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[Mark Colvin](#) presents PM Monday to Friday from 5:10pm on Radio National and 6:10pm on ABC Local Radio. Join Mark for the latest current affairs, wrapping the major stories of each day.



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Colin Ross Campbell pardoned, 86 years on

PM - Tuesday, 27 May , 2008 18:38:00**Reporter: Alison Caldwell**

MARK COLVIN: In the Australian Dictionary of Biography the first words in the entry for Colin Campbell Ross are 'convicted murderer'.

That may have to be revised now. Colin Campbell Ross was hanged in 1922 for the murder of a 12-year-old schoolgirl.

Eighty-six years on, Victoria's Governor officially pardoned him today, because it's no longer believed he did it.

The victim was a girl called Alma Tirtschke. Members of her family and Ross's came together in Melbourne today.

His niece Betty Everett said it was as if a shadow had been lifted from her life. And Alma's niece Betty Arthur says it reinforced the decision to abolish the death penalty.

It's now being claimed the real murderer was a distant relative of Alma's who has long since died.

Alison Caldwell reports.

ALISON CALDWELL: The grisly murder horrified the residents of Melbourne for weeks.

On New Years' Eve in 1921 a bottle collector found the naked body of schoolgirl Alma Tirtschke in a lane way off Little Collins Street, in inner city Melbourne.

Twelve days later, 28-year-old wine bar manager Colin Campbell Ross was arrested and charged with raping and strangling Alma Tirtschke.

During his short trial, the prosecution alleged that he'd lured her into his shop, plied her with alcohol, then raped and strangled her.

Convicted and sentenced to death, Colin Campbell Ross wrote to his family telling them, the day is coming when my innocence will be proved.

Well over half a century on, Colin Ross has been pardoned.

Betty Everett is his niece.

BETTY EVERETT: I think it's more than relief, I think it's just wonderful that this has gone from my family now forever.

ALISON CALDWELL: She always knew this mysterious uncle existed because his name and date of birth were recorded in a family bible.

BETTY EVERETT: Like children, you stickybeak and I found the bible and the bible had this name, Colin Campbell Ross.

Later on I heard my aunty talking to my mother and saying "do the girls know?" and mum said, words to the effect, let sleeping dogs lie.

ALISON CALDWELL: And then a few years later on your honeymoon in fact, you saw a magazine article about your uncle.

BETTY EVERETT: Yes and it was written by a reporter that was there at the hanging and said he was convinced an innocent man was being hung.

ALISON CALDWELL: What would you say to people who think that the death penalty should be brought back?

BETTY EVERETT: Let our family be an example that the justice system is not always right. Certainly we hope that there's never another case like this.

BETTY ARTHUR: He was an innocent man and this is a good thing for the family and it also exonerates Alma too.

ALISON CALDWELL: Betty Arthur is the niece of 12-year-old Alma Tirtschke.

BETTY ARTHUR: It was all done so quickly and they just found their scapegoat and they just went with it.

ALISON CALDWELL: Researcher Kevin Morgan is the author of "Gun Alley; Murder, Lies and the Failure of Justice" which examines the Tirtschke murder.

Writing the book, he managed to unearth fresh evidence raising serious doubts about the conviction of Colin Campbell Ross.

KEVIN MORGAN: Just before she was buried the two policeman went out to her home and as she lay in her coffin they cut from her head a lock of her hair. Two weeks later they arrested Colin Campbell Ross and they took from him some blankets and on those blankets they found some hairs and they had the government chemist of the day have a look at those hairs and he was willing to testify in court at Colin Ross's trial that these hairs, and I quote "come from the scalp of one and the same person".

ALISON CALDWELL: A decade ago, the hair samples were retested using modern techniques.

The hair on the blanket was found not to be Alma's.

The pardon follows an unprecedented inquiry by three senior Victorian judges. They found Ross suffered a miscarriage of justice.

Victoria's Attorney General Rob Hulls formally announced the decision in Question Time.

ROB HULLS: We are repairing a wrong in this state's history. I hope that the pardon does go some way in making amends for the tragedy that befell both families.

("Hear hear")

ALISON CALDWELL: One outstanding question is who killed Alma Tirtschke?

Her descendants believe they know who the murderer was.

Betty Arthur says he was a relative of the victim

BETTY ARTHUR: It's long gone and he was a man who wasn't liked by the family, by my mother and her sister.

ALISON CALDWELL: Betty Arthur's son Bruce Arthur says the tragedy should now be laid to rest.

BRUCE ARTHUR: It's been a painful family secret that's been unearthed and that's been a difficult process. But it's good to know that an injustice has been righted. And it's not really about who did it, it's more about the pardoning of Colin Campbell Ross than it is about who killed my great aunt.

ALISON CALDWELL: Betty Everett hopes the coroner can positively identify the remains of Colin Ross so he can be buried with his family.

MARK COLVIN: Alison Caldwell.

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