

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

Erotomania and Queen Victoria: or love among the assassins?

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The issue of crime and insanity in Victorian Britain is dominated by the 1843 case of Daniel McNaughton. Hounded by paranoid delusions, about which he was relatively unforthcoming despite detailed questioning, he succeeded in shooting Henry Drummond, private secretary to the Prime Minister, Robert Peel. Thinking that it was Peel himself he had shot, McNaughton is quoted by the arresting policeman as stating “he shall break my peace of mind no longer”. The furore over his trial and non-execution filtered down the century, via the *McNaughton rules*. Daniel himself mouldered in Bethlem and Broadmoor for the rest of his days (West & Walk, 1977, esp. p. 93). But much more prevalent in the public’s eye were the seven (at least) serious assaults on the Queen. Not only did they bring about a new criminal charge (*vide infra*) – but their recurrence tended to promote pro-royalist sympathies as well as pro-custodial attitudes towards “the insane”.

From the reports available and Victoria’s own descriptions (e.g. Walker, 1968; Benson & Esher, 1908) it seems clear that assassination, real or symbolic, was the motive behind most of the attempts. Another Prime Minister and stalwart of the age, William Gladstone, regarded the assailants as “madmen without political motive”, and the evidence from contemporary and modern assaults on leading public figures tends to bear out this notion.

The 1881 trial of the assassin Guiteau, who shot US President Garfield (Rosenberg, 1968), and Hinckley’s more recent attempt on President Reagan, are obvious reference points. But why Queen Victoria should have been so regularly shot at has never been clarified, even though the heightened attention given to royal lives does tend to illuminate some of the more obscure aspects of history. Thus, the illnesses of George III and Henry VI focussed the debates as to the nature and treatments of psychiatric disorder, in the 18th and 15th centuries respectively. In Victoria’s case, though, there is evidence of various eccentrics approaching her in other ways.

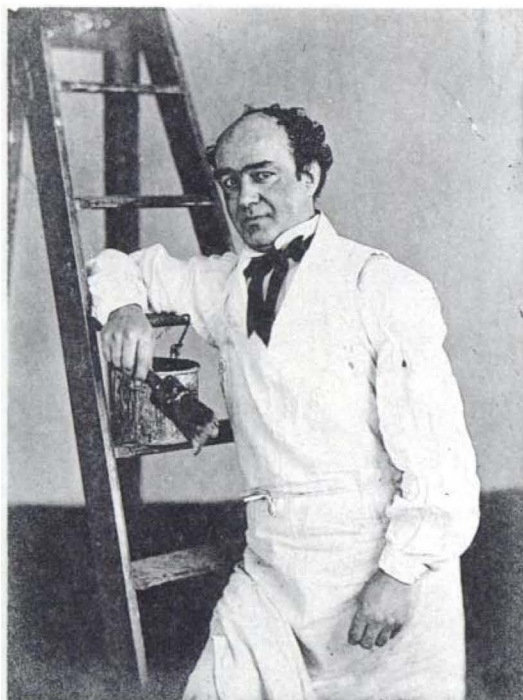
In particular, there is recorded among the case-notes of the plush Ticehurst House Asylum the story of a psychotic Army captain whose details may provide a partial explanation for the other would-be regicides.

The seven assaults

Victoria’s seven assailants were generally unprepossessing young men; several were Irish, and all but one used pistols. The first, Edward Oxford, an 18 year old pot-boy, was “a little mean-looking man”, both “slow-witted and equally slow of foot” (Weintraub, 1988, pp. 145–6). He actually fired two shots at the Queen, in June 1840, as she was driving with Prince Albert along Constitution Hill. The royal couple later drove on through Hyde Park “to show the public we had not....lost all confidence in them”, and there was apparently no ill effect on the Queen’s pregnancy. Found insane at his trial, Oxford spent 28 years inside, and in Broadmoor was said to have remarked, about later attempts, “If only they had hanged me, the dear Queen would not have had all this bother” (Walker, 1968, p. 188). An interesting sideline on this case was Lord Melbourne’s insistence that Oxford be examined “before such of your Majesty’s confidential servants as are of the Privy Council” (i.e. the Cabinet) the very next morning (Benson & Esher, 1907, i, p. 226).

The other attempts followed a similar pattern. In May 1842 John Francis’ pistol misfired in Green Park. Aroused by a strange mixture of wounded pride and aristocratic brio, the royals drove out the next afternoon on a similar route to “try to draw the man’s fire”, excusing only their ladies-in-waiting from attendance. The ploy worked. Francis fired from five paces, but his pistol was only loaded with powder. This circumstance led to his death sentence, for treason, being commuted to transportation for life (Walker, 1968, p. 187). Yet in July of the same year John Bean, in Prince Albert’s words “a stunted

young man barely four feet tall” (Weintraub, 1988, p. 155), fired a pistol loaded mainly with tobacco. The then Prime Minister, Melbourne, wrote of this episode as not “dangerous in itself”, but as “affording additional evidence of the ease with which persons of the lower orders can incite themselves, or be incited by others” (Benson & Esher, 1907, i, p. 407). Bean got 18 months imprisonment because a new Act, designed to avoid the capital crime of high treason for such pathetic embarrassments, had brought in the charge of “high misdemeanour” (Walker, 1968, p. 187).



Edward Oxford (copyright the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives)

Two more assaults took place in 1850. On 19 May, William Hamilton, a visiting Irishman, fired at her (again, the pistol only had powder in it and again it happened on Constitution Hill). In the Queen’s own words this was, it seems, “a wanton and wicked wish merely to frighten” (Benson & Esher, ii, p. 220), and he received seven years transportation. Even the 4-year-old Princess Helena concurred in this outcome, declaring; “man shot, tried, to shoot dear mamma, must be punished”. But just over a week later an ex-officer, Robert Pate, “struck her viciously on the forehead with the brass knob of his cane”

(Weintraub, 1988, p. 215). Though badly bruised, Victoria still attended the opera that night (it was Meyerbeer’s ‘Le Prophete’). Pate, though probably deranged, failed to be proved insane in court, and got the by now customary seven years ‘down under’.

There was then something of a break in proceedings for 20 odd years but the last two assailants were more clearly unwell. In 1872, a 17 year old Fenian the “weak-minded” Arthur O’Connor, pointed a pistol at the Queen because he wanted her to sign a petition. Seized by the throat by her Scottish servant, Brown, he was only sentenced to a year’s imprisonment, which greatly upset Victoria. She felt this made it “impossible for her to go about in public – or at all in London” (Weintraub, 1988, p. 386), and predicted “more of these things”. Nevertheless, it was not until March 1882 that her prophecy came true when Roderick MacLean fired at her on Windsor Station. She “heard a sharp sound, a locomotive noise” (Weintraub, 1988, p. 450), while MacLean was set upon by several umbrella-wielding Eton boys. To what extent this contributed to his successful insanity plea is unknown, but it should be noted that he had correctly loaded his pistol.

The story of Captain C

Alongside these ineffectual would-be regicides, Captain Jonathan C. provides both a contrast and a possible insight into their acts. His story comes from the Ticehurst Casebooks. Described as “handsome and prepossessing in appearance”, he had been a cavalry officer, like Pate. Between March and June 1840 “under the influence of delusions he wrote several offensive letters” to the Queen, which were discontinued on the news of her pregnancy. He believed “her marriage was not real but a *formal and left-handed one*”, was reported insane (“labouring under overpowering delusions”) by an Army Medical Board and shipped off, for reasons that are not clear, to Dublin. He also wrote frequent offensive letters to Lord Raglan and other peers, as well as other communications in cypher to HM (the Queen) containing most obscene language and abusing her for colluding in his confinement. Cared for by a Dr Duncan near Dublin, he was transferred to Hayes Park Asylum in 1851 and to Ticehurst House in October 1854.

His mental state on admission there is given in some detail. Of ‘robust habit’ and ‘nervous temperament’ he was in ‘good’ physical shape but had constant delusions with respect to the Queen’s “marked manner towards him in public some years since, leading him to suppose that she was attached to him”. In a later letter to the Lord Chancellor he described “being deceived by the Queen’s looking in the direction in which he sat at the opera”. Convinced he had been confined to stop him exposing “Lord Raglan’s

discreditable acts in office" he evinced "a peculiar dislike to meet persons" and persisted in "actions that are inconsistent with those of a sane person".

The continuation notes over the next eight years enlarge on these psychotic ideas. In December 1854 his conversation demonstrated "he has still an attachment for HM....the reasons for addressing the Queen in the manner expressed in the cypher letters are frivolous". He wrote endless abusive letters, paced the corridors and displayed "uniform eccentric conduct". He threatened violence, became "dirty in his habits", had to be fed by the stomach pump, and "refused to answer any questions unless put to him on paper". He also deliberately picked sores in his neck, was very "troublesome", described "a direct communication" to the effect "that it will be all up with us in a fortnight", and urinated on carpets, clothes and furniture. In June 1860 he remarked "You will receive your orders—I have been told they're coming, I know all about it". The medical officer commented, "from these observations and others....I think he hears voices". Visited often by the Commissioners in Lunacy, he continued to receive 'communications' and became very angry when they "tried to persuade him to change his habits".

By late 1860 however he seems to have become quite affable, though persisting in his "delusions" and "cypher letters". Asked once from whom he received his 'communications' he replied, "You know very well and if you don't you soon will" (September 1860), but he played at whist, went out for drives, and continued to exercise, though growing more "stout". Sadly, a poisoned foot—said to have been due to "foulness of blood brought on by over-eating" and "aggravated by excessive walking...it is essential he should refrain from this" (according to the notes of Mr Paget, the celebrated surgeon summoned from Barts to attend him) led to his demise. On 16 April 1862, the Captain is quoted as saying to Dr Newington, the proprietor of the asylum, "I believe I am dying....tell my father that I forgive him....if I have been unkind to him or anyone I could not help it". A week later he died, of "necrosis" of the foot.

True erotomania?

While his later decline may be associated with physical illness, there seems little doubt that the core of Captain C's delusional system was his attachment to the Queen, his belief that she was affectionately attached to him, and his conclusion that his confinement was a complex governmental plot designed to frustrate their union. Thus the cypher letters, thus his subsequent written abuse to her, thus his feeling that she had betrayed him by colluding in his continued certification. All of which seems fairly typical of

erotomania (de Clerambault's syndrome), secondary to a chronic paranoid psychosis. His symptoms also comply with *probable schizophrenia* in terms of, for example, Research Diagnostic Criteria (Spitzer *et al.*, 1978). As for the Queen's own knowledge of the affair, I am unable to deduce anything definite. Perhaps the obscene nature of the Captain's correspondence would have excluded it, either from her eyes, or from the published letters readily available.

Assuming that Captain C's version of events was delusional, it seems all in all a fairly typical case. As Trethowan (1979) has pointed out, "while de Clerambault endeavoured to identify what he termed pure erotomania....most of the patients he described suffered clearly from symptoms more suggestive of a paranoid psychosis". Even more to the point, one of de Clerambault's own patients apparently had King George V—Victoria's grandson—as love object, while the course of the illness "tends to turn into a delusion of being persecuted by the supposedly loving one". As a result of this "embarrassing confrontations can occur". If we accept the Freudian notion of a pistol as a penis-substitute—and the *brass knob* of Robert Pate's case is no less symbolic—Victoria's assailants take on a most specific, and embarrassing, sexuality.

Conclusions

However, just as Queen Victoria had several potential assassins, it seems inherently likely that many more erotomaniac scribblers—such as Captain C—addressed their hearts to her. As moths gather around a candle, the intense detail of royal lives should provide a colourful collection of mentally ill hangers-on. One wonders then to what extent these seven men really were lovers, turned to jealousy by continued disappointment. Oxford, Bean, MacLean and Pate certainly seem to have been deluded, and Pate's strange assault with a stick—as if remonstrating with the Queen's faithlessness?—is very redolent of Captain C's attitudes. Jealousy is all too often the basis for marital assaults and murders, and as the symbolic female of her time, Victoria must have figured in many fantasies of psychotic attraction.

It is also of interest to note so early a description of a syndrome first formally described in the 20th century. There may well be more such descriptions hidden away in Victorian casenotes, or even royal archives. Similarities to present psychopathology would be of immense value in assessing the validity of diagnosis across history. Notions of mental illness being a social construct rather than a true form of disease remain powerful in lay circles, especially those keen on opposing psychiatric influences.

The last word on Queen Victoria's assassin-lovers should perhaps be left to her: after the seventh assault, by MacLean, she commented "It is worth

being shot – to see how much one is loved”. Freud may have publicised the Eros/Thanatos relationship for our own times, but in their own bluff style the Victorians knew about love and death.

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Note. The Casebooks of Ticehurst House are in the library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1.

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Psychiatry and the media

‘The Blues’ and psychiatry

Symptomatology and therapy in song lyrics

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*In the wee midnight hours, long 'fore the break of day
In the wee midnight hours, long before the break of day
When the blues creep upon you and carry your mind away.*

Leroy Carr (i)

In the early years of this century, there arose, in the Negro areas of America, a form of music born out of suffering and segregation, hopelessness and loss. It was music that had developed from ‘field hollers’ and work songs of African slaves in the southern states of the USA; music that had changed with the emancipation of those slaves and their migration to the squalid quarters of large industrial cities; and music that is inseparable from the struggle and sadness of the American Negro. And yet it is music that has become popular throughout the world, and which, despite its sad roots, can be uplifting and exhilarating. It is, of course, the Blues.

This paper is not about music therapy, but rather it looks at the words in the Blues: firstly how they describe the psychiatric symptomatology of the

singer, secondly how they can serve a therapeutic effect, and finally introducing the concept of ‘lexithymia’.

Psychiatric symptomatology

‘Feeling blue’ or ‘the blues’ is simply another way of describing sadness; terms joining the range of synonyms we already have for that emotion – ‘low-spirited’, ‘down-hearted’, and many more – in short, the lay meaning of the term ‘depression’. Further examination, however, reveals that not only is this depression in its broadest sense but that within the lyrics of the songs can be found described all of the clinical features of a depressive disorder.