

William Chester Minor (1834-1920)

Minor was born in June 1834 in Ceylon, the son of American missionaries. His mother died when he was three, and his father subsequently remarried and had a second family.

Minor remained in Ceylon with eight new siblings until, at the age of fourteen, he was sent to live with his uncle in New Haven, Connecticut. In his early twenties he studied medicine at Yale University and graduated from there in 1863.

It was the time of the American Civil War. Minor joined the Union Army as a surgeon and spent some time at the front line. He remained in service after the war had ended and took a posting at New York, where his behaviour first caught the attention of his superiors. Minor was addicted to visiting brothels - the first recording of the sexual obsessions that characterised his illness - and was moved to Florida.

It was here that Minor first articulated his fears of persecution. At this point, it was his fellow army officers he blamed. Shortly after challenging a fellow officer to a duel, the army diagnosed him as suffering from mental illness and he was sent to the Government Hospital for the Insane in Washington DC (now St Elizabeth's Hospital).

He was offered retirement from the army in 1871 and discharged from the Government institution at the same time. In receipt of a considerable private income, and now without a profession, Minor decided to travel to Europe and undertake the Grand Tour of classical sites. He travelled to London at the end of that year. He took up residence at Radley's Hotel, in the West End, before moving to Lambeth, almost certainly as it afforded greater access to the capital's sex trade.

Minor's fears of persecution persisted. He believed that he was being followed and approached Scotland Yard to report this. One night in February 1872 Minor woke and saw a ghostly figure at the end of the bed which he reckoned to be one of his persecutors. He took a pistol from his luggage and pursued this phantom spirit into the street, whereupon Minor chanced by accident upon a man called George Merrett walking to work at a brewery near Waterloo. Believing Merrett to be the figure he had seen, Minor shouted at the brewery worker, pursued him as he ran, and then caught him. Minor drew his pistol and shot Merrett fatally in the neck.

Minor was committed for trial at the Surrey Assizes in April 1872. Although his defence made great play of Minor's war experiences, the true nature of them was arguably divorced from his enduring delusions. The latter were described in detail. A warder at his jail testified that every morning, Minor would awake and exclaim that he had been abused sexually during the night. His abusers - men, women and sometimes children - hid in the voids of the room under the floor, in the walls or in the rafters. One of Minor's

step-brothers attended the trial to confirm that this delusion could be dated back to at least his release from the Washington asylum, and indeed might be traced back to an act that Minor had been forced to commit during the Civil War. While in open court this act was related as his having to brand a deserter, it seems more likely that Minor - a man from a missionary family - had taken part in some sexual activity that he regarded as sinful. As a result, he was now living in fear.

Whatever facts the family may have wished to keep private, it was clear that Minor had shot Merrett under the mistaken belief that Merrett was one of his abusers and, since this belief was clearly irrational, Minor was found 'not guilty but insane' by the court. He was detained at Her Majesty's pleasure and transferred to the country's Criminal Lunatic Asylum.

Minor arrived at Broadmoor on 17th April 1872. He was described on admission as 'a thin, pale and sharp-featured man with light coloured sandy hair; deep-set eyes and prominent cheek bones'. Despite his active symptoms, he was considered to be low-risk and was placed in Block 2, which had the lowest security levels within the asylum.

Minor enjoyed a reasonable degree of freedom within Block 2. He was able to wear his own clothes, to walk along the Broadmoor terrace and, as his family continued his allowance, to purchase daily newspapers, art materials, a flute and many books for his library. Indeed, the latter grew so

vast that exceptionally, Minor had two rooms at Broadmoor: his bedroom, and a day room for his books.

Minor's art, music and voracious reading were encouraged in the asylum as a suitable part of treatment: an occupied mind stood a better chance of being free from unhealthy thoughts. So, when 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's determination to help was encouraged. He began immediately to send into the dictionary staff thousands of examples of word use from his book collection to assist them with their labours.

It was through this work that Minor and Murray met after several years of a corresponding relationship. It seems that for a long time Murray considered Minor to be out of bounds in his secure institution; only realising after prompting from a colleague that Minor could receive visitors. In early 1891 David Nicolson, then Superintendent at Broadmoor, invited both men to meet at his house for lunch and this became the first of a handful of similar events over the subsequent years.

Despite the potentially therapeutic effects of his work on the dictionary, Minor's condition continued to deteriorate. He had never come to terms with his sexual fantasies and his fear of persecution never left him. On the morning of 3rd December 1902 he tied a tourniquet around the base of his penis and sliced off the organ. 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 previously he had been taken out of the asylum at night and forced to fornicate with between fifty and one hundred women 'from Reading to Land's End.'

After this episode, Broadmoor suggested that Minor's family petition the Home Office for his discharge and return to care in the United States. They did so a few years later, and in April 1910 a conditional discharge was granted for Minor's release. Sir James Murray visited him one last time before Minor was escorted to the Tilbury Docks, handed to his step-brother and put on board a steamer for the journey back across the Atlantic.

After thirty-eight years in Broadmoor, Minor was delivered back to the Government Hospital for the Insane. He remained in Washington until November 1919, when he was compassionately discharged to be nearer his family at the Retreat for the Elderly Insane in Hartford, Connecticut. He died there on 26th March 1920.

A fuller biography of Minor is included in *Broadmoor Revealed: Victorian Crime and the Lunatic Asylum*