Andrew Taylor

1. *Bleeding Heart Square*: Where It Began

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Like a river, a book must start somewhere. And, like a river, it sometimes has more than one source. *Bleeding Heart Square* had three. The sources didn't appear at the same time but slowly and coyly. But I couldn't start writing until they flowed together, mingling so quickly and thoroughly that I find it hard to know when and where one idea ends and the others begin.

Two of the sources were relatively late arrivals. In the 1990s I discovered the staid terraced cul-de-sac of Ely Place in London. The eighteen-century enclave is guarded by wrought-iron gates. It has a medieval chapel and a beadle in his brown top hat and a frockcoat. It lies in a curious area just north of Holborn, where history and myth lie in confused and fragmented layers beneath the brick and tarmac of the modern city. The cul-de-sac was the site of one of the great palaces of medieval London, the town residence of the Bishops of Ely. The bishops' domain included much of the surroundings, including what is now Hatton Garden to the west. To the north lies Bleeding Heart Yard, which features in several of Dickens' novels. Nowadays there are restaurants there and it was while talking to my editor in one of them that much of the setting of this novel arrived almost literally with the coffee. My wife gave me the title.

Another starting point was the British Union of Fascists. Mosley and his Blackshirts are still the almost mythical bogeymen of British politics. We see them with the comfort of hindsight through the lens of history – as fanatics, fatally tainted by their association with Hitler and the Nazis. But if we make the effort to see them as they were in the early 1930s, a very different picture emerges. Fascism was respectable. In Britain, peers and MPs were members and sympathisers. The BUF was well-funded and well-organised. Mosley had coherent policies that appealed to many voters from all classes. He appeared to offer simple solutions to complicated problems.

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Seventy-five years ago, the movement's appeal – and its tactics and arguments - had a poisonous plausibility. I went to a museum with a display of fascist memorabilia from the UK. It was unsettling to see the actual uniforms they wore, the posters they put up, the truncheons they carried. It became abundantly clear that the BUF offered a sense of belonging, and that this was at the heart of its appeal. Its members were proud to march in paramilitary style behind the emblazoned drums. Some of them bought enamelled cufflinks or cigarette lighters bearing the movement's insignia. The BUF belongs to history, but movements that demand a sinister, quasi-tribal loyalty from their members are unfortunately still with us.

The third source is the oldest. I've known about it almost all my life. It's where this book really started, though it ended in a very different place. In this case the past begins in 1899. And this is where my grandmother comes into the story.

* * *

My grandmother told me about the murder. 'Our' murder. She talked about it with modest proprietorial pride. I was twelve years old, and my experience of the subject was derived largely from Agatha Christie. By and large, having a murder more or less in the family seemed mildly distinguished, like having a house with a ghost. I don't think it occurred to me then that a murder inevitably has a victim, that someone has actually died.

The Moat Farm Murder had been a well-known case in its time. The farm was in Essex, near Saffron Walden. Its very name sounded pleasingly romantic, redolent of antiquity. The farm used to belong to my great-great-grandparents, and in the 1890s my grandmother and her sister Fanny would go down from London to stay there. I saw a

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photograph of them once – two little girls in white pinafores holding hands in a garden.

More than twenty years later, I found myself making a living by writing novels with corpses in them. In the course of work I flicked through one of those compilations of famous murder cases that regularly trickle into print. And suddenly there it was, no longer confined to childhood memory: the Moat Farm Murder of 1899. What caught my eye was a double-page spread of photographs that accompanied the account. There was the house itself, with a stretch of the moat, which had been drained. Two men, one in a bowler hat and the other in cap and shirt-sleeves, were searching it, presumably for bodies. There was the timbered interior of the farm's great barn, where the inquest had been held. There was the murderer: a bearded man, rather like Edward VII. His name was Samuel Herbert Dougal. And there was his victim, Miss Camille Cecile Holland – first as a pretty, middle-aged woman posing by a sofa in her Sunday best and smiling shyly at the camera, and then in death as a sodden bundle wrapped in sacking and stretched across three dining chairs in the greenhouse at Moat Farm.

That's how *Bleeding Heart Square* began – with my grandmother and a bundle of sacking in a greenhouse. Nothing happened quickly: in a sense, this novel had a gestation period of more than forty years. But the photograph of a body in its sacking shroud festered slowly in my mind.

When I began to research the case, I had a stroke of luck: it had been covered in the Notable British Trials series, which fed the pre-war public appetite for homicide that George Orwell immortalised in his essay 'The Decline of the English Murder'. Each of these plump red volumes concentrates on a single murder case, providing transcripts of court proceedings, copies of other relevant documents, photographs, maps, and a substantial introduction giving an account of the murder

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and its aftermath. F. Tennyson Jesse, the distinguished criminologist and the great-niece of the poet Tennyson, edited and introduced *The Trial of Samuel Herbert Dougal* (William Hodge and Company, London and Edinburgh, 1928).

Miss Holland met Samuel Dougal in 1898. She was a fifty-five-year-old spinster with a small fortune of her own. He was three years younger, a former soldier, a womaniser and a convicted forger who had narrowly escaped prison for a string of other offences, including arson, larceny, bigamy and possibly murder. He was anamoral charmer who swiftly overcame Miss Holland's religious, moral and social scruples. Within three months they were living together as man and wife. But they didn't marry.

There is no doubt that Dougal's motives were entirely mercenary. As F. Tennyson Jesse puts it in her inimitably fruity prose: '...there can have been no physical pleasure for him in his conquest of this timid, precise, elderly woman. His taste was rather for buxom country wenches whom he was yet to garner so plentifully.' He persuaded Miss Holland to use nearly a quarter of her capital into buying a farm, which is where my grandmother's family comes into the story. The patriarch, William Savill, had recently died. The family put the farm, then known as Coldhams, up for sale. Dougal – or rather Miss Holland – bought it.

It is impossible to say for certain why they wanted the place. Miss Holland had spent her life in cities. Perhaps she had romantic ideas about living in the country, particularly in a farmhouse encircled with a moat like the gloomy but romantic grange of Tennyson's 'Mariana'. Perhaps she hoped that Dougal would settle down and farm; that he would stop leering at buxom wenches and drinking too much brandy.

During negotiations for the purchase, Dougal had the contract put in his sole name. Miss Holland showed a brief flash of common sense

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by insisting that it be put in her name instead. But she didn't have enough sense to walk away from him. Perhaps she felt she had finally found a man to love her. She wouldn't have wanted to lose him or indeed her treasured family furniture and possessions, which were now installed at Moat Farm. Or perhaps she believed her reputation was now so compromised she had to make the best of what she had. In any case, how was she to know what his plans for her were? That last attempt to assert herself might have been why she had to die – because Dougal knew he had not fully mastered her.

The contract was signed on 19 January, 1899. On 26 January, the couple moved to furnished rooms in Saffron Walden, where they stayed for three months while the sale was finalised and the house made ready for them. Miss Holland brought her little dog, Jacko, to whom she was devoted.

Their landlady, Mrs Wiskens, later said that when she was dressed for the day, Miss Holland looked ten or fifteen years younger than she was. Mrs Wiskens noted signs of strain in her lodgers' relationship, even then. 'Mrs Dougal' made it quite clear that the money that had bought the farm was hers. And she disliked the way that Dougal had a habit making trips to London, wiring at the last moment to say that he was 'detained by business' and obliged to spend the night. Miss Holland would sit in the parlour, waiting sometimes in vain for the sound of Dougal's bicycle bell as he rode back from the station. 'I don't believe he needed stay up at all,' she confided to Mrs Wiskens. 'He could have come back if he'd wanted to.'

On 27 April, Samuel Dougal and Miss Holland moved to Moat Farm. As the crow flies, it is not much more than thirty miles from the centre of London, but even now it's an isolated place surrounded by farmland between the village of Clavering and the hamlet of Rickling. In those days the nearest house was Rickling Vicarage, nearly half a

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mile away.

F. Tennyson Jesse must have seen the place in the 1920s: 'The house itself is a building that even on a sunny day holds something sinister and dreary, a look as of a house in some wild Bronte tale, and that on a wet, grey day might stand for the epitome of everything that is lonely and grim.' Indeed she goes on to describe it in language reminiscent of the scarier sort of fairy tale, which is perhaps appropriate in view of poor Miss Holland's fate. Even the names of the farm workers and servants had an other-worldly quality that might have come from Bunyan. The trap that took Miss Holland and Dougal to the farm on that first day was driven by a man called Henry Pilgrim. One of the maidservants, who came and went at Moat Farm with bewildering speed, was called Lydia Faithful.

Everything conspired to make the fairy tale darker. The countryside was blighted by an agricultural depression. The heavy clay soil clung to the feet. The few inhabitants of the area were both physically and morally depressed. F. Tennyson Jesse made dark hints of sexual depravity: '...the habits of the beasts of the field, so blameless in them and so degrading in human beings, were the rule rather than the exception in the small, overcrowded cottages.'

Miss Holland had three miserable weeks to live. The farm was isolated at the end of muddy cart track; the house was accessible only by a single footbridge over the moat. The post was left in a box on the lane, at the far end of the cart track; every morning Dougal would walk down to collect it. No tradesmen ever called – everything was fetched in the trap. On the couple's first morning at the farm, the maid complained that her master had tried to kiss her.

At about 6.30 p.m. on Friday 19 May, Miss Holland told the maid that Mr Dougal was taking her shopping in the trap. That was the last time anyone, apart from her murderer, saw her alive. A few minutes

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later, when she was waiting in the trap by the bridge over the moat, Dougal shot her with his revolver. Soon afterwards he buried her in a disused ditch between the farmyard and the moat.

Later that evening Dougal returned alone. He told the servant that 'Mrs Dougal' had decided to go to London. The following morning, he claimed to have had a letter from his 'wife' (though the post had not arrived), and that she had gone away to stay with a friend. On the same day he sent a telegram to his real wife (his third) inviting her down to the farm. He introduced her to the local clergyman as his daughter. The real Mrs Dougal was soon wearing some of Miss Holland's clothes and jewellery, and generously gave the clergyman's wife a shawl and some sheet music that had once belonged to her.

A few months later, Jacko, Miss Holland's dearly loved dog, turned up at the home of Mrs Wiskens, the Saffron Walden landlady. Mrs Wiskens, who had been surprised and rather hurt that Miss Holland hadn't said goodbye to her, wrote to Moat Farm. Dougal eventually collected the dog. He avoided questions about where his wife was.

The years passed. It was easy for Dougal to forge Miss Holland's signature. Gradually he sold her shares and withdrew her money. He transferred the ownership of the farm to himself. At first he was a popular addition to the neighbourhood – genial, talkative, an excellent shot; he was always ready to stand a drink or contribute to a good cause. He was noteworthy too for having one of the few bicycles in the neighbourhood, and also the very first car (which he referred to as his 'locomobile').

The only problem was sex, and in particular the fact that (in F. Tennyson Jesse's discreetly convoluted prose) Dougal was unable 'to restrain his amours within the not at all narrow limits of the not very exiguous circle in which he lived.' (I am still not quite sure what that means.) He had a succession of affairs close to home, and barely

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bothered to conceal them – seducing one sister in front of the other, for example, and denying paternity when served with affiliation orders. In another case he 'had relations' with three sisters and their mother. No doubt this was 'the conduct of a man in whom sex was a disease, who was so mad with lust that he did not know ordinary prudence.'

People began to talk about Moat Farm. Stories circulated about Dougal giving bicycling lessons to naked girls in the meadow to the north of the house. 'What a picture,' wrote F. Tennyson Jesse in mounting excitement, 'in that clayey, lumpy field, the clayey, lumpy girls, naked, astride that unromantic object, a bicycle, and Dougal, gross and vital, cheering on these bucolic improprieties...!'

People also began to remember the past and to ask questions about what had happened to Miss Holland. Among them was the real Mrs Dougal, who had run off with another man, and whom Dougal was now trying to divorce. Doubts accumulated, hardened into suspicions, and at last, in March 1903, led to a full-blown police investigation into Miss Holland's disappearance. Dougal concocted a story to explain her departure, but it was soon shown to be false. The trail of forgeries was exposed after a close examination of financial transactions in Miss Holland's name since May 1899.

Even before the body was found, the case aroused widespread interest. The police took up residence in the house, drained the moat and dug up many parts of the surrounding land. According to *The Times*, six thousand 'excursionists' swooped on the farm during the Easter Bank holiday of 1903. Many were souvenir hunters. Some were armed with 'Kodaks'. Food vendors circulated, selling peanuts and other snacks. Enterprising photographers printed postcards of the scene and sold them to the tourists.

At last they found the body of a woman. The corpse was much decayed. A foot broke off when they moved it. The hair had gone,

and so had most of the face. There was a bullet hole in the skull. But enough remained of the body and its clothing for the police to establish that it was Miss Camille Holland.

Dougal had made a mistake by burying the body in a ditch, where it had been partly shielded by some branch cuttings. A pathologist pointed out that if he had put the body in the farmyard midden, the acids would have set to work and after four years there would have been little or nothing left of either body or clothes apart from, perhaps, an unidentifiable thighbone or two.

At the coroner's inquest, the jury withdrew for only five minutes before delivering a verdict of wilful murder against Samuel Herbert Dougal. Miss Holland's killer protested his innocence but the evidence had mounted steadily against him. Much of it depended on railway timetables and postal deliveries, on bank clerks' statements and landladies' gossip – reinforcing the sense that this real-life murder case eventually had a misty afterlife in the imaginations of so many authors and readers of inter-war golden age detective stories.

Dougal was tried and convicted. While awaiting execution, he sold his story to the *Sun*. His presumably ghosted account claimed implausibly that Miss Holland's death was a dreadful accident. He blamed the brandy. He was hanged at Chelmsford Gaol on the 14 July 1903. His grave is unmarked, though his initials and number are carved on a nearby wall.

His victim lies in Saffron Walden cemetery. F. Tennyson Jesse remarks that Miss Holland would have approved of the delicate phrasing of the inscription on the cross above the grave: 'In sympathetic memory of Camille Cecile Holland, of Maida Vale, London, who died at Clavering under distressing circumstances on the 19th May, 1899, aged 56 years.'

As for Jacko, Miss Holland's little dog, he was given a home by Mrs

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Wiskens, the Saffron Walden landlady who had been an important witness for the prosecution at Dougal's trial. F. Tennyson Jesse should have the last word. In later life, Jacko became 'the object of admiring curiosity'. And even death itself did not bring an end to this: 'And now he stands, stuffed and in a glass case, on a side table, in the parlour where Miss Holland used to listen for the sound of Dougal's bicycle bell.'

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A novelist has the luxury of selection. Jacko lives on in *Bleeding Heart Square*, and so do the top-hatted beadle, the fascist cufflinks and much else. But the book started with my grandmother. It started with the desire to give a voice to a woman murdered in 'distressing circumstances'.

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