

A MATTER OF MORALITY: THE THIRD BATTLE OF MANASSAS

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During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war is of every man against every man.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

There have been three battles of Manassas, the little town set in the beautiful Virginia countryside, 20 miles south-west of Washington, DC. The first was fought in July 1861 when a Confederate force routed a much larger Union army. The same happened a year later in August 1862. Historians estimate that some 30,000 lives were lost in these two battles, now named after a nearby river, the Bull Run.

Only two people were involved this year in the third battle of Manassas. Blood was spilt, both literally and metaphorically, but the only casualty was truth. The battle was fought in the court house where Lorena Bobbitt was charged with malicious wounding of her husband, but found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. Mrs Bobbitt admitted mutilating her husband with a kitchen knife in a most horrible way, but maintained she did so only after he had raped her. The trial provoked much media attention and a torrent of justificatory nonsense in mitigation by female chauvinists. The opening statement by Lorena Bobbitt's female lawyer was that it was a case of 'his penis versus her life', a not inelegant summation of feminist victimisation theory. Male chauvinists on their part argued that it would be a different story had the husband cut off one of his wife's breasts, as a reaction to suffering chronic verbal abuse. Mrs Lorena Bobbitt's lawyer argued that her client had experienced a brief psychotic breakdown, brought on by years of spousal abuse, and had been unable to resist the impulse to maim her husband. The jurors, predominantly female, were persuaded by the litany of abuse presented at the trial, to declare her not guilty of the offence. And this despite the fact that her husband had been acquitted of marital sexual assault in the same courthouse only a short while before.

The Manassas courthouse with Mrs Bobbitt's testimony became the centre of a classic media circus. John and Lorena Bobbitt became symbols of the sex war, modern-day versions of Samson and Delilah without the metaphors. The enormity of Lorena Bobbitt's crime has obscured the reason for acquittal: she was a victim, not the victimizer. Similarly in the previous trial of her husband he was portrayed as a victim.

Other trials which attracted similar media attention have occurred in California. Damien Williams, a young black man, kicked nearly to death a white truck driver in the 1992 Los Angeles riot. It was argued that he had perpetuated the crime 'in the heat of the moment', and that he had had a 'rough childhood'. He too was a victim, and was acquitted. Had he been found guilty, this might have provoked another race riot, a fact which no doubt influenced both judge

and jurors in their deliberations. Another trial was that of the two Menendez brothers who murdered their parents and then went on a spending spree buying Rolex watches and a \$70,000 Porsche car. Their lawyer pleaded that they had been physically and mentally abused as children, and were afraid of being killed by their parents. This was the explanation why they blasted away their parents with shotguns while they were quietly sitting eating ice-cream and watching television. Forgotten was the fact that self-defence used to mean shooting someone about to shoot you first. Both brothers were acquitted. After all they had been victims of parental abuse. Even more surprising was the public's response with offers of sympathy, new homes and money for the two boys. The Menendez trial makes one wonder what the verdict would be today if Oedipus were put on trial for murdering his father.

Britain has had the ghastly murder of the toddler, James Bulger, by two boys aged 10 and 12. From British newspapers that I have read on the trial it appears the great majority of people were rightly outraged. However, I did read of responses, similar to those in the American trials, that the two boys charged with the murder were products of a morally bankrupt society and broken homes. Thus, they had to be seen as the victims of an unjust society, and not simply as murderers.

It would appear that 'more sinned against than sinning', as King Lear put it, is the order of the day and that a fundamental tenet of law, society's right to exact just retribution for wrong doing, is collapsing. Impartial justice for all is the only safeguard against Hobbesian anarchy. What is right or wrong cannot depend on sex, colour, race, religious or political creed, or whatever the fashion of the moment. The law of revenge is not law at all. Statues must never be guidelines.

We live in an era of moral relativism. This is not only evident in criminal cases, but permeates the corridors of power in governments and elsewhere and affects individuals at all levels in society, both powerful and anonymous. Few cabinet ministers in Britain have resigned since the Profumo scandal over issues of conscience or as a result of personal responsibility. The same is true in Canada and the USA. A notable exception was Lord Carrington who resigned over his failure to prevent the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. In Canada, Jean Chretien, the Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party, abolished taxes on cigarettes in Quebec to counteract the smuggling of cheap cigarettes from the USA. No effort was made to stop the smugglers, who were mainly Mohawk Indians. Rather than let the Mounted Police enforce the law and arrest the smugglers, the Prime Minister opted for the politically prudent and easier approach. He and his Cabinet were, of course, anxious to avoid conflict with the Mohawk warriors, and have a repetition of the Oka rebellion.

In Britain there have been scandals regarding members of the royal family, which have enriched the infamous British gutter press. The royal family have an important role as guardians of proper behaviour and decorum. However rumours of Prince Charles's adultery and possible divorce from Princess Diana has not prevented high-ranking officials of the Church of England coming to this defence and arguing that he would not be the first king to have committed the sin of being divorced. The people of Britain seem by no means happy with the royal's comings and goings—and quite rightly.

In sport we have recently witnessed wrongdoing being excused. Ben Johnson,

when found to have a positive urine test for steroids after winning the 100 metre gold medal at the Seoul Olympic Games, was immediately declared a 'victim' by sports writers in Canada, who suggested his urine had been tampered with to give a positive result. It was even suggested that this had been done by his American rival, Carl Lewis. Clearly poor Ben Johnson had been the victim of a dastardly plot; after all had he not steadfastly refused to admit he had even taken steroids? Later at the Dublin Enquiry Ben Johnson admitted to doing so without apparent concern for his previous denials. Despite this cheating and lying, Ben Johnson was fêted at a fair in Brantford (where Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone), and later was allowed to represent Canada at the 1992 Barcelona Games. In the USA Tonya Harding admitted to being complicit in a coverup by withholding her knowledge of the attack on her rival Nancy Kerrigan. Tonya Harding did not explain her silence, and it would appear acceptable to cover up a crime if you did not know about it in advance. Ms Harding had in any case to overcome so many odds, being a daughter of poor working class parents and being physically abused by her husband. In short she was a victim and her sandpaper personality was evidence of the hard life that she had had. But there is no excuse for breaking the law. Representing one's country at the Olympic Games is not a constitutional right; it is a privilege. We have come a long way from 'Chariots of Fire'.

The Western world began a journey of riotous freedom in the 1960s, which has now turned into licence. There has been a decline in organized religion with many of the churches failing to take a stand against the depravity from which we now suffer. The failure of the educational system is merely symptomatic, as is the degraded and demoralizing mass media. Our political leaders are spineless being only too willing to react to the wishes of interest groups, rather than defend individual rights. Mr John Major's return to basics (we must understand a little less, condemn a little more) is like limp spaghetti when it comes to dealing with members of his own cabinet and party. The leaders of other Western nations are no better.

The recent papal encyclical disappointed the press since it dealt with morality in terms of principle rather than practice. The press would have preferred more exciting stuff. Instead the Pope said that there are absolute things in the order of existence and things that are intrinsically evil. One may not agree with all the Pope's prescriptions, but one has to respect His Holiness's diagnosis.

MISCELLANEA MEDICA

COLLEGE AFFAIRS IN THE PAST: AN HONORARY FELLOW

From Council Minutes 22nd August 1705

*Dr David Gregory
admitted a Fellow*

The said day a motione being made that Dr David Gregory Doctor of Medicine and Savalian professor of astronomie in the university Oxford be received into the socitie It was unanimously agreed to by the Colledge, and he accordingly Declaired a Socius with all the priviledges and immunities belonging to the Members of the Colledge And his Diploma ordaine to be made ready and given to him.

David Gregory (1661–1708) was the first Honorary Fellow to be elected for his learning and scholarship. The three previously elected were influential politicians and aristocrats. Gregory was no stranger to Edinburgh as he had been professor of mathematics at the university from 1683–91 and was a personal friend of Archibald Pitcairne (1652–1713), the most distinguished Edinburgh physician of his time. He was appointed to the Oxford chair on the recommendation of Isaac Newton. There he was distinguished for his learned writings, his teaching and as a man of affairs. His Doctorate of Medicine was an honorary degree and at no time did he study or practice medicine. However he belonged to the distinguished Aberdeen family which produced 16 professors of mathematics and medicine.¹ His cousin, James, was professor of medicine at Kings College Aberdeen 1725–32 whose son, John, grandson, James, and great grandson, William Alison, were all three to be professor of medicine at Edinburgh.

In the eighteenth century only 46 Honorary Fellows were elected. Of these 32 were physicians, 11 noblemen and only 3, David Gregory, Hans Sloan and Joseph Banks for their contributions to mathematics and science. Then, as now, an Honorary Fellowship was a rare distinction.

REFERENCES

¹ Granger Stewart A. *The Academic Gregories*. Edinburgh: Anderson and Ferrier 1901.

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COLLEGE AFFAIRS IN THE PAST: CONCERN FOR MORALITY IN QUEEN STREET

A letter to the College Secretary, 15th September 1869.

City Mission Office
5 St Andrew Square
Edinburgh

Dear Sir, I am instructed by the Committee of the Edinburgh City Mission to submit, through you to the Royal College of Physicians, the following statement with reference to the house No 12 North St David Street,—at the corner of Queen Street.

This house was for many years notorious as a moral nuisance to the inhabitants and frequenters of a most respectable locality, until May 1868 when a Sub Committee of the City Missions rented the drawing room floor for the use of their missionary to the fallen, Mr Mackie and his family, who paid one fourth of the rent and taxes,—these amounting in all to £48. At the same time, they