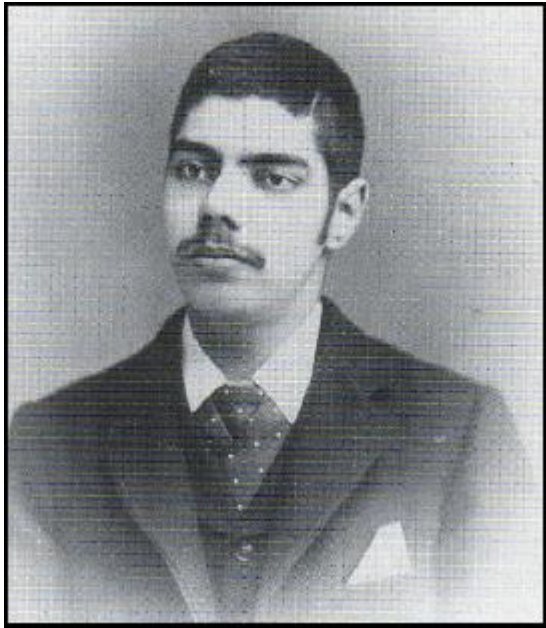


THE CASE OF GEORGE ERNEST THOMPSON EDALJI



In 1903, Staffordshire Police arrested George Edalji of Great Wyrley (near Birmingham) on charges of wounding a pony and writing a threatening letter under a pseudonym (which strangely accused Edalji himself of the mutilations). Edalji, the eldest 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 Shapurji Edalji (the vicar of Great Wyrley), who had converted to Church of England from Parsi, the family had suffered a great deal of abuse (including racial abuse) for many years from colleagues and local people perhaps because of Shapurji's Indian origin and his marriage to an Englishwoman.

Over a period of six months, 16 animals were found brutally slashed to death and mutilated with shallow slits along their stomach. Despite him having no possible involvement (Davenport-Hines 2008) George Edalji was convicted of the 8th animal outrage, when a pit-pony was discovered in a field not far from the Edalji home with a savage wound across its belly. The police suspected 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 the vicarage and spots of blood on his coat were counted as evidence that he had committed the crime. The fact that the animal outrages continued after George Edalji's imprisonment was disregarded and it was claimed that George was just a member of a gang.

A petition organized by Judge Yelverton (former chief justice in the Bahamas) signed by 10,000 people and another from 300 lawyers was sent to the Home Office because with the lack of evidence in the case; they all believed there had been a great miscarriage of justice. 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 only because the sentence was considered too harsh and his name was not cleared. Unable to practice law, Edalji conveyed his story in the Manchester newspaper *Umpire*, and other papers began reporting the case as well. He and several other leading figures set up 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 for which he was convicted. He would not be able to navigate his way to the crime scene at that time of night.

However, the public paid even more attention when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle got involved in the case himself, after Edalji appealed to him for support and sent him his articles from the *Umpire*. He and several other leading figures set up 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 for which he was convicted. He would not be able to navigate his way to the crime scene at that time of night. He had been a butcher's apprentice and not only owned the tools, but as a boy had been witnessed ripping up railway carriage seats in a similar fashion to the animal mutilations. He also had a reputation for forging letters whilst at school. The Home Secretary however refused to pursue any research that Conan Doyle presented to them, since it would undermine the Home Office's 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, and though he was careful to alter the names of the Sharp brothers in his writings it was clear to the Great Wyrley locals whom he was accusing.

Eventually the Home Office did set up a Committee of Enquiry to review the case but its conclusions were mixed. The Committee found Edalji innocent of the outrage against the pony but still maintained that he had brought his troubles on himself by writing the threatening letters. As a result the Home Secretary gave Edalji a pardon but refused any compensation. Conan Doyle and other Edalji supporters never got a retrial, but all the ruckus they caused was a major factor in the establishment of the Court of Criminal Appeal in 1907.

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