

Behind the Books

'Stalemate': Published

The murder of Julia Wallace was never 'solved' in the sense that whoever did it was 'brought to justice' as the saying goes nowadays. The (then) Liverpool City Police thought they had solved it when they arrested and charged the murdered woman's husband, William Herbert Wallace. At his trial the Crown offered no evidence of motive and only the most circumstantial evidence of opportunity, yet he was convicted and sentenced to hang. A month later the Court of Criminal Appeal quashed the verdict on the grounds the evidence led by the prosecution at the trial did not justify it. Wallace was freed, though technically not acquitted. The Liverpool Police did not reopen the case and both the police and DPP files on it were withheld from public scrutiny for another 70 years.

Unsurprisingly the case attracted a lot of attention from public figures, writers, and critics both at the time and from then on.

James Agate, a leading critic famous in his day, wrote 'Either the murderer was Wallace or it wasn't. If it wasn't, then here at last is the perfect murder.' Raymond Chandler wrote 'The Wallace case is unbeatable; it will always be unbeatable.' Even in 2012 there were two books published which offered 'solutions' to the case and as late as October 2013, the late P D James, who had always been fascinated by it and used elements of it in her novels, contributed a long article to the Sunday Times Magazine in which she suggested that Wallace did kill his wife when presented with an out-of-the-blue opportunity in the form of a malicious telephone message inviting him to call on a Mr Qualtrough the following evening to transact a lucrative piece of insurance business. The caller was Richard Gordon Parry and the reason for the call was to send Wallace on a wild goose chase as revenge because Wallace had reported Parry to their mutual employer, the Prudential, for not paying-in all of the collections he took from clients. Parry had consequently been dismissed by the company.

What do we actually know – as distinct from speculate – about the case?

- At the time of the murder Wallace was terminally ill. One kidney had been removed in 1909; he'd spent a month as an in-patient in a Liverpool hospital in mid-1930 and it had been made clear to him his remaining kidney was diseased and malfunctioning and nothing could be done to reverse or even arrest that.
- He was a deeply introspective, introverted, and cerebral man. Wholly self-taught, his interests covered chemistry, science in general, philosophy, chess, music, and literature –interests that, together with his psychological traits, tended to cut him off from those among whom he lived and worked.
- Research published in the present century revealed Julia Wallace to be nearly twenty years older than her husband and yet she had got away with claiming to be the same age as him. No one at the time or for long afterwards suspected it. She did not look her age. She had lied persistently on official documents about her age, parentage, place of birth and even her first name, and did so too with her marriage certificate.
- She rented and did not own the house she lived in when she met Wallace.

- On the night she was killed she had today's equivalent of £2340 in her Post Office account and about £40 in today's money in a pocket applied to her corset. She would have had to undress to get at it.
- When Wallace arrived home around 9 pm from his wasted trip to Mossley Hill in pursuit of business from Mr Qualtrough, he was able to enter his back yard through the door in the wall. He said he'd told his wife to bolt it after him when he went out. If she had, he wouldn't have been able, or expected, to get in.
- Julia was killed around 8pm. Professor McFall stated so in the original report he made to the CID. He later changed his mind although he had no better evidence than he had had when he made that first report.
- Contrary to PD James's theory, Wallace did not cost Parry his job by reporting him to the Pru for paying-in less than he collected. It was more than a year after Wallace caught Parry out that Parry left the Pru of his own accord. About a month before the murder, Parry gave Wallace a calendar from his new employer. It was Wallace's supervisor who told him later that Parry's father had made good shortages in his son's accounts.

So, given what is known, what might have happened? Someone killed Julia with a degree of violence of which Wallace, with his temperament and physical condition, was probably incapable. What's more, whoever it was did it when Wallace was several miles from home. Someone Julia let into the house, someone she either knew or thought she knew. Someone who intended from the start, or was provoked, to kill her. Someone from her distinctly strange past, perhaps, or someone who wanted her out of the way? Or someone who was persuaded, rewarded, or pressured to kill her so someone else could benefit? Someone else who might then feel that at the end of a lifetime of frustration and disappointment he (or she) had committed 'the perfect murder'.

'This Son of York': a work in progress

For all that his reign was very short, from mid-June 1483 to mid-August 1485, Richard III generated in his lifetime, in the century or more after his death in battle, and among historians ever since a prodigious quantity of the coals of controversy – the embers of which have been recently blown upon by the discovery of his mortal remains beneath a local authority department car park in Leicester on the site of what was the choir of the long-destroyed Franciscan Friary. Even here in the twenty first century, controversy raged between those who felt strongly he should have been re-interred in his 'home' city of York – where as both his brother's lieutenant in the North and as king, he had been welcomed, perhaps even loved, and where he had chosen to create his only legitimate son Prince of Wales – and those who insisted, and won the argument, that he be re-interred in the city where his skeleton had been uncovered.

Even in his lifetime he was accused, not always openly, of having 'usurped' the throne by setting aside the claim of his brother's eldest son – already proclaimed Edward V -- and the younger, the heir presumptive, on the grounds that their parents' marriage had been bigamous because the husband, Edward IV, had gone through a form of marriage with another woman two or three years before, and the woman involved was still alive when the second marriage took place. Stalwart Ricardians will insist that this claim of a previous marriage holds water and that there is strong circumstantial evidence for it. Opponents, those inclined to take Richard as a long-term intended

usurper, will argue that he, and the cleric who claimed to have been there at the first marriage, concocted the story as part of a plan to keep the boy and his mother's family from the kingship. Certainly many thought so at the time and were genuinely shocked at this abnormality. Kings had been effectively deposed in the past but in such cases they were grown men and were widely seen as incompetent or dangerous to the weal of the kingdom. A royal minority was an accepted fact of kingship and legally sanctioned. There was a process to deal with such a situation. Sixty years previously, the one-year-old son of Harry the Fifth, King of England and heir apparent to the kingdom of France, had been represented by a regency, which had, after a fashion, worked.

Richard's short reign is presented as a juxtaposition of good and bad. His only Parliament, from late January to late February 1484, passed laws to restore ancient property rights and due forms of conveyancing that had been distorted and abused by the powerful during the civil upheavals of the fifteenth century. A Statute of Limitations made its first appearance declaring the time in which appellants and suitors could make good in court actions against them and get redress, while the practice by the crown itself of extracting forced loans and gifts from its wealthier subjects was put beyond the law. Statutes were also passed to minimise or eliminate the power of local authorities to execute summary justice on 'offenders' in matters to do with markets and the conduct of fairs. Juries were to be properly empanelled from those who enjoyed a good reputation and a significant stake in local land rather than from the cronies and henchmen of the powerful and their officers. No one was to be refused bail as an act of malice or at the whim of powerful people, nor could a suspect's property be seized before he or she had been convicted by due process. The impact of this legislation was such that well over thirty years later Parliament upheld it to Wolsey as examples. The cleric's explosion of anger made it clear to them that such a wicked usurper could not have supported such benevolent laws.

In parallel with this reputation as an inspirer and enforcer of good, equitable, laws, of course is the long-standing accusation that he murdered his nephews to eliminate the threat they represented. Moving them aside was only the start, he would be bound then to put them beyond rescue, wouldn't he?

He is also accused of hypocrisy for his condemnation of his brother's court's lifestyle. He, Richard, had two illegitimate children, so who was the 'pot calling the kettle black'? Richard, like many young men of his age, bred children from women he did not marry but he appears to have sewn these wild oats before his own marriage, he acknowledged and took care of his offspring, and his condemnation of his brother and friends was to do with the incessant and excessive partying – orgies of sex, eating, and drinking, which was widely known about and which, in Richard's opinion, contributed to the king's premature death.

All this leads, of course, to what Richard's reign would have been like had he lived longer. Would he have been a reforming king – an early renaissance prince, encouraging learning, technology, art and music; introducing competent but low-born administrators to carry out royal policy and to increase the income of the crown, as in real life the Tudors did? Would he have been able to manage the English aristocracy into working together in the interests of the crown? Would he have had to deal with pretenders (real and false) to his throne as in real life Henry VII had to? Would he have developed a peaceful co-existence with Scotland and France? Would he have had heirs carrying the Plantagenet genes into the sixteenth century and beyond?

These, and other issues, are the focus of this novel-in-progress. Not a fantasy but, while entirely fictional, never losing sight of what had actually happened previously in England and was occurring contemporaneously in other places.