

Mad dogs and Irishmen

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Richard Mead in *A mechanical account of poisons*, discussed forceable immersion, or rather submersion, as a treatment for some diseases [1]. He commented: 'at least there is more humanity in such proceeding, than in stifling a miserable wretch between two feather-beds: which, as I have been informed, is the practice in a neighbouring country, and sometimes in our own.' Mead was referring to the treatment for hydrophobia, then in vogue in Ireland. Hydrophobia, a disease in man inflicted by animals infected by rabies, has been a most feared disease throughout history. The name rabies is derived from a sanskrit word meaning 'to do violence' [2]. Dogs have most often been associated with rabies and Sirius, the dog star in the constellation Orion, was considered in ancient times to have a deleterious effect on health. The practice of smothering a victim of hydrophobia between two feather beds is described by Sir Jonah Barrington in *Personal sketches of his own time* [3]: 'such a dread had the Irish of the bite of a mad dog, that they did not regard it as murder, but absolutely as a legal and meritorious act, to smother any person who had arrived at an advanced stage of hydrophobia. If he made a noise similar to barking, his hour of suffocation was seldom protracted. In this mode of administering the remedy, it was sometimes difficult to procure proper instruments; for they conceived that by law the patient should be smothered between two feather beds—one being laid cleverly over him, and a sufficient number of the neighbours lying on it till he was "out of danger".'

Barrington described an incident that took place in County Offaly in 1781. One Dan Dempsey contracted hydrophobia and 'was observed to bark like a dog.' The magistrate ordered that Dan should be smothered and his instructions were accurately obeyed. 'Daniel barked, and was duly smothered between two feather beds, three hours after daybreak next morning, by the schoolmaster's watch. Mr Calcut came and held his coroner's inquest, who brought in the verdict that the said "Daniel Dempsey died in consequence of a mad dog!"'

In England a similar practice was reported for the treatment of insanity. In his history of the Royal Sappers and Miners, Connolly recorded [4] that an insane soldier named Chambers was put to death by suffocation. This incident took place in 1796 when 'the patient was sent to Woolwich in a deranged state of mind. Soon afterwards he was domiciled in a mad house, where, his malady increasing, he was smothered, according to the cruel practice then in vogue with regard to incurable cases.'

In *Irish country cures*, Patrick Logan described how his

father showed him a man whose grandfather had been smothered in a similar way because he had had hydrophobia [5]. He went on to tell of a man named McGovern from County Cavan who was a famous curer of hydrophobia. It was believed that the man used barley meal and crowfoot leaves as well as the 'hair of the dog that bit the patient.' Logan quoted a 15th century book of the Irish laws—'There is no benefit in proclaiming it (the dog) unless it be killed, nor though it be killed unless it be burned, nor though it be burned unless the ashes be cast into a stream.' Barrington also stated [3] that 'when the bite of a dog took place, every effort was made to kill the beast and if they succeeded, it was never inquired whether he actually was, or pretended to be mad: his liver was immediately taken out, dried by the fire till quite hard, then reduced to powder, and given in treatment doses with a draft of holy or blessed water, to the patient for seven days.'

Edith Somerville described this practice in *Maria and some other dogs* [6]. Apparently Old Michael, a stable helper, 'was saved by this remedy'. Rabies was well known to Edith Somerville because in *Wheel-tracks* [7], written in conjunction with Martin Ross (Violet Martin, Fig. 1), she recounts how rabies affected the local pack of fox-hounds. This was The West Carbery Pack, County Cork, of which her brother Aylmer was master. It is a harrowing account: Countess, the first of the hounds to go mad, was shot on 22nd August, 1897. By August 25th the entire pack had to be destroyed. When inspecting the kennels soon after Countess was shot, Edith saw four hounds 'with their backs to the wall, silent and motionless with feverish bright eyes, staring at us unrecognisingly—the dear hounds which had never failed to greet us with extravagant affection.' She and Aylmer hurried to Skibbereen to get poison but before they returned, two of the hounds had passed from the still and awful phase into raging madness. Two policemen with guns had been called to prevent any possibility of a hound escaping and were stationed outside the kennel yard. They could not see to shoot into the kennel and were afraid to enter the yard and get close. With two hounds mad and the rest going mad a terrible fight inside the kennel seemed imminent. Tim Crowley, the kennel huntsman and whip, realised that the only thing to be done was to enter the kennel. This he did alone, caught one of the hounds by the 'neck and stern and dragged him out for the policeman to shoot.' The policeman fired but missed, he was so agitated. Crowley then snatched his rifle, shot the animal and 'one by one dragged out hound after hound and shot

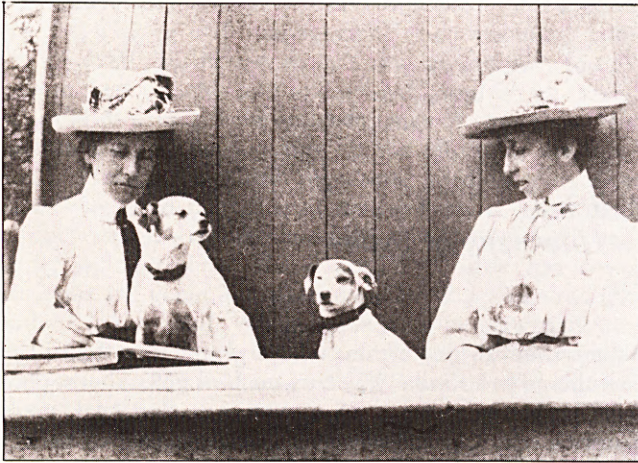


Fig. 1. Edith (left) and Violet (right) with canine companions (1907).

every one of them with his own hand.’ The lost pack was replaced by October of that year and housed in new kennels; they burnt the old ones.

This was by no means a unique incident. In 1871 the entire pack of the Quorn had to be put down [8]—Edith hunted with this pack in 1894 [9]; and in 1886–87 over 400 deer in Richmond Park died from rabies [10]. Edith Somerville became master of the West Carbery hunt in 1903 and, according to her nephew Sir Patrick Coghill, she was the first woman Master of Fox Hounds in history [11]. There is no doubt that these hunting experiences formed the basis of her sporting novels, written in collaboration with Violet Martin.

It happens, however, that Edith Somerville had an even more intimate knowledge of the effects of rabies than she described in any of her books. Instead, it is contained in letters to Violet Martin, and details are published in Collis’s biography, *Somerville and Ross* [12]. Family papers tell us that Edith’s sister Hildegard (Fig. 2) was a woman of sterling character and Edith’s constant companion and confidante. She later married Sir Egerton Coghill and one of her sons became Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford. In January 1897 she was involved in a frightening incident. It seems that the mad dog which was at the root of the outbreak of rabies in the West Carbery pack had several months before infected a little girl. The details are given in a letter from Edith to Martin: ‘Let me tell you of the surpassing heroism of Hildegard. About noon yesterday (11 January) she heard the most awful bellowing in the street which stopped at her door. Mary the Monkey (a servant whose job it was to look after the family pet monkey), roaring at full pitch of lungs and, literally tearing her hair. Hildegard made out with some trouble that a mad dog had run from Skibbereen, got down to the quay, ran quietly into the Monkey’s house, sniffed round, then suddenly it had badly bitten one of the children aged three on the leg. Hildegard tore down to the quay; the wound in the filthy little bare leg was bleeding hard, she sucked it. I say no more, she deserves a VC. One can’t speak to her of it as she has to go away and be sick whenever she thinks of it.’

The child, however, died six weeks later. The entry in Edith’s diary for 2nd March 1897 reads: ‘Mary the Monkey came up to say that her child was ill with pleurisy. We got it up to the big bath at Glen Barrahan [the Coghill residence] and did all we could for it, in vain. Stayed there all night. It went up to the Skibbereen Hospital this morning and died there.’ The death took place in the workhouse on 3 March 1897 and was certified on 31 March by Jerome O’Driscoll, the ‘occupier’. The cause given was hydrophobia, not pleurisy. Hildegard was not told this, ‘her nerves are too shaky for the shock of hearing the truth.’ She was left to believe it was pleurisy. Hildegard survived this incident.

There are several inconsistencies in this account. Edith gave the child’s age as three years but the death certificate records the age as eight and a half years. Moreover, her name was given as Mary McCarthy. Collis states that Mary the Monkey was the wife of Donovan [12] although it seems that her real surname was O’Sullivan [13].

Hildegard put herself at great danger by her brave act; rabies is not particularly infectious by this route, but she would not have known this. Mary the Monkey was an old family retainer and though the social divisions were wide, the relations between Anglo-Irish aristocrat and servant in rural Ireland must have been deep. Hildegard and Edith’s servants were members of the household in a way inexplicable to English visitors [14]. Edith once turned her rage on a house guest because she had ‘treated Mike like a servant.’ More strange, perhaps, is the contrast in the levels of emotions engendered for the child and the ‘dear hounds’—maybe Edith held the child in some way responsible for placing her beloved sister in danger.

The methods for the prevention of rabies had been known for some years and the first measure to control rabies was in 1831 when a Bill was prepared giving power to authorities to fine owners, to destroy any dog, and to pay compensation for injuries due to dog bites [10]. Serious efforts to control rabies in Britain started in 1887 on the advice of Sir Victor Horsley [15]. He helped found the ‘Society for the Prevention of Hydrophobia’ and to reform the dog laws in opposition to the ‘Dog Owners Protection Association’ which was the 19th century equivalent of today’s ‘Animal Liberation’ movement. Despite these hard-won measures, Edith describes in her diary for 1887 how she smuggled her fox terrier puppy to and from Paris [16]. On another occasion a letter records: ‘At Newhaven had a moment of terror, all bags examined (the puppy was in the carpet bag). Martin crammed Patsy up her sleeve and he escaped.’ These pains were taken to hide the dogs from the customs men because quarantine had been introduced by this time. Although there was clearly no link between this incident and the outbreak of rabies a decade later, Edith had good cause to reflect on the irresponsibility of such acts. This experience is drawn upon in the novel *French Leave* in which the heroine, curiously also named Patsy, smuggles her dog from England to France [17].

The preventive measures were successful in eradicating rabies from England in 1902, and from Ireland in 1903 [18]. Rabies is still remembered in rural Ireland



Fig. 2. Hildegard in the garden of Glen Barrahan (1895).

with fear and dread by old people. It was perhaps a mark of the importance attached to the disease at about this time, that in some American states the post of dog-catcher was a political office [19]. There was an outbreak of rabies in England in the years 1918 to 1922 caused by the illicit importation of pet dogs by soldiers returning from World War I. Fortunately, the British Isles have remained free of rabies since then.

Presently, rabies is epizootic across most of northern Europe [20], especially in foxes. It is possible that the opening of the channel tunnel will hasten a return of the problem to the British Isles, and thereby weaken the sentimental attachment we have for our pets. Although rabies was never enzootic in British wildlife in the past, it is not known what effect the recent urbanisation of foxes would have on the progress of the disease.

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