

STRANGER THAN FICTION

Jonathan Calder exposed the fact that great dane assassin Andrew Gino Newton was still alive, and looks at why the Jeremy Thorpe story still holds enough fascination for the BBC to make *A Very English Scandal*

My blog Liberal England (“An eclectic mix of musical choices, random news items from Shropshire (where he doesn’t live), and political news and views” - New Statesman) has been going since 2004. By far the most popular post I have written in all that time is one from May this year entitled “What became of Jeremy Thorpe’s son?”

The interest in it continues: as I write this in mid-July, it has had more readers this week than any other post. The answer to the question it poses, incidentally, is that Rupert Thorpe is now a leading paparazzo in the United States. He was one of the photographers involved in the famous court case over Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones’s wedding snaps.

I take this exceptional and lasting interest as confirmation of the extraordinary popularity achieved by this summer’s dramatisation of the Jeremy Thorpe affair, *A Very English Scandal*, which was based on John Pearson’s book of the same name, made by Blueprint Pictures and screened by BBC One.

It told the story of Thorpe’s sexual relations with a young man called Norman Scott and his apparent attempt to have him murdered when Scott’s refusal to stop talking about it threatened Thorpe’s political career after he became leader of the Liberal Party. Scott escaped with his life: his great dane, Rinka, was not so fortunate.

The popularity of the series was so great that it returned Thorpe to the front pages when the newspapers discovered that Norman Scott’s alleged would-be assassin Andrew Newton was still alive.

My blog may have played a part here. Planning to write something disobliging about Newton, I decided to check if he really was dead, as I thought I had read somewhere. I soon found that, under the name Hann Redwin, he had been very much alive as recently as 2015 – he was sailing boats, building aircraft and flying them from Redhill Aerodrome in Surrey – and published a post to that effect.

FLEET STREET’S FINEST

Two days later he was being doorstepped by Fleet Street’s finest. The press were excited because there was talk in 2016 of reopening the Thorpe case because of a claim that Newton had first tried to persuade another man to murder Scott before taking on the job himself. The police in South Wales had not taken things further because they too believed that Newton was dead and had apparently not checked this belief with Google as I did.

What was puzzling about their interest in this story of a second assassin was that it was first told in the

Spectator by Auberon Waugh as long ago as 1981. Put up to it by his Private Eye colleague Richard Ingrams, Waugh stood against Thorpe in North Devon for the Dog Lovers’ Party at the 1979 general election, which took place while the latter was awaiting trial at the Old Bailey for conspiracy to murder.

Only one of Thorpe’s co-accused there is alive today, George Deakin, and he will have to spend the rest of his life with the infamy of being the uncle of the guitarist in Black Lace.

If I am something of a scholar of the Thorpe Affair, it is understandable. I joined the party two months after Thorpe was charged; when I started going to Liberal Party assemblies we sang songs about it – ‘On Exmoor bah t’at’ – at the Glee Club.

So in reviewing *A Very English Scandal* I have to remember that it was a drama, not a point-by-point recreation of events 40 or 50 years ago. Seen as a drama, it was very good indeed even if some figures received scant justice. David Holmes, for instance, was a successful entrepreneur not a buffoon, while Emlyn Hooson was far from the bitter, vengeful figure he was painted as. This portrayal, however, did show us that not all Liberal MPs were seduced by Thorpe’s charm or well treated by him.

Hugh Grant’s performance as Thorpe has been rightly praised. As well as his arrogance, Grant showed us why Thorpe was an attractive figure to liberally minded voters, particularly in the scenes set in the Commons chamber. I thought no actor would be able to get near to Thorpe’s ugly-handsome, doglike face, but there were times when Grant made me see it.

It is no criticism of Grant to say that the script never showed us what a formidable local campaigner Thorpe must have been. When he gained North Devon for the Liberals in at the general election of 1959, it was an extraordinary feat.

I was also going to suggest that Thorpe must have had more charisma than Grant showed us, given the lengths to which others were prepared to go to help him. Thinking about it, however, I have seen parties do that for the most mundane people. It was a sad fact about the nature of political allegiance rather than the function of some extraordinary feature of Thorpe’s personality that saw him so indulged.

Ben Wishaw’s Norman Scott was a more modern figure than the real Scott, but then a drama written so long after the event is bound to take a different approach than would have been taken at the time and will probably be more interesting for it.

So while Wishaw was wholly convincing as Scott the fashion model in 1960s Dublin and touching in the scenes that showed the failure of his marriage, we never heard the tones in the real Scott’s voice that told

us he had spent time among the horse-riding classes and desperately wanted to pass as one of them.

His great scene – giving evidence at the Old Bailey – was very much a Russell T Davies one and it showed Whishaw's Scott at his most 21st century. At the actual trial Scott was repeatedly asked by the judge to speak up: here drama you half-expected him to break into I Am What I Am, with the whole courtroom joining in the final chorus.

The sexual politics of *A Very English Scandal* were complicated because they were complicated in Scott's own mind. Was he a victim of rape or a partner in a loving and unacknowledged relationship?

Those who say that today Thorpe would face no problems with such a relationship risk underestimating Scott. It is hard to imagine him going quietly, like a Victorian parlour maid who goes home to have her baby after being seduced by the young heir to the lord of the manor.

Much clearer were the issues at stake in the powerful scene where the Earl of Arran ("Call me Boofy") gave his reasons for taking Leo Abse's bill to decriminalise gay sex through the Lords. "And the deaths go on," he says, remembering his own brother, "By hanging, by poison, by gas. Men killing themselves through fear and shame. And I don't think it's suicide: I think it's murder. They are murdered by the laws of the land and I think it's time it stopped."

There were many fine performances among the minor characters and much fine writing for them too. In his book *Preston* makes Peter Bessell, Thorpe's friend and fellow Liberal MP, the centre of the story, even if you could never claim he is its moral centre. By all accounts Alex Jennings caught him and his lounge-lizard voice perfectly.

Then there were the indomitable Michelle Dotrice as Edna Friendship, Eve Myles as the tragic Gwen Parry-Jones (who reminds us of Scott's ability to scatter suffering in his wake) and, above all, Monica Dolan as the redoubtable and unexpectedly loyal Marion Thorpe: "I practically grew up with Benjamin Britten ... I've toured with orchestras. I couldn't begin to tell you the things I've seen."

Many of the lesser male characters, particularly those caught up in the plot to do away with Scott, were played for laughs. This "make 'em laugh, make 'em cry" approach is very Davis, but I wonder if the contrasts in approach to the story here were too great.

Nevertheless, Davis went in for a lot of shaping of events, because the Thorpe story is stranger even than it was shown to be in *A Very English Scandal*. Sir Jack Hayward – 'Union Jack' – was an idiosyncratic millionaire whose good causes included keeping his home-town football club, Wolverhampton Wanderers, and purchasing Lundy Island for the National Trust.

It was through the Lundy campaign that Hayward came into Thorpe's orbit. Though he was no Liberal, Hayward gave money to the Liberal party because, in words that later acquired a heavy freight of irony,

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PERSONAL DISPOSAL

The money he gave did not go through the party's books, but was put at Thorpe's personal disposal. It was the prosecution's claim at Thorpe's trial that some of it had gone to pay to have Scott dealt with.

Other murky financial transactions gathered around Thorpe. He gave the running of the National Liberal Club

to 'Georges de Chabris' (real name George Marks), who moved his family in to live rent-free and then left suddenly owing the club £60,000. Before that, a Department of Trade report into the collapse of the secondary banking firm London & County Securities, of which Thorpe was a director, had been highly critical of him.

I sometimes got the impression from Liberals of Thorpe's vintage that it was the mishandling of the party's money that they could not forgive him for – the shooting of poor Rinka came a distant second.

Was he guilty as charged? It would have been a brave jury that committed on the basis of the evidence given by Scott, Bessell and Newton. Yet one of the jurors, when interviewed after the trial by the *New Statesman* (it would be illegal today), said they would have convicted Thorpe at least of a conspiracy to frighten had such a lesser charge been put before them. They were frustrated, he said, that it had not been.

But the truth and what can be proved in a court of law are two different things. Why did Newton travel to Barnstaple – all right, Dunstable and then Barnstaple – to look for Scott whatever his precise motive? It is hard to believe that Thorpe's difficulties with Scott do not supply the answer to that question.

Let us end on a sobering note. Four years after Thorpe's trial the Liberal Party, in alliance with the SDP, received more than 25% of the national vote. Three years on from the end of the Liberal Democrats' coalition with the Conservatives, we can only dream of such riches. There appear to be some things Liberal voters, like Thorpe's contemporaries, find harder to forgive than shooting a great dane.

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