GEORGE DYSON ALIAS JOHN BERNARD WALKER

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This is a story of discovery in two senses: of what was discovered and of the succession of fortuitous events by which it was discovered. Which of the two proves the more interesting remains to be seen, but the two must be interwoven.

The process by which I found myself on the trail of George Dyson began with a chance discovery, but one which can only be touched on here. In 1977 I discovered the typescript of a diary kept by Helen McKenny, a daughter of the manse, during the three years her father was minister of Wesley’s Chapel in London. There was just time to prepare this for publication as part of the reopening celebrations at City Road in November 1978, but the editing had to be done in quite a hurry. In the course of it I made a twofold editorial error for which I can offer no excuse other than the pressure under which I was working. First, I gave incorrect information in one of my editorial notes, and then compounded this by being quite unable to remember or trace where this information came from.

My offending note related to a passing reference in the diary, under the date February 19, 1886, to “the distressing poisoning case of Rev. Dyson.” When I first read it, this meant nothing whatever to me. However, a quick check of the Minutes of Conference showed that between the Minutes of 1885 and 1886 the name of George Dyson disappeared without a trace. Moreover, from some source I could not later identify, I obtained (and recorded in my notes) what turned out to be the false information that Dyson had committed suicide.1

It is always distressing to add to the tally of historical errors in print. This lapse was, however, a fortunate one in its consequences. Felix culpa indeed, for it put me on the trail of a most unusual and unexpected story. The first step on that road was a letter from a friend, David Barton, who, quite unknown to me, had a lively interest in murder trials. He wrote to say that he had not known of Dyson’s suicide and asked, whether I had deliberately made my note “diplomatically unilluminating” in that I had avoided any reference to his involvement in the Bartlett poisoning case? The short answer was: “No; I had failed to refer to that case out of simple ignorance.” In a second letter Barton began to repair that ignorance and direct me to sources of further information on what had been a cause célèbre in its day and was still a fascinating case to

the aficionado of crime.

The details of that case must be outlined in due course, but for the moment we will stay with the process of my enlightenment. I read the two or three books on the Bartlett case, including the full transcript in the "Notable British Trials" series edited by Sir John Hall, but these did not tell me anything about the course of George Dyson's subsequent life. In particular, there was no corroborating evidence about his suicide and I gradually became aware that my editorial haste had led me into error.

The next revelation came some months later and entirely out of the blue. A colleague of mine one day passed me a copy of an issue of Books for Sale, a tabloid catalogue from the second-hand bookseller Richard Booth of Hay-on-Wye, drawing my attention to a page about John Wesley. As it happened, nothing on the page was of any interest to me; but I had not seen this catalogue before and its unusual format caused me to browse through it more generally. The page that arrested my attention was devoted to the library of Edgar Lustgarten, which was for sale and which included volumes in the "Notable Trials" series, including the Adelaide Bartlett case. Moreover, the catalogue referred to an obituary of George Dyson and other insertions in that volume. My interest roused, I wrote to the booksellers asking for further information, though making it clear that I was not seriously interested as a buyer.

After some delay I received a reply that exceeded my wildest hopes. The obituary was a typed copy of one from Scientific American and was for someone called John Bernard Walker. This was at first puzzling and disappointing, but as I read on, all was revealed. An accompanying letter, which my correspondent most generously transcribed for me, was from a Miss Evelyn Curtis of Bournemouth. It was addressed to Lustgarten and revealed that George Dyson and John Bernard Walker were one and the same person, that he had been a friend of her father's before his disastrous involvement in the murder case and that she had met him when he came to see her father on a return visit to England shortly before he died. After the visit, her father had given her the background to Dyson-Walker's bizarre career, and this she was now passing on to Lustgarten.

Here was just the break-through I needed and one which, without the casual perusal of a catalogue, I might never have made. I learned at a stroke that, far from committing suicide, Dyson had emigrated to America, assumed a new name, and launched on a new career. Though I found I was just too late to make contact myself with Miss Curtis, she had done all I could have asked.

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1 Sir John Hall, ed., The Trial of Adelaide Bartlett, 1927. See also Yseult Bridges, Poison and Adelaide Bartlett, 1962; Edgar Lustgarten, Defender's Triumph, 1951. There is also a detailed transcript of the trial in the Wandsworth Borough News (available on microfilm at Wandsworth Central library. For this and other local information I am indebted to the late Rev. Leslie G. Farmer, a former minister of Putney Methodist Church and an indefatigable researcher.
2 My informant was Mr. L.G. Simkins, whose kindness pointed me along a fascinating trail.
3 Taken from Scientific American, December, 1928, 495.
of her, and more. The vital clues were now in my hands and it was for me to follow them up. For much of the research in trans-Atlantic sources it is only fair to give credit to a resourceful and indefatigable friend, Mrs. Betty Young, then head of the East Campus Library at Duke University. If I had the initial stroke of luck, she did much of the hard work that followed.

It is time to back-track to George Dyson's early life and to his fatal involvement with Mrs. Adelaide Bartlett. Dyson was the son of a much respected Wesleyan minister, the Rev. John B. Dyson. Being part of an itinerant ministry, his father moved frequently from circuit to circuit and at the time of George's birth in 1858 was stationed in Northampton. In 1880 George followed in his father's footsteps and was accepted as a candidate for the Wesleyan ministry. The next four years—unusually long for those days—he spent at Headingley College in Leeds where, in addition to preparing for the ministry, he followed studies which earned him in 1885 a B.A. at Trinity College, Dublin.

The Conference of 1884 put him down as a "supply" minister and in January 1885 he was sent to take charge of a newly opened chapel at Merton in the Wandsworth Circuit. Here it was he met his fate and showed himself, for all his book learning, to be naive, gullible, and perhaps too self-regarding for his own good. A married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett, began to attend the chapel and a friendship developed which deepened and survived his removal to take charge of a much more prestigious chapel in Upper Richmond Road, Putney, the following September. The Bartletts were clearly an oddly-matched couple: he the proprietor of a grocery business; she some years younger and (at least in part) of French origin. The husband engaged Bartlett to tutor his wife and encouraged an intimacy that would certainly not have been considered respectable in Victorian eyes. Whether or not, as some writers have readily assumed, this led to more than just close friendship between Dyson and Mrs. Bartlett, will never be known.

Whether in order to remain under his ministry or not, the Bartletts soon moved to Pimlico and Dyson's visits to them continued. But in the early hours of New Year's Day, 1886 this rather bizarre pattern was shattered by the death of Mr. Bartlett in circumstances that strongly suggested he had been murdered. Dyson was soon under suspicion because he admitted having purchased for Mrs. Bartlett the liquid chloroform which had been the cause of her husband's death, and, indeed, having lied about the purpose for which he

5Born in 1815, he entered the Wesleyan ministry in 1839 and retired in 1880 to Poole. From 1888 until his death in 1904 he lived in Bournemouth. He was the author of several local Methodist histories.

6The obituary in Scientific American says he was born in Bournemouth, but this was clearly a misunderstanding.

7Among his contemporaries there were Dinsdale Young, later to be well known as the minister at Westminster Central hall, and Henry Lunn, ecumenist and pioneer travel agent.

8At this point in the story, it has to be said, Yseult Bridges’s imagination takes over.
wanted it. Both were soon under arrest, Dyson charged with being an accessory before the event. Inevitably, the case became a sensation, seeming as it did to involve a married woman and her lover who, for good measure, was a "man of the cloth" (thought not yet "in holy orders," since his status was that of a probationer, with his ordination still in the future).

What was its effect on the Wesleyan Methodist world, and even more on Dyson's family, may easily be imagined. Nonetheless, some of those closely associated with him, such as his colleagues in the Wandsworth Circuit and the two circuit stewards, were prepared to stand up and declare their belief in his innocence, and there was an appeal in the Methodist Times for contributions to his defense fund. Popular suspicion, understandably, did not exonerate him so easily; but the eventual outcome was better than anything he can have dared to hope.

This is not the place for a detailed account of the trial. Against the odds, Adelaide Bartlett was acquitted of murder by a jury which had difficulty in coming to an unanimous verdict. At the outset of the trial Dyson found the charges against him dropped by a prosecution eager to use him as a witness.\(^9\) The judge nevertheless dismissed him with undisguised contempt: "I should think there can be little doubt on the part of anybody who has seen him here that there is one person in the world that the Rev. George Dyson was determined should suffer as little as possible by this history—that is the Rev. George Dyson himself."\(^10\)

Despite the withdrawal of the charges against him, and the acquittal of Mrs. Bartlett, in the eyes of his Church Dyson was tainted—a foolish and unreliable young man, if not very much worse. The verdict of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, meeting in Conference later in that summer of 1886, was measured but unequivocal. It recorded and endorsed the judgement of the London District Meeting, "that by his own admissions it plainly appears that Mr. Dyson has been guilty of wilful falsehood and has otherwise misconducted himself in a manner so grave and discreditable as to render his continuance among us under any circumstances utterly impossible."\(^11\) Dyson’s name thereupon disappeared from the list of those young men continuing on trial as Probationers and (except for one or two crumbs and Miss Curtis’s letter over eighty years later) from the records on this side of the Atlantic.

From this point on, his trail must be followed in the United States, with Miss Curtis’s information filling out the brief entry in the Register of his old school, Kingswood, Bath: "Wesleyan minister, 1884-6. Engineer, U.S.A."\(^12\) From the account given to her by her father, supplemented by American

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\(^9\)Hall, 80.
\(^10\)Hall, 375.
\(^11\)As was normal in disciplinary cases, this verdict is not found in the published Minutes of Conference, but is recorded in the manuscript "Conference Journal", now in the Methodist Archives at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester.
\(^12\)The History of Kingswood School by Three Old Boys, 1898, 39 of the “Register.”
records, his subsequent career can at least be outlined. How soon after the trial Dyson emigrated is not clear, but he is unlikely to have wasted much time in escaping from a notoriety he would find, at the very least, uncomfortable to live with. In his eagerness to bury the past, he went as far west as possible and we find him living for a time in Oregon, where at first he found life harsh and work hard to get. Miss Curtis wrote of his “doing manual labour and all sorts until I believe some knowledgeable person saw some drawings he had made in spare time—scientific or architectural.” This was an important break-through for him, as a result of which before the end of the century he was back in the New York area. In December 1898 he “abjured all allegiance and fidelity... to the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland” and became a naturalized citizen of the United States of America.

He had already assumed the name of John Bernard Walker, borrowing his middle name from Miss Curtis’ father. Eighteen months later the census records show that he was living at Mount Vernon in Westchester County, NY, with a wife, Bella, whom he had married in Oregon thirteen years earlier and a son, George, born to them there in 1889.

The census record (together with local directories for the period) give his occupation as “journalist” and it is at this point that Miss Curtis’ evidence springs its greatest surprise. For the obituary she enclosed with her letter showed that Walker (as we must now call him) had not only been put on the payroll of Scientific American, but had quite soon (at least by 1899 and probably by 1895) risen to the position of Editor and was beginning to make a considerable reputation as both journalist and technical expert. Whether he was self-taught or had found some opportunity to attend courses in technical subjects, the ineffectual probationer minister had emerged from his Wesleyan cocoon as an expert in engineering and naval affairs, writing with increasing knowledge and authority on a wide range of topics. It was indeed a remarkable transformation, confirming the earlier Wesleyan verdict that he was a young man of considerable promise.

Before 1911, so much of the material in Scientific American was unsigned that we can only guess at the scope of his contribution. But the later signed articles provide more than sufficient evidence. Thus we find him writing on a “Racing Aeroplane of the Future” (1910); “Personal Impressions” of the Panama Canal (1912); “Thirteen Years’ Development” of trans-Atlantic steamships (1913); “Problems of our [i.e. America’s] Navy (1914), followed by many articles on technical aspects of the First World War. The spate continues year after year, embracing many aspects of civil and military technolo-

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3Naturalization certificate, dated December 24, 1898, in the County Court of Westchester, New York.
4A review of his Unsinkable Titanic in The Bookman, vol. 35 (1912) 585 describes him as editor “for the past seventeen years.”
5At the end of 1910 it was announced that future issues were to be enlarged to 24 pages, with a monthly supplement on “some topic of live, current interest” and “a large number of signed articles written by men of special knowledge and world-wide reputation.”
gy as well as more widely ranging topics such as the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race (1925) and the America’s Cup (1926). By 1926, though semi-retired, he was still contributing articles as “Editor Emeritus.”

There were also contributions to other periodicals such as The American Review of Reviews, Hearst’s Magazine, The Bookman and National Geographic. And, if this were not enough, the titles of eight publications are listed under his name in the catalogue of the Library of Congress, including a book on maritime safety called An Unsinkable Titanic (1912) and The Story of Steel (1926). His American Fallen! The Sequel to the European War, written in 1915, was an imaginary account of Germany’s invasion of America after the defeat of her European enemies and may well have contributed to the eventual engagement of America in the “Great War.” Unquestionably he had become a prolific and a wide-ranging and versatile writer whose judgments carried weight.

His public reputation at the height of his career is clearly reflected in the offices he held, notably as Chairman of the Navy Committee of the National Security League. His obituary recorded how he “enjoyed not only the friendship of a host of army and navy men, but also the confidence of men high in governmental positions.” It also speaks of him as an editor who got to the bottom of his subjects and “then presented them in a clear, thought-provoking manner, without fear or favor...Evading no issues, he fought his verbal battles with a keen zest for the truth, regardless of the consequences.” Clearly, John Bernard Walker had grown into something far removed from the easily misled, self-pitying George Dyson of 1886.

It would be pleasant to record that his professional success was matched by domestic happiness, but sadly this does not seem to have been the case. When news of his death reached Poole, Miss Curtis’s father wrote a letter of condolence to his son, only to receive a reply, written “somewhat harshly” informing him that Walker had made his wife very unhappy and they had divorced. Perhaps the flaws in his character had not been entirely eradicated by the events of 1886; but on this we shall have to content ourselves with speculation.

It seems unlikely that throughout these years Walker ever returned to his homeland, though it is tempting to speculate on the basis of articles such as “Great Britain at War” in November 1918 or “Saving St. Paul’s Cathedral” in 1925 that he may have sneaked in under heavy disguise. But there is only one visit of which we have definite evidence. Early in 1928 and in declining health, he set out on travels which brought him back to England. It was on this occasion that he went down to Bournemouth to renew acquaintance with Miss Curtis’ father and she remembered his as “a little old man, frail, very courteous and kind, and, I think, sentimental.” “I had several letters from him,” she wrote, “as he toured England visiting various of our architectural glories and

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\*This is the title by which he is referred to, e.g. in the New York Times Book Review, 5 September 1926, 20.
with introductions in his pocket to anyone who mattered in his particular lines." And though, as she said, "the shadow of death was upon him," he continued to send back articles on what he saw and heard. Yet again, another facet of his personality briefly comes into view and we are left wondering which was the "real" George Dyson.

Before the end of the year, on October 17, Dyson and Walker were both dead and the latter's obituary appeared in the December issue of Scientific American; though, curiously enough, none can be traced in the New York Times. It was the end of a chequered, and largely clandestine career, punctuated by one moment of blazing notoriety.

And what of his guilt or innocence in the matter of Edwin Bartlett's sudden death? In Methodist circles of the time, belief in his innocence was widespread—or was widely asserted—and the general view both at grassroots level and in the Conference seems to have been that he was gullible rather than guilty. This might, of course, be little more than wishful thinking. Miss Curtis throws a little light on the matter: "Father went to see him in prison and found him quite calm, though he realized it was touch and go.... He said to my father, Bernard, there was nothing wrong until I started lying. I lied to the chemist about the chloroform." And the prosecution clearly felt the evidence against him to be less than conclusive. But the informal verdict remains open.

This is George Dyson's story, but perhaps the last word must be the lady's. Adelaide Bartlett's acquittal was greeted with rather more skepticism. The surgeon, Sir James Paget is said to have remarked after the trial, "Now that she's acquitted, she should tell us, in the interests of science, how she did it." But a letter to the Times from the foreman of the jury shortly after the trial ended strikes a different note in the form of a footnote to their verdict. It reveals that all but one of the jurors were in favour of adding a rider to the effect that her husband probably "administered the chloroform to himself with a view of obtaining sleep or committing suicide."

On the other hand, after the publication of her book, Yseult Bridges received information about Mrs. Bartlett's subsequent career that shows her to have been a thoroughly duplicitous character. It is interesting that for her, too, "life after acquittal" included some years in America, where she became a piano teacher in a genteel suburb of Boston. But equally, it is unlikely that either she or John Bernard Walker knew the whereabouts of the other, or would have wished to renew their acquaintance and thereby reopen old sores.

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17 Death Certificate, Brooklyn, New York, no. 21000.
18 The Times, April 20, 1886. This letter seems to have been overlooked by earlier writers on the Adelaide Bartlett case. Whether the jury's majority view is more plausible than Yseult Bridges' ingenious explanation of how the poison was administered is a matter for debate.
19 The information is given in a postscript to the 1970 reissue of her book and is based on the evidence of an apparently reliable correspondent. Another correspondent informed her, erroneously, that Dyson had emigrated to Australia and this found its way into Leslie Farmer's History of Putney Methodism, published in connection with the celebration of the church's centenary in 1970.