

Historical myth-making

DEAR SIRs

Dr Trevor Turner's article 'Erotomania and Queen Victoria' (*Psychiatric Bulletin*, April 1990, 14, 224–227) throws an interesting light on the process of historical myth-making.

The argument seems to be as follows: a patient in Ticehurst asylum wrote letters to Queen Victoria, sometimes abusive, and might have been suffering from, among other things, erotomania: it "seems inherently likely" that many more "erotomaniac scribblers" also wrote letters to her: therefore the seven people who made (mainly half-hearted) attacks on her are likely to have been similarly afflicted. The reasoning is not hard to follow, as there does not appear to be any. Outlines of the seven attacks are simply juxtaposed with details from the case of the letter-writer, and "one wonders then to what extent these seven men really were lovers". Nevertheless, by the end of the article they have become "Queen Victoria's assassin-lovers", a phrase which will doubtless linger in the memory long after the lack of justification for it has been forgotten; and a well known quotation is wrenched out of context to clinch the deal. (The Queen's remark that "It is worth being shot at – to see how much one is loved" referred, of course, to the demonstrations of loyalty which followed her various escapes from assassination, and not to her prescient anticipation of Freudian tenets.)

While no evidence is adduced in support of this novel theory, a fact which may speak for itself, it may be worth pointing out there is actually some on the other side. Since all the assailants were brought to trial without the discovery that any of them had previously harassed the Queen by letter-writing or any other means, or had otherwise demonstrated any kind of deluded affection for her, this alone should give some pause for thought. There is also the consideration that while the pretty young Victoria of the early attacks might well have stirred up "fantasies of psychotic attraction" in the hearts of adolescent youth, the stout old lady dressed in perpetual mourning of the later episodes seems a less likely source of provocation. But in Edward Oxford's case, at least, there is plenty of more positive information available (much of it already in print).

Oxford is briefly dismissed as "both slow-witted and equally slow of foot", which is particularly inapposite for a man who had taught himself six languages and was learning the violin by the end of his first 14 years in Bethlem, and was the best fives, chess and draughts player in the hospital (not to mention an accomplished knitter, carpenter and house-painter). We are also told that "Oxford (and others) certainly seem to have been deluded". Oxford, in fact, never gave anyone who knew him the slightest reason to think him deluded, or in any way insane, at

any time during his confinement in Bethlem, and behaved throughout with the utmost propriety. The likelihood seems to be that he had passed through a brief period of adolescent disturbance, during which he sought notoriety by becoming involved in a probably imaginary political 'plot': but this is not the place to go into further detail. After his eventual release from Broadmoor he made a new and successful life for himself in Australia under the poignantly symbolic name 'John Freeman', married, and at one time earned a living by writing. More to the point, he never showed any symptom of erotomania.

The "interesting sideline" of Oxford's examination by the Privy Council, incidentally, is less remarkable to anyone who knows that the Privy Council was not (as it still is not) 'the Cabinet', but a largely hand-picked group of men constituting the Sovereign's closest advisers; and that it was quite normal at this time for them to undertake the examination of supposed lunatics whose crimes amounted to high treason.

While Oxford's is the only case for which information comes so readily to hand, it seems inherently likely (to re-cycle a phrase) that investigation of the other six assailants would prove equally unrewarding. It is to be hoped, at any rate, that the concept of "Queen Victoria's assassin-lovers" will not slip quietly into the mythology merely on the strength of a few groundless speculations and a piece of slick wordplay. The history of psychiatry merits a more rigorous approach than this, even when it only appears under the heading of 'Sketches'.

PATRICIA ALLDERIDGE
Archivist and Curator

*The Bethlem Royal Hospital
and the Maudsley Hospital
Beckenham, Kent BR3 3BY*

DEAR SIRs

There are several pleasures in contributing brief and designedly speculative Sketches on the History of Psychiatry. One is the additional information often elicited by adopting an interrogative mood, and title. I very much hope that Patricia Allderidge will contribute more details on the life and times of Edward Oxford, also delightfully known as "John Freeman".

Another is the notion that one has written a phrase that will "doubtless linger in the memory". I have little doubt though that any myth-making would soon be demolished by detailed historical scholarship.

TREVOR TURNER

*Waikato Area Health Board (Thames)
Mackay Street
Thames, New Zealand
PO Box 707*