

C Y O'Connor's suicide note, 1902

Delict. *CR*
The position has become impossible
having important work to do and then
the commissions of enquiry to attend to
If my life was not required I would have
the same idea
We may not have done as well as
possible on the facts but
we will necessarily be too hampered
to do well in the immediate future
I feel that my brain is suffering
and I am in great fear of what
effect all this worry may have
upon me - I have lost control
of my thoughts
The Coolgardie scheme is all right
and I could finish it if I got a
chance and protection from
interference but I have no
hope for that now and it is better
that it should be given to some
other man to do who will be
entirely untroubled by prior responsibility
10/3/02
Put the originals to Helena this
at once -

Description

This is a note written by Charles Yelverton O'Connor, Engineer-in-Chief of Western Australia with overall responsibility for the Coolgardie Water Scheme. It was presented as evidence at the inquest into his death in 1902. The note is handwritten and contains some deletions and a postscript.

Educational value

- This asset is the last known communication written by C Y O'Connor - O'Connor was Engineer-in-Chief of Western Australia from 1891 to 1902; the state premier, Sir John Forrest, embarked on an ambitious program of public works during this time, and famously offered O'Connor the position with responsibility for 'Railways, harbours, everything'; O'Connor's term coincided with WA's gold boom and the infrastructure he established laid the foundations for today's modern state; one of the most famous engineering works for which he was responsible was the 560-km pipeline delivering water to Western Australia's parched eastern gold fields; O'Connor shot himself on 10 March 1902 in the ocean off North Coogee, south of Fremantle.
- It is part of the evidence submitted at the inquest on Tuesday, 11 March 1902 into O'Connor's death - O'Connor had overall responsibility for the pipeline built to deliver water to WA's arid eastern gold fields; the note is in his handwriting and dated 10 March 1902, the day of his death; at the inquest one of O'Connor's sons, Roderick, gave evidence that he had found this document on his father's desk; the note reads as the suicide note of someone suffering from stress; three jurors returned a verdict of 'Death by his own hand through a bullet wound from a revolver at Robb's Jetty while in a state of mental derangement caused through worry and overwork'.
- It is evidence that O'Connor did not kill himself because the pipeline failed - many myths surround the Engineer-in-Chief, one being that he killed himself



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because the water did not arrive at the expected time; this note refutes that possibility as it does not hint at the possibility of failure; the date of the note pre-dates the start of pumping; the date on the note is 10 March 1902 while a photograph with the caption 'The First Day's Pumping No 1 Pump Station', part of an official record of the project, is dated 31 March 1902.

- It suggests that O'Connor may have been depressed - in the note O'Connor expresses concern about his thought processes, 'I have lost control of my thoughts'; his youngest daughter Bridget described him as 'unusually depressed' on his return from South Australia on 5 February 1902 and a fellow passenger gave evidence that when the ship departed from Adelaide O'Connor showed 'his usual brilliance' but over the next few days he was affected by 'a growing disturbance'; the coroner's report suggests a stress-related mental illness.
- It is indicative of O'Connor's commitment and dedication to the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme - his final words are an instruction to his staff; the words appear as an afterthought below the date and read 'Put the wingwalls to Helena Weir at once' and refer to the guide or training walls for the storage reservoir for the gold fields' water supply; although he is about to end his own life, the engineer is concerned that these barrier walls be constructed to channel water flowing over the dam wall away from the foundations.
- It is evidence that O'Connor was affected by public ridicule and criticism of the scheme - O'Connor refers in his note to three commissions of inquiry and 'misrepresentation'; the commissions of inquiry included one 'to inquire into and report upon the conduct and completion of the Coolgardie Water Scheme'; there were allegations of corruption regarding contracts and 'misrepresentation' may refer to accusations in the press that O'Connor had taken bribes; in fact he owned no property and left very little and the WA Government passed a special Act to provide for his widow.

Transcript

The position has become impossible.

Anxious important work to do and three commissions of inquiry to attend to.

We may not have done as well as possible in the past but we will necessarily be too hampered to do well in the immediate future.

I feel that my brain is suffering, and I am in great fear of what all this worry may have upon me - I have lost control of my thoughts.

The Coolgardie scheme is all right and I could finish it if I got a chance and protection from misrepresentation but there is no hope for that now and it's better that it should be given to some entirely new man to do who will be untrammelled by prior responsibility.

10/3/02

Put the wingwalls to Helena Weir at once -

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Creator C Y O'Connor, author, 1902

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