

OPINION

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The major contributions of Dr. William Chester Minor

By R. Marc Kantrowitz



Lambeth Marsh in London was a crime-infested cesspool of humanity.

Crowded tenements housed far too many people living in, or on the edge of, poverty in a dank area smelling of rotten eggs.

Notwithstanding the ongoing and overt violence of the area, gunfire was a rarity. Fists, knives, bricks, rocks and shanks were the choices of mayhem.

Thus, when shots rang out shortly after 2 a.m. on Feb. 17, 1872, all took notice.

The hapless victim was 34-year-old George Merrett, the father of seven with number eight on the way. He rose early to heave coal into the roaring fires at the local brewery. He bid his wife, Eliza, farewell and trudged off into the clear night, smoke from his pipe mixed with his cold breath.

Suddenly, loud cries shook the quiet of the early hour. Merrett

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looked at the source of the ruckus and quickly realized that he was under attack. The shouting man gave chase and Merrett ran. The man stopped, pulled out a gun and fired several shots. Merrett fell to the ground, dead.

The gunman did not attempt to flee and was quickly caught. William Chester Minor readily admitted to the misdeed, though he explained that he had shot the wrong man. His intended target was someone who had broken into his room.

The authorities quickly learned that the killer was no ordinary criminal. Tall and regal looking, the 37-year-old Minor was a doctor.

He had attended Yale and served the Union as a surgeon during the Civil War.

Questions of how the well-educated and respected American wound up living in sordid decadence was pounced on by a hungry and titillated press: Soon enough the court addressed the very same issues.

That Minor lived in a district of easy women mirrored his behavior when he was in the military, where he started frequenting the sleaziest parts of the cities in which he was stationed,

His vigorous sexual appetite was matched by his contraction of venereal diseases. Unfortunately for Minor, those illnesses paled in comparison to the horrors he found on the frontline. In time, their accumulation pushed him closer to madness and his behavior grew more bizarre.

At night his torment crested. He saw people coming through the walls and floor to steal, poison, molest and victimize him. He carried a gun to protect himself.

In 1871, he was discharged from the military, given a well-earned pension and sent on his way. Hoping to escape his demons, he traveled abroad, planning to rest, read and paint in Europe's finest

cities. Instead, he lived in a seedy part of London where people continued to come through the walls.

One night he had had enough, grabbed his gun and pursued one of his tormentors, shooting him dead. But he shot the wrong man.

At trial, Dr. Minor was found insane and sent to an institution, where he would in time become its longest-serving inmate, residing there for 38 years.

As the cultured Minor was found not to pose a threat, he was given two cells, one in which to sleep and the other in which to

write and paint. Having money, he collected books, and soon his cell looked like a library, complete with bookshelves and even a fireplace.

Feeling great remorse for his murder of an innocent young man, Minor, with the approval of the institution, started sending money to the victim's wife, Eliza Merrett.

In time, she started visiting him, apparently somewhat taken with the seemingly harmless yet refined individual. When in passing he mentioned having some difficulty obtaining certain books in which he was interested, she volunteered to purchase them for him and did so on a monthly basis.

Soon, however, Merrett took to drink and stopped visiting Minor. Sadly, Minor's nightly visitors continued to torture him, as they would for the remainder of his long life. He died at 85 at an asylum in America to which he had been transferred.

Epilogue

One of the greatest accomplishments in literature is the 1st edition of the Oxford English Dictionary in which every English word is defined, a feat that took nearly 75 years to accomplish. In 12 volumes, more than 400,000 words were defined using 1.8 million illustrative quotations.

Thousands of volunteers were sought and used. One, who simply



The well-educated and respected Dr. Minor

identified himself as being from Broadmoor, Crowthorne, Berkshire, became one of the dictionary's greatest and most dependable contributors, working tirelessly for 20 years and providing tens of thousands of definitions.

His name: Dr. William Chester Minor.

And how did he likely learn of the project in the first place? From a flyer in a book purchased by Eliza Merrett.