

Psychiatry in the 1880s

The President's Assassin and the Queen's Would-be Assassin

The President

One hundred years ago, in July 1881, President Garfield met his death by assassination. The trial of the murderer, Guiteau, and the controversy about his mental state, were extensively commented on in the *Journal of Mental Science* between July 1882 and January 1883. First there is a lengthy editorial (an 'Occasional Note of the Quarter') in which the Editor gives his own opinion as to Guiteau's sanity and responsibility, and in later pages there is a full report of the Judge's summing up in the case. The October issue contains a detailed account of the post-mortem carried out on the body of the murderer after his execution; and lastly, in January 1883 the Editor replies to letters and criticisms he has received. The following is a condensed version of the first editorial.

Case of Guiteau (*Journal*, July 1882, p. 236 ff.)

'The assassination of the President of the United States, General James Abram Garfield, on the 2nd of July, 1881, a few months only after his entry upon office, must ever stand out as a prominent event in American history. The long period of eighty days that elapsed between the date upon which the assassin's bullets were fired and the date at which death closed the scene gave time for creating the most intense interest and sympathy throughout the civilized world. The interest thus awakened was not suffered to flag, but was kept alive by the unprecedented nature of the trial of the assassin, Charles Julius Guiteau.

'The trial commenced on the 16th of November, and lasted until the 26th of January, the ten weeks of its duration being occupied almost entirely with the question of the mental condition of the assassin, and no less than twenty-four medical witnesses being examined upon this subject, either for the prosecution or for the defence.

'In our opinion the plea of insanity which was raised in this case was not sustained by the evidence.

'The medical witnesses who testified in favour of the insanity of the accused were eight in number, but only one of them was asked his opinion as to the sanity or insanity of the prisoner at the time of the examination. To the other seven a hypothetical question was put in these words [summarized]:

'Q. Assume it to be a fact that there was a strong hereditary taint of insanity in the blood of the prisoner at the bar; that at about the age of thirty-five years his mind was so much deranged that he was a fit subject to be sent to an asylum; that at different times he manifested decided symptoms of insanity, that during the month of June, 1881, he became dominated by the idea that he was inspired of God to remove by death the President; that he committed the act under what he believed to be a Divine command so that he could not resist the mental pressure upon him; that there was no other motive for the act than the conviction that he was executing the Divine Will for the good of his country. Assuming

all these propositions to be true, state whether, in your opinion, the prisoner was sane or insane at the time of shooting President Garfield.

'It will be observed that the plea of insanity was based upon the assumption that all the propositions contained in the above hypothetical question were true; but this was an assumption which the evidence failed to sustain. With respect to one of the vital points of the question, whether the prisoner really believed himself inspired of God to commit his act, and that he was under a Divine command which overpowered his will, it was shown that Guiteau had no auditory hallucinations, and that the so-called inspiration did not come to him in any of the ordinary ways in which insane delusions usually arise. His readiness to ascribe his acts to inspiration dated from the time of his residence in the Oneida Community, from 1860 to 1865, and Dr Channing, one of the witnesses for the defence, writes:

"At this time he was a quick-witted, sensitive, nervous, half-educated, vacillating, over-religious boy, knowing but little of practical life, and anxious to do great things. At the community he absorbed everything that was bad, but found nothing to develop good. There he learned to believe that he had found the kingdom of heaven on earth, and was taught that indulgence of the passions, if done with the sanction of the leader, Noyes, would be approved by God."

'We are not disposed to admit that a man whose correct moral sense and whose respect for society have been destroyed by an education of this kind is, on this account, to be regarded as insane, or held irresponsible for his criminal acts.

'Medical evidence of a very positive kind was submitted by the prosecution in disproof of the prisoner's insanity. Sixteen medical witnesses were called by the prosecution, of whom fifteen had personally examined the prisoner. The evidence of these gentlemen clearly disproved the assumption contained in the hypothetical question as to Divine inspiration as an insane delusion. Dr Gray, in his evidence, stated that he asked the prisoner, "How did you come to think of insanity as a defence, and when did it occur to you?" and that the prisoner's reply was, "I knew from the time I conceived the act, if I could establish the fact before a jury that I believed the killing was an inspired act, I could not be held to responsibility before the law."

'The general tenor of Dr Gray's evidence goes to show that, in his opinion, disappointment at not obtaining office under General Garfield's administration was largely concerned as a motive for the commission of the act. It was also established by the prosecution that when the prisoner was, in the first instance, charged with his crime, he justified it as a patriotic act, and asserted that it was a political necessity, and that the President was guilty of the blackest ingratitude

towards the men who elected him.

'There is very much of interest in an article by Dr Folsom, in favour of Guiteau's insanity; but we think that the admissions which Dr Folsom, with great fairness in argument, feels himself compelled to make, only tend to confirm the opinion we have expressed. The second of a series of conclusions given by Dr Folsom is to this effect: "His shooting the President was, to a certain extent, the logical result of bad training, character somewhat unscrupulous, enormous self-conceit, self-will, disappointment in not getting office, delusions or deceit regarding religion, desperation of poverty, expectation of personal gain, love of notoriety." One of Dr Folsom's conclusions is "Certainty of punishment would have restrained him from the act."

'The most interesting point, to our mind, raised by Dr Folsom is as to whether there may not have been in Guiteau's life several attacks similar to subacute mania. Dr Folsom thinks the evidence points to periods of maniacal excitement so common in the congenital or degenerative types of insanity, and that, although Guiteau's mental condition at the time of the trial indicated responsibility, yet that at the time of the murder he might have been suffering from subacute mania with incoherence of ideas.

'We have in these observations confined ourselves to the question of Guiteau's responsibility. But in this, as in many other criminal cases, we cannot but feel that the character in these cases offers to the psychologist a rich field for study. We are sadly ignorant of those abnormal ones which border on the region of well-recognized mental aberration. When understood, it will be seen to what precise category we are to refer such moral or immoral monstrosities as Guiteau.'

The Queen

The same issue of the *Journal* that contains the first Guiteau editorial, July 1882, also carries a report of the trial of Roderick Maclean, who had fired a pistol at Queen Victoria in March of that year. An abridged version is given below. There are several noteworthy features about the trial: the general consensus regarding the prisoner's insanity; the Lord Chief Justice's willingness to stretch the McNaughton rules to include the irresistible compulsive power of a delusion; the vagueness of the psychiatric diagnoses, and the rather pathetic failure to cope with the problem of a patient apparently recovered yet potentially dangerous. This was the case, moreover, which led the Queen to insist on a change in the law whereby the verdict of 'not guilty on the ground of insanity' became 'guilty, but insane'. Lytton Strachey, in his life of the Queen, discusses, though not very accurately, the various assaults and attempts on her life, taken as a whole, and there is a chapter on the subject (Chapter 11) in Nigel Walker's *Crime and Insanity in England*, Vol 1.

Attempt to shoot the Queen (*Journal*, July 1882, p. 307 ff.)

'The indictment charged the prisoner, Roderick Maclean, with traitorously and maliciously compassing the death of

her Majesty the Queen, and with having, on the 2nd of March, discharged a pistol loaded with powder and bullet at her Majesty in the parish of Windsor. He was tried at Reading, April 19, 1882 before the Lord Chief Justice (Lord Coleridge). Mr Montagu Williams having opened the case for the defence, in the course of which he expressed the astounding opinion that the attempt to murder the Queen was "committed under the influence of a condition of mind brought upon him by the Almighty"—a charge which throws into the shade the worst utterances of Mr Bradlaugh—called the following among other witnesses*:

'Dr Maudsley said—I have had 25 years' experience of insanity. I remember being called in to the prisoner; I formed an opinion at that time that he was not of perfectly sound mind. Witness recommended his being placed under some supervision in order that he might be prevented from doing mischief, as there was every reason to believe he would some day attempt it.

'Samuel Stainsby: I have known the prisoner and his family for upwards of twenty years. I had no doubt at all but that he was absolutely insane.

'Mr Montagu Williams then put in the following letter [and others] in the prisoner's handwriting:

'13, George Street, Weston-super-Mare, Sunday, May 30, 1880.
"Dear Annie—I have no doubt but you will be somewhat surprised to receive another letter from me; but as the English people have continued to annoy me, I thought I would write, as you should not be surprised if anything unpleasant occurred, as the people being so antagonistically inclined towards me makes me raving mad. I can hardly contain myself, in fact, I mean if they don't cease wearing blue I will commit murder. In fact, I could not prevent myself committing murder about them not assisting me to get a letter for the Sanatorium; and yet they have the audacity to wear blue, and the anguish I passed the other night I could not describe. Perhaps by the time you receive this I shall be in prison. I really think I cannot prevent myself having revenge on the English people, and I don't mind a bit if they hang me, as now I see things in a different light. They only pretend to be friendly, to annoy and cause untold misery. I fear it will be just as bad in Boulogne or elsewhere. What chance have I to cope with the millions of people who are against me? Not merely against me—I should not mind that—but at open defiance and publicly annoying me on every possible occasion ... [and more to the same effect] ...

From yours affectionately,

RODERICK"

'Dr Hitchens, Westminster,—On the 3rd of June, 1880, I examined the prisoner. I concluded that he was a person of unsound mind and issued a certificate of insanity. Upon the certificate the prisoner was confined in the Somerset Lunatic Asylum [Mendip Hospital].

'What kind of mania do you think he was suffering from?—Homicidal mania. I was afraid he would do some

*But why the astonishment when juries were regularly asked to decide whether a prisoner was 'mute by the visitation of God'?

injury to some one.

'Mr Thos. S. Sheldon, said—I am assistant medical superintendent at the Wells Lunatic Asylum. I produce a certificate of the discharge of the prisoner, which is as follows:—"R. E. Maclean, admitted June 2, 1880; discharged, recovered, on Feb. 21, on no probation." The remark on the case is "being convalescent some months; his habits being intemperate."

'He was suffering from an indefinite state, which was mania and partly melancholia. During the last month I do not remember his delusions very accurately, but I have a strong impression they were the same as were recorded in the certificate, in which he was said to be suffering from homicidal mania—at all events, from a mania calculated to do injury to others. I thought when I sent him out he would probably come back, or be taken to some other asylum.

'The Lord Chief Justice—You say that, as far as you could ascertain, the prisoner was recovered?

'Witness—That is as far as we can go. I thought that any exciting cause, such as privation, would induce a return of insanity.

'Did you think him safe to be at large?—Quite safe at the time.

'The Rev. Archibald Campbell MacLachlan, examined by Mr Williams—I am a clergyman of the Church of England, and live at Newton Vallance, in Hampshire. On Thursday, 23rd February last my attention was called by my wife to a man who had fallen down in a fit at my gate. That man was the prisoner at the bar. He was in a most exhausted condition when I came up . . . I was in Windsor on the 2nd March and saw the out-riders coming; so I said, "Here is Her Majesty." Just then I heard a report and saw smoke. I then saw the man I had relieved carried up the street. I recognize him as the same man.

'Mr Manning, medical superintendent of Laverstock Asylum, Salisbury, said he saw the prisoner in Reading Gaol; he was rambling and disconnected in his discourse. He was labouring under three delusions—first, that there was a determination on the part of the people of England to persecute him; that persons were in the habit of dressing in blue to annoy him; and that he was under the influence of a supernatural power, hearing from time to time voices mocking and debating with him. Referring to the crime, he said he had come to the conclusion that it would be better to put a bullet into the pistol to impress people with its gravity. From time to time he broke out into loud laughter, so that there was difficulty in controlling him.

'The Attorney-General—Of course there are different degrees of insanity. What do you say as to his knowledge of an act he is committing? Would he be aware of what he was doing?—I think he would.

'What do you think as to his competency to know whether he is doing right or wrong?—Well, it is difficult to enter into the mind of another person.

'The Lord Chief Justice—Do you say that this man, at the

time he presented the pistol to shoot the Queen, knew that he was doing wrong, but yet was unable, from mental or other causes, to control his act, such as a strong man, not suffering from delusions, would have been?—I do.

'The Attorney-General—When it was understood that a defence of insanity was to be set up I thought some inquiry should be made by independent medical men in order that there should be some check on the defence.

'Dr Edgar Sheppard, formerly of Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, said the prisoner has very marked congenital defects, which handicap him very heavily. He has a very narrow head, with the high, arched skull so commonly associated with idiocy and insanity. He is not a man who could reach a fair standard of moral or physical health. I found he had delusions of an unmistakable character. He had a perfect right to do what he had done, because it had been revealed to him in early life that he had a great and secret power over mankind. I regard him as an imbecile, and I think he has always been so. All imbeciles are liable to paroxysms of this kind, homicidal mania.

'The Lord Chief Justice—In Macnaughten's case a question was put, and it was answered by a very eminent man in your profession. The question was whether the man had no power to resist gratifying his insane passion, but was just as if a man of greater strength had taken his hand and pointed the pistol.—I do not think in this case the prisoner had any power whatever to distinguish between right or wrong.

'Dr William Orange, medical superintendent of Broadmoor Asylum, said: At the time I examined the prisoner I did not think he was capable of appreciating the nature and quality of the act he did. I think the prisoner is too wanting in capacity to appreciate the nature of the act he was committing.

'Can you say he did not know at that time?—It is exceedingly difficult to dive into the muddy minds of insane people and assign some motive for insane acts.

'Lord Chief Justice then proceeded to sum up the case to the jury. Having reviewed the evidence adduced, his Lordship said—It is for you to say whether you consider the prisoner to be not guilty on the ground of insanity. It is a merciful verdict. It saves the man's life, as it ought to be saved if he is not a moral agent, while on the other hand it protects society against a repetition of those outrages. I do not desire to say one word about the nature of the act if the man had been responsible for it, because it seems to me that burden of proof has, at all events, been very largely met by the prisoner.

'The jury after an absence of five minutes returned into court. Their verdict was "not guilty on the ground of insanity".

'His Lordship then signed the usual order, and the prisoner, who manifested no emotion, nor seemed to understand his position, was removed from the dock.'

ALEXANDER WALK