

## THE DEATH OF EDMUND GURNEY

by M. H. COLEMAN

### ABSTRACT

The circumstances surrounding the death of Edmund Gurney, by the inhalation of an overdose of chloroform in a Brighton hotel-room in 1888, are re-considered. Reasons are advanced for doubting the theory advanced by Trevor Hall that Gurney committed suicide, and it is therefore concluded that his death was accidental, in agreement with the verdict of the inquest.

### PROLEGOMENA

In consequence of a youthful interest in chemistry, I was in the habit, some fifty years ago, of purchasing a variety of chemical reagents, both solid and liquid, some poisonous, some corrosive, from various retail chemists (i.e. pharmacists) in my native city of Bristol. Solids unaffected by atmospheric moisture were supplied in packets folded from highly glazed paper; deliquescent solids in wide-mouthed, corked bottles; liquids in narrow-mouthed corked bottles (or glass-stoppered, if corrosive). In every case the chemist supplied the bottle; and in the small sizes with which I was concerned, a charge of one or two pence was made for corked, and sixpence for glass-stoppered, bottles. All these containers were labelled with the name of the contents, the name and address of the supplier, and a warning if the contents were poisonous. Poisonous substances were supplied in bottles of coloured glass (usually blue or green) with ribbing and 'Poison' or 'Not to be Taken' moulded into the glass: this was to provide both visual and tactile warning of the poisonous nature of the contents.

In re-reading Hall's (1964) account of Edmund Gurney's death, I was reminded of my youthful experiences of purchasing poisonous liquids, including chloroform, from chemists, and the implications that these might have for Hall's version of events.

### INTRODUCTION

The late Trevor Hall wrote a number of books, alone (Hall, 1962; 1964; 1980) and in collaboration (Dingwall, Goldney & Hall, 1956; Dingwall & Hall, 1958), which sought to criticise members, and especially the early leaders, of the SPR. His books have been subject to a good deal of criticism (Coleman, 1956; Gauld, 1965a; Lambert, 1966; Nicol, 1966), including criticisms from former collaborators (Dingwall, 1979; Goldney, 1958). Thus the late Dr Dingwall wrote to me (1979) saying that he had tried to stop Hall writing his (1978) book on Harry Price, but he had not succeeded because "he is now one of those people who must be always right and therefore all discussion becomes impossible." Hall's principal failings seem to be his habit of representing his initial speculations as proven fact at a later stage in the argument (Gauld, 1965c), and his inability to retract any of these, even when they have been shown to be unsound (Gauld, 1965b). A case in point is his *The Strange*

*Case of Edmund Gurney*, which was first published in 1964. Although this book was subject to very substantial criticism by Nicol (1966), Gauld (1965a) and Lambert (1966), it was reprinted in 1980 without any amendment of the text.

#### THE BACKGROUND

For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with the story, it should be said that Edmund Gurney, prior to his death in 1888, had been conducting experiments on behalf of the SPR with two young men, Douglas Blackburn and George Smith, who lived in Brighton. In the spring of 1882 Smith had been giving demonstrations of stage-hypnotism in Brighton, which had been highly praised by the local journalist, Blackburn, in his paper, *The Brightonian*. By September of that year, Blackburn had joined Smith in a stage mind-reading act, which he subsequently publicised in a letter to the Spiritualist periodical, *Light* (Blackburn, 1882). This led Gurney, with F. W. H. Myers, to visit Blackburn and Smith in Brighton, in mid-November and early December, to observe their demonstration of thought-reading. Further experiments took place in January and April of 1883 at the SPR premises in Dean's Yard in London; but then Blackburn withdrew from further experiments, and Smith became secretary, first to Gurney and then, after Gurney's death, to Myers. It was in this capacity that Smith acted as hypnotist in a series of experiments in 'community of sensation', with a number of young men from Brighton as subjects. These experiments were continued after Gurney's death under the supervision of Mrs Sidgwick and Myers, with Smith continuing to act as hypnotist. Smith's work with the SPR ceased after 1892, when he resumed his career in the entertainment business. In 1908, Blackburn, thinking that Smith, like Gurney and Myers, was dead, published a series of articles in which he claimed that the positive results obtained in the thought-reading experiments of 1882-83 were achieved by trickery between himself and Smith (Blackburn, 1908; 1909). Smith (1911) denied Blackburn's claims, which were repeated some three years later (Blackburn, 1911).

#### GURNEY'S DEATH

The events immediately preceding Gurney's death were that he dined on Thursday 21st June at the House of Commons with Cyril Flower, M.P., and then seemed in good health and spirits (*Sussex Daily News*, 1888). On arriving home, he found a letter asking him to go to Brighton, which he did the following day (Hall, 1964, p.5). He booked in at the Royal Albion Hotel on the evening of Friday 22nd, dined there, and went to bed at around 10 o'clock (*Brighton Gazette*, 1888). Since no answer was obtained when staff knocked on Gurney's locked door on Saturday 23rd, it was broken down at about 2 p.m. (*Sussex Daily News*, 1888), and Gurney was found dead in his bed, with a sponge-bag pressed over his nose and mouth by his right hand (*Brighton & Hove Herald*, 1888). This account says that two pads of cotton wool were found inside the sponge-bag: but if this were true, it was probably the result of someone 'tidying up'; the cotton wool was almost certainly under the sponge-bag, as both Gauld (1965a, p.59) and Lambert (1966, p.80) assume. An uncorked three-ounce (85 ml.) bottle, containing 2 or 3 ml. of a colourless,

odourless fluid, was found by the side of the bed, where it had apparently fallen. (Other accounts say that the bottle was on the bed (*Brighton Examiner*, 1888) or under it (*Sussex Daily News*, 1888)).

An inquest was held on the afternoon of Monday 25th June, at which Dr A. T. Myers (brother of F. W. H. Myers) gave evidence that Gurney, whom he had known for nineteen years, was subject to severe attacks of facial neuralgia and sleeplessness. For these Dr Myers had administered large doses of morphia, chloral and belladonna, but without the usual effects. He also said that Gurney, who had received medical training, had discussed the use of chloroform for pain relief, but he did not know if Gurney had ever taken it (*Brighton & Hove Herald*, 1888). Gurney's brother, the Rev. Alfred Gurney, confirmed his use of anaesthetics for pain relief and sleeplessness (*ibid.*). (In one account (*Brighton Examiner*, 1888) Dr Myers is wrongly named as Dr A. T. Barclay.) At the suggestion of the coroner, Mr A. F. Gell, it was decided not to analyse the contents of the bottle or the stomach (*Brighton & Hove Herald*, 1888). The jury after a long (*Brighton Gazette*, 1888) or a short (*Brighton & Hove Herald*, 1888) discussion, returned a verdict of accidental death from inhaling an overdose of chloroform to relieve pain (*ibid.*).

#### HALL'S VERSION

According to Hall, the letter summoning Gurney to Brighton was written by Alice Smith, sister of the hypnotist, who by this time was Gurney's secretary. Smith had recently (13th June) married, and was away on his honeymoon; so this was a rare opportunity for Alice to contact Gurney, without his secretary being aware of the fact. Alice, according to Hall's account (p. 188), wished to warn Gurney that her brother was deceiving him; and this revelation so upset Gurney that he thereupon purchased chloroform—in Brighton—for the purpose of committing suicide (p. 22). Hall accepts Dr Myers's suggestion that Gurney had used his hair-oil bottle to obtain the chloroform (to account for the colourless, odourless residue), so we have the curious sequence of events:—

- (i) Gurney is told of Smith's deception, and decides to end his life.
- (ii) He returns to his hotel, empties his hair-oil bottle, and then goes out and purchases chloroform.
- (iii) He returns to his hotel, where he has dinner.
- (iv) He retires to his bed, where he deliberately inhales an overdose of chloroform.

Hall particularly comments (p. 23) on the distaste of a fastidious man like Gurney in having to use a dirty bottle for the chloroform.

#### HALL'S MISAPPREHENSIONS

But this is nonsense! As my own experiences (see above) suggest, chemists were not in the habit of supplying drugs in bottles—especially dirty bottles—provided by their customers: and this view was also advanced by Lambert (1966, p. 81). In fact, in the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth, both pharmacists and doctors supplied the containers for the substances which they dispensed; and this has been confirmed by Mr Nigel Tallis (1990), assistant curator of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society museum, who quotes from *The Art of Dispensing* (London, 1888):—

The dispenser . . . who economises on his bottles . . . is a fool. . . . It is a good thing to have different shaped bottles. [etc.]

But a much more important point is that under the Pharmacy Act of 1868 it was unlawful to sell any poison unless the container (Glyn-Jones, 1909):—

. . . be distinctly labelled with the Name of the Article and the word Poison, and with the Name and Address of the Seller of the Poison;

Chloroform is listed under Part 2 of Schedule (A) of the Act (Glyn-Jones, 1909, p.239). Now if Gurney bought chloroform in Brighton (having only decided to kill himself after hearing Alice Smith's information), it would have been supplied in such a labelled container. Where then did this container go? It seems most unlikely that this could have been the bottle found beside his bed, since this was both oily and unlabelled<sup>1</sup>. As previously observed, a chemist would not have supplied a drug in a dirty bottle; and Gurney is hardly likely to have scraped off the label. If Gurney bought chloroform in Brighton, it must have been supplied in another bottle; but the only place where Gurney could have inconspicuously transferred the contents to the 'hair-oil' bottle would have been in his hotel-room. In which case, what became of the original bottle? If he had discarded it in the waste-basket of his room, it would surely have been noticed, and commented upon at the inquest. Indeed, the chemist supplying the drug, identified by the required label, would almost certainly have been called to give some account of his dealings with Gurney.

All these problems disappear if Gurney had dispensed chloroform into his hair-oil bottle from a supply in London, before he set out for Brighton. But since he had not then heard whatever Alice Smith is supposed to have told him, and was apparently in good spirits when he set out, it is difficult to suppose that he took chloroform with him, in case he felt like committing suicide that night. These considerations, that Gurney had a supply of chloroform in London, and that he took a small quantity with him to Brighton, would seem to square with the evidence which Dr Myers gave at the inquest, namely that Gurney suffered from neuralgia, and that he had discussed the use of — *inter alia* — chloroform for pain relief; and this evidence had been confirmed by Gurney's brother, the Rev. Alfred Gurney.

It may be that Gurney received some discouraging information in Brighton — Lambert (1969) has envisaged something of the sort—and in consequence of this, and his depressive tendencies, he was perhaps less careful in his use of the pain-killing drug than he might otherwise have been, and this resulted in his death. But as Gauld (1965 a, p.59) has pointed out, chloroform was used in three ways for pain relief:—

<sup>1</sup> It is, I think, reasonable to conclude from the statements that the bottle contained a small volume of a colourless fluid (*Brighton Gazette*, 1888; *Brighton & Hove Herald*, 1888; *Brighton Examiner*, 1888) that the bottle itself was colourless, since there is no indication that the fluid was removed from the bottle to determine its colour, which would have been necessary if the bottle had been a coloured 'Poison' bottle. Indeed, Mr Burland, the surgeon summoned when Gurney was found, stated (*Brighton & Hove Herald*, 1888) that he had sealed the bottle to secure it for subsequent examination; and Dr Myers described the residue as "smeared over the glass quite unlike chloroform" (Hall, 1964, p.22): both indicating that the fluid could not have been removed from the bottle. The conclusion that this bottle was not therefore a coloured 'Poison' bottle increases the presumption that it was not the bottle in which the drug was sold.

- (a) internally in small amounts;
- (b) by inhalation;
- (c) by topical application.

For inhalation the subject breathes through an open gauze pad impregnated with the drug; but for topical application such an impregnated pad is best held in place with an impermeable cover, such as the sponge-bag found over Gurney's face. The presence of this bag suggests that Gurney was using chloroform as a counter-irritant by topical application, and any inhalation was unintentional. If the sponge-bag was of the usual rubberised cotton fabric, it suggests that Gurney had not used this procedure before, because chloroform attacks rubber, causing it first to swell and then to crumble. If this was Gurney's first use of the drug, this would explain why Dr Myers had no knowledge of Gurney employing it. And if Gurney happened to be one of those individuals hyper-sensitive to chloroform, it might explain how he came to die, in spite of his medical training. Again (Flagg, 1944):—

A previous condition of suffering and anxiety . . . renders a subject who would otherwise be able to resist a large dosage liable to collapse even under a small dosage.

Gurney may have supposed that the amount he applied to the cotton-wool pads was insufficient to cause death. But if cardiac arrest occurs during the initial light anaesthesia, 10 ml. would probably constitute a lethal dose; whereas under deep anaesthesia 30 ml. might be required (Nunn, 1988). It should be remembered that during the period when chloroform was used under medical supervision as an anaesthetic, about one patient in two thousand died under its use (Flagg, 1944).

Dr John F. Nunn, to whom I am very grateful for answering a number of my questions relating to chloroform anaesthesia and toxicity, has suggested that the circumstances of an hotel room and the unlabelled chloroform bottle are suggestive of the recreational use of the anaesthetic. But whilst there have certainly been many fatalities during such activities (Nunn, 1989), the use of chloroform seems to be relatively uncommon (*Chemist & Druggist*, 1907; 1908). Dr Nunn emphasises the difficulty of maintaining a sub-anaesthetic but analgesic concentration of chloroform by self-administration; and the hazards are well illustrated by Cromwell Varley's (1871) account of how he was unable to remove the chloroform-soaked sponge from his face during self-administration of the drug. It seems likely that Gurney, from his training, would appreciate the problem; and this argues for his use of the drug for topical application rather than by inhalation.

#### CONCLUSION

The absence of the legally-required labelled bottle for chloroform in Gurney's hotel-room suggests that he did not purchase the drug in Brighton, with the intention of ending his life as the result of some disheartening revelation about his psychical research which he had learnt that day. Indeed, there is no good reason to connect his visit to Brighton with his psychical work, since his principal assistant, Smith, was absent at the time. And there is no evidence that Gurney's correspondent was Alice Smith; even Hall himself originally supposed (p.186) that it was Blackburn's mistress, a Mrs Parsons, who had sent the letter summoning Gurney to Brighton: and his colleague,

Archie Jarman, has argued that Gurney went to Brighton to meet one of his experimental subjects, Wells, and that the supposed summoning letter was merely a confirmation of his hotel booking from the Royal Albion Hotel (Hall, 1964, pp. 181-182).

Lambert (1969) has argued that Gurney was summoned to Brighton by a letter from an acquaintance with a serious medical problem, who was lodging near the Royal Albion Hotel. After visiting him, Gurney was naturally distressed and, unable to sleep, he resorted to chloroform, which he may have used incautiously because of his state of mind. Lambert suggests that the nature of his correspondent's problem—he died in an asylum in 1896—provides the reason for Gurney's not explaining why he was visiting Brighton, and for the subsequent (successful) efforts to conceal the contents of the summoning letter.

From the foregoing it seems reasonable to conclude that Gurney's death was an accident (unconnected with his psychical investigations), as the coroner's jury found. The supposed conspiracy to conceal the alleged suicide, between his brother the Rev. Alfred Gurney, Dr A. T. Myers and his brother F. W. H. Myers, Frank Podmore, et al., is then seen to be yet another example of Trevor Hall's imagination animated by his antipathy to the SPR and its early leaders.

### 3 The Ridgeway, Putnoe, Bedford. MK41 8ET

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