

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

William Chester Minor (1834-1920)

Richard Dadd's rival for the crown of best-known Victorian Broadmoorite is Dr Minor, American murderer and contributor to the first *Oxford English Dictionary*. Minor was the subject of Simon Winchester's book *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, which is now (2009) being made into a film under its US title of *The Professor and the Madman*.

Winchester records Minor's birth as being in June 1834 in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. He was the son of missionaries, and one of two children - his mother died of consumption when he was three. His father subsequently remarried and had another family. He remained in the east until his father sent him to live with his uncle in New Haven, Connecticut, at the age of fourteen.

Once in the USA he attended Yale University, where he studied medicine. He graduated in 1863, and joined the Union Army as a surgeon, in the middle of the American Civil War. Winchester says that he was sent into action at the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864. At his trial at the Surrey Assizes the defence suggested that the horrors of war had caused his illness. Particularly, he had witnessed an execution, and had been required to brand an Irish deserter from the Union cause with a letter 'D'.

After the end of the civil war, Minor remained in the army and indeed rose through the ranks. The pressures of his work continued, but without any immediate signs of insanity. The only catalyst presented for the change in his behaviour is hearsay - that he had become engaged, but the relationship ended. At this point it is known that he began frequenting brothels in New York, where he was stationed at the time. The army moved him to Florida, where he began to exhibit delusions of persecution by his fellow officers. In 1868 the army diagnosed him as suffering from the mental illness of monomania - an obsession with one subject, which gave rise to delusions. He was sent to the Government Hospital for the Insane in Washington DC (now St Elizabeth's Hospital).

Minor was released in 1871, now in enforced retirement from the army and in receipt of his pension. He travelled to London at the end of the year, ostensibly to spend time touring Europe. It appears that he first took up residence at Radley's Hotel, in the west end, and after Christmas moved to Lambeth, where it seems likely he felt he would have easier access to the sex trade. It was in Lambeth that he shot and killed a stranger called George Merritt or Merrett on 17th February 1872. Merritt worked in a brewery, was married and had six children, with another on the way, and was unlucky. On that particular night he was making his way to work when Minor spotted him, chased him, and shot at him several times before fatally wounding him in the neck.

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The scene of crime was very central, between Waterloo and Hungerford bridges, and Minor was apprehended on the spot. Minor said it was a case of mistaken identity - he had thought Merritt was the person who had been breaking into his room. This delusion about forced entry during the night, on various levels, would remain with Minor for the rest of his life.

Minor was committed for trial, and this was held at Kingston upon Thames in April 1872. It seemed that as well as the US authorities, the British had also been acquainted with him. Shortly before Christmas he had visited Scotland Yard to make a complaint that men were coming to his room at night, trying to poison him. He believed that they were Irishmen. Nor was this an isolated incident - Minor had kept in contact with the Yard, continuing to provide evidence to support his claims. The Police noted him, dismissed him as mad, and did nothing. The outcry today would be enormous.

The nature of Minor's enduring delusion was laid bare at the trial. A warder at the jail where Minor was on remand was also an employee at Bethlem, and he testified that every morning Minor would wake up and level the accusation that his guards had allowed him to be sexually abused during the night. His abusers hid in the voids of the room - under the bed, or in the walls or rafters. The abusers were always male, but both men and women (and boys and girls) feature in his descriptions of the sexual terrors that his abusers forced upon him. On the night of Merritt's murder he believed he had disturbed one of his abusers, who had then run off with Minor in hot pursuit. Minor's step-brother attended the trial to confirm that this delusion could be dated back to at least his release from the Washington asylum. He would frequently report that people had been in his room at night. His step-brother stated that apparently it was all punishment for an unspecified act that he had been forced to commit while in the Union Army.

Whatever Minor's confused reasoning for his actions, the jury were quite clear that he was not guilty by reason of insanity. He duly received the sentence of detention at Her Majesty's Pleasure, and was sent on to Broadmoor.

Minor arrived from the Surrey County Gaol on 17th April 1872. Unusually for a Broadmoor patient, he travelled with another patient being transferred from the same prison. Described on admission as 'A thin, pale and sharp-featured man with light coloured sandy hair; deep-set eyes and prominent cheek bones', he dutifully recounted his persistent nocturnal experiences, as well as giving an account of his current bodily health (gonorrhoea and possibly signs of tuberculosis, though none were found). He was obviously thought to be a low risk and was placed in Block 2, where privileges were greatest.

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Almost as soon as he arrived, the American Consulate in London wrote to the Medical Superintendent of Broadmoor for permission to send various things to Minor – both his own possessions and ‘some comforts, such as Dunn’s Coffee, French Plums etc’. The Consulate sent on his possessions shortly after – including clothes, drawing equipment, his tobacco and his diary. They kept hold of his surgical instruments, but kept up an interest in their citizen while he remained in Broadmoor.

As a patient in Block 2 Minor enjoyed a reasonable degree of freedom within the Hospital routine. He had his own clothes, his art materials, and a regular income from his family which allowed him to ask the Hospital to purchase things for him. Examples of things Minor bought are: beef, haddock, poultry, game, steak, bacon, salmon, as well as biscuits, coffee and lots of eggs. Once he bought himself a macaroni cheese. He also regularly bought newspapers and a number of engineering journals (quite possibly for advice about solid building construction, which might prevent his nightly suffering).

He enjoyed as comfortable an existence as would be possible for any Broadmoor patient. At some point he was allowed a separate day room as well as his bedroom, and by 1901 if not before he employed other patients as his servant (occasionally having to change his domestic staff if they were discharged). Winchester suggests that his two rooms were interconnecting, but more probably they were next door or close together in Block 2. He must have enjoyed this privilege for most of his stay, as a note in his file from 1887 suggests that Minor could not get into his day room one morning as the lock was faulty – which no doubt provided him with further evidence of the conspiracy against him – until the attendants removed an obstruction from it.

Much of the anecdotal evidence for Minor’s comfort comes from a 1958 letter written by Dr Patrick McGrath, then the Superintendent, in response to an academic enquiry. He reported on a conversation with Miss Nicolson, daughter of Dr David Nicolson (Superintendent 1886-1895), who confirmed that Minor had his own day room in Block 2, employed a servant, and had his own library, music and paints and even a private stock of wines and spirits. She also said that Minor played the flute, and would from time to time dine with the Superintendent’s family in the latter’s home.

Minor was obviously cared about by his family and friends, and received visits as well as money and luxuries. He began to amass books too, and read voraciously. After Sir James Murray published his ‘appeal to English speakers and the English reading public’ in 1879 for help with what became the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Minor must have come across it and began to send in to the dictionary staff what became thousands of examples of word use to assist them.

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Books would come to play a part in the refinement of his delusion. In his early years in Broadmoor, it was poison that was administered to him at night. Usually chloroform was used to render him helpless. By 1877 he was subject to torture by electricity for the first time, and by 1878 he was being secretly removed from the asylum at night and abused. The first evidence that the criminal agents had moved on to his books is in 1884, when he wrote to the Superintendent alleging his books were defaced at night.

Minor must have found the approach of night a very frightening thing, as it brought with it the certainty of pain and degradation. Immediately he was in Broadmoor he would barricade his room every night by placing furniture across the door. Occasionally the attendants reported that his nights had not been as restless as usual, but mostly the morning brought fresh reports of his trials. He expended much effort on trying to remedy the situation through practical means such as the barricade, asking the Superintendent to watch the attendants and so on. The letter below was sent to the Super on 6th October 1884:

Dear Sir

Let me mention one fact that falls in with my hypothesis. So many fires have occurred in the US originating quite inexplicably in the interspace of ceiling and floor; that I learn now Insurance Companies refuse to insure large buildings - mills, factories etc - which have the usual hollow spacing under the floor. They insist upon solid floors. All this has come to notice within ten years; but no one suggests any explanation.

Very sincerely yours
WC Minor

Winchester also suggests that Minor met regularly with Eliza Merritt, the widow of the man he shot. Unfortunately nothing has yet surfaced in the Broadmoor archives to verify this. But we do know that he met with Sir James Murray. Indeed an apocryphal account of the meeting has been around for some time - the story is that Murray was received into Dr Brayn's office, then the Medical Superintendent (and possessor of a very suitable name), whereupon Murray thanked Dr Brayn for his contribution to the dictionary. Dr Brayn corrected Murray and assured him that it was not he that should be thanked, and then walked him to Block 2 and introduced him to Minor.

The extent of the relationship between the two men is open to conjecture. Evidence from Minor's file suggests that they met sporadically. The first letter from Murray in Minor's file is probably dated 3rd January 1891, although the '1' is indistinct. It refers to Thomas Brushfield, a former Superintendent of Brookwood Asylum in Woking and probably a

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contemporary of Dr Nicolson. Murray says that he is currently working on 'do' for the Dictionary, which dates the letter to around that time. Murray made arrangements to visit Minor for the first time and presumably did so shortly afterwards. Whether or not he became a regular visitor is not evidenced in Minor's file. But the next letter from Murray, which is dated 21st August 1901, says that Murray had not seen Minor since just before Dr Nicolson left as Super. That places their last previous meeting as towards the end of 1895, and implies that Murray had not visited Minor for six years.

Despite the therapeutic effects of his work on the dictionary, Minor's condition deteriorated over the years. The delusions never left him. Reading his notes gives a sense that sometimes he probably internalised them, and when it got too much he would make an accusatory outburst to the attendants or to the Super. Eventually he took matters into his own hands, and on the morning of 3rd December 1902 he tied a tourniquet around the base of his penis and sliced it off. He was 68 years old. Asked why he had done it he replied: 'In the interests of morality'. He testified that for a long time recently he had been taken out of the asylum at night and forced to fornicate with between 50 and 100 women 'from Reading to Land's End.' He spent time in the infirmary but was discharged after four months back to Block 2. Sadly his retaliatory act did not defeat his delusions, which remained as before - his last letter to Dr Brayn, shortly before his discharge, complains still of 'these nightly sensual uses of my body that I experience and struggle against.'

Winchester's book suggests various hypotheses about Minor's own sexual motivations, from dusky eastern maidens with pert breasts to disease and prostitution in New York's metropolis, and to guilt about his feelings for Eliza Merritt. However, Minor's early delusions at Broadmoor all seem to relate to his body being used by men, and it is only in the later years that women play the more significant part. We may never know exactly what Minor's own sexual experiences were, and how his obsessions led him to such a dramatic conclusion. What is beyond doubt is that Minor was able to concoct outrageous tales of depravity experienced with a multitude of other bodies, of both sexes, and that his mutilation of his own body was a direct result of his discomfort with that fact.

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Still riddled with fear and hampered by his burdens, Minor was becoming an old and frail man. In 1907 he severely scalded himself when bathing in his room. In 1908 he suffered from a serious bout of flu. The fact of his advancing years and ill health was not lost on his family and friends, who remained in constant touch with the hospital. The first formal petition for Minor's release was delivered to the Home Office in 1899, who rejected it quickly. But by 1903 Dr Brayn was suggesting to Minor's step-brother that a proposal to remove Minor to America might be received favourably, providing suitable care could be found for him.

It took seven years before matters reached a resolution. In 1909 and 1910, Dr Brayn felt compelled from time to time to remove Minor to the infirmary - he did not feel it was safe to leave Minor alone in his room day after day, as he was no longer capable of looking after himself. Deprived of his books and his art materials, he was increasingly miserable, as well as increasingly harmless. Finally, in April 1910 a conditional discharge was granted for his release. Both Sir James and Lady Murray visited him one last time before he was escorted to the Tilbury Docks on 15th April (via Bracknell, Waterloo and St Pancras), where he was put on board a steamer and handed over to the care of his step-brother.

After thirty-eight years in Broadmoor, he arrived back in America to return to the Government Hospital for the Insane in Washington. There he swapped one similar regime for another - a private room, certain privileges, and nightly torments. Though the Broadmoor authorities had thought he was nearing the end of his life, he did in fact keep going - reading, writing, and making the occasional outburst. He remained in Washington until November 1919, when he was compassionately released to be nearer his family, at the Retreat for the Elderly Insane in Hartford, Connecticut. He died there on 26th March 1920.

Inevitably for Minor there has to be a postscript, because unlike Dadd, who was acknowledged during his life, Minor's place in history has only really come about after his death. Hayden Church, an American journalist, published a romantic piece about Minor in 1915, and another in 1944. He intended to write a book about Minor - there is a relevant letter in Minor's file - but did not. By the 1980s the Oxford University Press was becoming aware of its own history and Minor's place in it, and a more scholarly article was published. Then came Simon Winchester, and latterly, Hollywood and Mel Gibson. The truth of Minor might become obscured by the cloud of myth that now gathers over him, but the truth is there, all the same.

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Sources:

From Broadmoor, information about Minor comes from the relevant case books (D/H14/D2/1/1/3 and D2/1/3/1), and his case file (D/H14/D2/2/1/742), here at the Berkshire Record Office. Entries for purchases made by Minor can be found in the patients' account book (D/H14/D3/3/1/1).

Online, Minor's wikipedia entry is at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Chester_Minor , and there's a BBC article at http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/myths_legends/england/berkshire/article_1.shtml

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The principal work on Minor in print is Simon Winchester's *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, (*The Professor and The Madman* in the US), a bestseller and well worth a read to anyone interested in Minor's story. It is not an authoritative biography, but contains the results of far more research on Minor than the short piece above.