

Lawford Hall

There could hardly be anything more infuriating than this. You come up with a great idea for a book, invest considerable time and energy on the research and the writing, and then, just as you are ready to publish, someone else produces the same book.

Take pity, then, on Elizabeth Cooke and Anthony Harris, upon whom the muses did not smile.

Anthony Harris, by the way, is a former lecturer at Birmingham City University. Elizabeth Cooke is the married name of Elizabeth McGregor, who pens novels under the latter name. She too hails from Warwickshire originally.

I'm not in a position to adjudicate on matters of priority or seniority, and, as far as I know, there was no plagiarism or sleight of hand. Simply an unlucky coincidence. But in 2011 both authors published their accounts of the Lawford Hall tragedy. One book came from Profile Books, the other from Brewin Books, and both told the same story. I've seen them both on the cheap shelves, one in Hereford, the other in London. It could hardly be otherwise.

Lawford Hall once stood near Newbold-on-Avon in Warwickshire. You would look in vain for the house today. The hall was pulled down in the 1780s, though the stable block survives as Little Lawford Hall.

One reason for the hall's demolition was that it was considered cursed. Certainly it was the location for one of the most celebrated murders of the 18th Century. Even today (indeed, especially today) we would be enthralled by the case, a celebrity murder, followed by a celebrity trial. And - given that this was the 19th Century - a celebrity execution to follow.

The unwitting recipient of all this attention was Sir Theodosius Boughton, Seventh Baronet of Lawford. At the time of his death at Lawford Hall on August 30 1780 he was just 20 years old.

Theodosius was hardly in the best of health. Suggestions of congenital syphilis, mental instability, and his own dissolute lifestyle, were enough to ensure that he was under constant medication, and swallowing a daily cocktail of drugs, both prescribed and self-administered. "He was continually quacking himself," said one observer.

Nevertheless, the young man's death was peremptory and painful enough to raise suspicions, and there were no less than two inquests, one before burial, and one afterwards. The latter took place on an adjacent grave slab in the churchyard at Newbold-on-Avon, where Theodosius was laid to rest.

Both inquests were inconclusive, but by then one man was already standing in the dock of public opinion. He was Captain John Donellan, the husband of the victim's sister, Theodosia. Accusations were chiefly levelled at him by Lady Boughton, who had witnessed her son's agonizing death. She had also, unwittingly, given her son his final dose of medication, one which Donellan was believed to have laced with poison.

The evidence against John Donellan was largely circumstantial. It was said that he stood to benefit from the removal of the heir to the Lawford fortune, that he possessed a still in which he distilled plant essences, and that he had hastily washed out the glass which had contained the fatal medicine. The alleged poison had been laurel water, distilled from the leaves of the bush.

Donellan denied almost all of this, but Lady Boughton marshalled most of the household staff against him.

John Donellan was tried at Warwick Assizes on March 30 1781 before Francis Buller. Buller had the reputation of being a swift operator, quick to judge, and even quicker to sentence. Donellan's was his fourth murder case of the week, and each went to the scaffold.

Even the presence of John Hunter, arguably the greatest surgeon of his day, and called by the defence to cast doubt on the medical evidence of poisoning, failed to sway Justice Buller. In certain circumstances, said Buller, putting on his black cap, circumstantial evidence can be more convincing than positive evidence.

It was an astonishing denial of legal precedent, and it brought Buller notoriety. Not that this unduly interrupted his own career path or his progression to a baronetcy of his own. But it did enough to ensure that the jury took just nine minutes to find Donellan guilty as charged.

Captain Donellan went to the gallows at Warwick in April 1781, still protesting his innocence, and even wrote up his own account of the trial and the events at Lawford, which was published posthumously. Posterity, as well as much of the press at the time, has tended to agree with him.

That sense of injustice lingered long in the public memory, and the story of Lawford Hall featured in Charles Dickens' journal, *All the Year Round*, as well as in novels and legal textbooks. And if the trial itself was not a good reason to re-tell it, then there was the extra spice of scandal, disinterment and poisoning.

And thus the tale found its way to us, via Anthony Harris's book, *Death of a Baronet*, and *The Damnation of John Donellan* by Elizabeth Cooke. Both writers, I should add, come to similar conclusions about the case.

If you are still wondering how and why two authors and two publishers were drawn to the same story at the same moment, then look no further than the publishing phenomenon that is *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*. Here was ample proof of the allure of a historical, real-life, country house, murder mystery to the UK reading public. And where one book leads, countless more inevitably follow.