

The Mansion House Murder Mystery

By Alistair Martin

Most accounts featuring large mansion houses in Broughty Ferry concentrate on the architects who designed them, the furnishings within them, the lifestyle of the occupants and the parties they gave. One mansion, however, had a completely different story – a mystery that was never solved. In 2013 there remain at least 77 unsolved murders on record in Scotland, the oldest dating back to 1866. The second oldest was committed in October 1912 when the body of Jean Milne, a wealthy, eccentric spinster, was discovered in Elmgrove, her 23 room mansion in the leafy and wealthy town of Broughty Ferry. Elmgrove sat in its own 2 acres of ground, and though Miss Milne was extremely wealthy, living off an annual income of £1,000 (£57,000 in 2013) from the rents of various properties once owned by her brother, she appeared to lead a quiet life strongly influenced by her religious faith. She had a circle of friends but she rarely entertained them in her home. She was heard by neighbours playing her pipe organ and singing along to the hymns, often well into the night. She had few servants and a gardener who came only occasionally. Consequently the garden was left to become a wilderness.

Jean Milne was born in Dundee and resided with her brother J H Milne, a wealthy tobacco manufacturer, who bought Elmgrove in 1895. When he died in 1903 she was given the life rent of the property, but on her death the property was to go to the St Andrew's United Free Church in Meadow Place, Dundee. Though she was 69 years old, she dressed as a younger woman would, never going out without her jewellery, including as many as seven diamond rings. To her neighbours she was a church going eccentric living in "Bleak House". Almost daily she dined in the best restaurants in Dundee, with afternoons given over to attending public meetings or lectures, many of which were church related, or consulting her bank manager and financial adviser Mr J Kyd. She made frequent trips to London and abroad, holidaying for around 4 months a year. She was well educated, spoke several languages and was a "pillar" of the United Free Church in Dundee but was also known to be a generous supporter of other local churches. She had an aunt, Miss Brown, with whom, although she lived in West Ferry, she had no contact and there was a nephew, John Milne, who resided in London.

At the end of October 1912 Jean Milne had not been seen for some time although this in itself was not unusual considering her love of holidays and travel and her eccentric habits. However, on 2nd November the postman, James Slidders, who delivered letters twice a day, could not get the mail into the box and thought this strange as she normally arranged for mail to be forwarded. He contacted the police, and the following day Coullie, the local joiner, (whose firm was still in existence in Brook Street, Broughty Ferry, in the 1970s) was summoned to force entry.

Miss Milne's body was found fully dressed at the bottom of the stairs apparently bludgeoned to death by a poker. She was covered by a sheet, her legs bound with a window cord. In the vicinity of the body was a two tine carving fork which was bloodstained. The telephone wires had been cut with a pair of garden shears, and a garden rake and hoe were also found in the house, perhaps another sign of her eccentricity. Miss Milne's jewellery was untouched but there was no money in the purse beside the body. There was no sign of forced doors and none of the windows appeared to have been opened for years, adding weight to the feeling that Miss Milne knew and possibly invited her assailant into the house. Other than the hallway, which showed signs of a struggle, all other rooms were intact. The post mortem examination showed that death was a result of shock and haemorrhage though her skull had not been broken. She was buried in the Western Cemetery, Dundee on 5th November with 14 invited guests in attendance.

Bearing in mind Broughty Ferry was not annexed to Dundee until the following year, Chief Constable Howard J Semphill of Broughty Ferry, being more used to reprimanding little boys for stealing apples or chastising dog owners for not having a licence, immediately called in the Taggart of the era, Detective Lieutenant John Trench of Glasgow. Trench arrived in Broughty Ferry on Monday 4th November. Four years earlier Trench had won acclaim by solving a similar crime in Glasgow when a wealthy spinster was murdered. With all Miss Milne's possessions intact, Trench immediately queried the motive and the possible date of her death. He was also concerned that, as she was a known user of tramcars, no loose change was found in the house.

Enquiries revealed she had attended church on 13th October and a Home Mission meeting in McCheyne Church Dundee the next day. All mail dated prior to 14th October was opened as was the local Advertiser of 12th October, but the Telegraph of the same date was folded as if just delivered. A Church Elder had called at the house on the 16th October but had not gained access. The assumption was she died early during the 15th/16th October. The actual date of death was to prove crucial later in the investigation. A reward of £100 (£5700 in 2013) was offered and brought forward many people with information both useful and fanciful. Elmgrove also became a "tourist attraction" with hundreds travelling to the house each day. The local dustman, James Don, gave a good description of a person all in black whom he saw leaving the house on 16th October at 4.30 a.m. The man doubled back into the property when he saw the dustman. A regular caller at the house, pedlar Andrew Hay, saw a smartly dressed man leave Elmgrove on 15th October. He himself got no answer at the door.

In mid October, Margaret Campbell, a maid in the adjoining mansion, saw a man in full evening dress walk up and down in the garden for some ten minutes in the forenoon. He was 6 foot tall and broad. Miss Milne's gardener, John Wood, also confirmed a foreign sounding gentleman, about 5' 8" tall, had called at the house around the same time. However the descriptions of the men varied so much it complicated matters for Trench and Semphill. A further complication arose when a Church Elder from Broughty Ferry Parish Church, John Troup, confirmed he called to collect a donation on the 21st October on two occasions but met with no response. Yet he insisted he saw Miss Milne at an upstairs window. An unattended car was seen outside the address for one hour and a cigar butt was found in a grate

in Elmwood. Two other witnesses said they saw her in Dundee the week after the suggested date of death, but the regular laundry driver failed to gain access on 17th October when Miss Milne should have left a porch window open for him to collect and deposit laundry as arranged.

As Trench's investigation continued, a fuller picture of Miss Milne was now emerging. She lived in only two rooms in Elmgrove, a bedroom and dining room. The house still contained all her brother's clothes though he had died some 9 years earlier, and there were bags of his correspondence all over the house. The only food in the house was tea, sugar and four scones which were purchased in Dundee on 15th October. She travelled to Dundee by tramcar, yet on her frequent trips to London she would stay in the Grand Palace Hotel in the Strand, or other expensive hotels, often for weeks on end and occasionally in the company of young male partners. Returning from these trips she talked openly to her friends about this lifestyle. On her death the United Free Church received the property and £8,000 (£450,000 in 2013), but her nephew to whom she gave a car a few years earlier was not a beneficiary.

In November, Trench and Semphill travelled to London to continue enquiries, the intriguing mystery now attracting nationwide attention. A consensus description of the suspect had been forwarded to all police forces, and ten days after the body was discovered Maidstone police announced they had imprisoned a man for obtaining board and lodging by fraud by befriending women. Charles Warner, a debonair Canadian, was the man and his description and photograph were sent north to Broughty Ferry. Five of the witnesses who had identified a male around Elmgrove agreed the man was Warner, and they, three women and two men, were put on the train to London but only after an appeal to Dundee Town Council to foot the expense was successful. Such was the notoriety of the case that they were met by a throng of newspaper reporters and members of the public when they arrived in London.

The next day Warner was taken into the prison yard at Maidstone jail and the witnesses entered one by one. Four out of five identified him as the man they had seen at or around Elmgrove. On his release from prison on his fraud charge Warner was detained, suspected of the possible murder of Miss Milne and brought to Dundee. Appearing in court in Dundee, he was represented by the duty solicitor, David Blackadder and later by an Edinburgh advocate.

Trench was concerned that the only grounds for Warner's detention were his vague similarity to the person who had been seen at Elmgrove. Enquiries in London could reveal no one who had seen him in the company of Miss Milne. Warner himself vehemently denied the charge, saying he had never been to Scotland and on the day of the crime was in Antwerp where he had pawned a waistcoat to raise some cash. Though initially very uncooperative with the police after his apprehension, he went on to give a fully detailed itinerary of his movements since travelling from New York to Le Havre at the end of September. He had visited Paris, returned to London, moved on to Liverpool, spent a week in digs at Seacombe on the Mersey before travelling to the Netherlands staying in Antwerp, Brussels and Amsterdam. He maintained that he visited the British Consul on 17th October where he received a passport to allow him to return to England. On 3rd November, the day Miss Milne's body was found, he

was on a tramp steamer from Liverpool to Tonbridge and was arrested as he left the ship and taken to Maidstone jail.

In December 1912, Chief Constable Semphill travelled to Antwerp where the pawnbroker was able to show his records confirmed Warner had been there on the date of the murder. The British Consul in Amsterdam also confirmed he had issued a passport to Warner on 17th October 1912. The case against Warner was dissolving fast. Although fingerprinting started in 1902 it was in its infancy and there was no DNA expertise or forensic science to assist with identification. A blood stained paper which had been forwarded to Scotland Yard for finger print analysis had been returned as the prints were too smudged to be of use.

Trench returned to Glasgow on December 14th with a twinge of conscious, as an innocent man had almost been tried for a crime he did not commit. By 31st December 1912 no charge had been laid against Warner though he remained in custody. According to the post-mortem the lightness of the poker blows would have been unlikely to have killed Miss Milne. On 17th November, after a discussion with the doctor who carried out the post-mortem, Miss Milne's clothes were re-examined and found to have 20 puncture holes, probably made by the carving fork. In an article written in 1915, Trench revealed he had applied for the body to be exhumed but this request was refused. Could a woman have committed the crime? The Church Elder was adamant he saw a woman in the house around the time of death. Was it someone Miss Milne had met and befriended on her travels? What was the motive for the killing? Was it simply an opportunist who hid in the garden and then followed her into the house? The investigation lost impetus and fizzled out, with Warner finally released from custody on 8th January 1913.

On his return to Glasgow Detective Lieutenant John Trench, with the unanswered questions of Miss Milne's murder whirling in his head, immediately decided to revisit the notorious case against Oscar Slater who was sentenced to death for a similar murder in Glasgow in 1908. Slater spent three weeks in a condemned cell, and two days before his execution his sentence was commuted to one of life imprisonment with hard labour. Trench agitated for a review of the Slater case, but so upset his superiors who, he alleged, had instructed witnesses to withhold evidence that his promptings eventually led to his losing his job and pension rights. He died just after passing his notes to a journalist friend, Willie Park. By this time Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had written a book about the case resulting in a Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry which, despite new evidence, refused to overrule the sentence. Willie Park, however, followed matters through and published a book in 1927 which became a sensation and saw new witnesses coming forward. Slater was retried and acquitted after serving eighteen years in prison. He was cleared of all charges and awarded £6,000 in compensation.

Charles Warner on release from custody was re-arrested by two Scotland Yard detectives who had travelled north, for the theft of a coat. The magistrate took pity on him due to his 6 weeks' incarceration in Dundee prison coupled with the fact that he told police about the overcoat, and he was discharged and taken to Liverpool where he paid £8.00 for a steerage ticket to Montreal. He enlisted in the Canadian army and served in the first World War.

Elmgrove was bought in 1913 by a jute merchant, Colonel Hill, who changed the name to Moyness. He remained there until 1923 when the property was bought by another merchant, Max Wulff, who in turn sold it to a merchant by the name of Laird in 1932. It was purchased in 1940 by RS Walker of Jute Industries (who formerly lived at Tighnamurin, Monifieth) and then in 1947 by Campbell Scarlett of the Dundee Linoleum Co. From 1973 it was used as an architects office, occupied by Hugh Martin & Partners, and was converted to a Nursing Home in 1987. The house remains much the same as it was when built in 1876 and is a pioneering example of concrete construction, although a modern extension was attached in 1995.

In 2007, a former Broughty Ferry resident applied to Tayside Police for sight of the police case file of the unsolved murder. Tayside Police refused, stating that its release could inhibit a future prosecution and might affect the families of the persons involved. An Appeal to the Scottish Information Commissioner under the Freedom of Information Act 2002 saw Tayside Police being instructed to reveal the information requested. However, the Mansion House Murder Mystery remains just that to this day.

This paper was first published in the booklet “The Memory of Broughty Ferry” published by the Broughty Ferry Community Council in 1913 to mark the centenary of the incorporation of the Burgh of Broughty Ferry into its neighbour, Dundee.