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Psychiatry in the arts

Apropos suicide verdicts: Lord Clifford strangled himself with his cravat in 1673? Beyond reasonable doubt versus the balance of probabilities

Greg Wilkinson  (Posthumous publication)

On 18 August 1673 John Evelyn, Diarist, was returning papers to his friend Lord Thomas Clifford who had resigned as Lord Treasurer the previous month. Under suspicion of ‘warping to Rome’, Clifford’s Catholicism barred him from holding Office, which Evelyn says broke Clifford’s heart, left him struggling in his mind, and he could not brook it.

Evelyn writes that he took leave of Clifford, who wrung his hand, looked earnestly at him, and bidding goodbye added ‘I shall never see thee more’. Evelyn: ‘No! My Lord, what’s the meaning of this? I hope I shall see you often, and as great a person again’. Clifford: ‘No, Mr. Evelyn, do not expect it, I will never see this place, this city, or Court again’. They parted ‘not without almost mutual tears’. Not long after came news that Clifford was dead (continues Evelyn, evidently in retrospect). He had heard that Clifford made away with himself, ‘after an extraordinary melancholy’; this was not confidently affirmed, but was reported by a servant, and afterwards by others; but when Evelyn hinted some such thing to Mr Prideaux, one of Clifford’s trustees, ‘he was not willing to enter into that discourse’. It was said that one morning, having unusually caused his servant to leave him, Clifford locked himself in and strangled himself with his cravat upon the bed-tester (wooden canopy). His servant, suspicious at his dismissal, looked through the keyhole – as Evelyn remembered – and seeing his master hanging, broke in, took him down, vomiting a great deal of blood, and heard Clifford say: ‘Well; let men say what they will, there is a God, a just God above’ – after which he said no more (see, for example editions by Bray, Dobson or de Beer).¹

Lord Clifford died on 17 October 1763 and there is no known conclusive account of his death. On undisclosed evidence, Arthur Clifford Esq states in his panoramic *Collectanea Cliffordiana* (1817) that Lord Clifford was ‘seized with a mortal illness soon after his retreat into the country’; the historians Oliver ([a priest] *Cliffordiana*, 1828) and Hartmann (*Clifford of the Cabal*, 1937) do not support suicide; de Beer notes that the details of Evelyn’s account are suspicious, and opines that Clifford’s death was almost certainly due to natural causes, although ‘it is possible that in the course of his sufferings Clifford did something that hastened his end’.¹ Suicide was then a grave sin in Catholicism. Family is a protective factor against suicide: Clifford’s wife Elizabeth Martin died in 1709, she bore 15 children, and he was survived by four sons and seven daughters. *Inter alia*, vomiting a great deal of blood is not typical of near suicide by hanging.

Reference

- 1 de Beer, ES. *The Diary of John Evelyn (Vol 4)*. Oxford University Press, 1955.

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