

“The Death of Dr. Dean” A novella

By Jack Coey

Adelaide Books

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Jack Coey of Keene turned his extensive research writing “The Death of Dr. Dean” into a novelistic version of the mysterious murder of Dr. William K. Dean of Jaffrey.

This latest rendering of a puzzling historical crime turns out to be a satisfying account of what has long become a complex local legend, complete with dangling loose ends in a serious life-and-death episode set against moneyed residents, world war and outright murder.

On Tuesday, Aug. 13, 1918, around midnight, 63-year-old William K. Dean went to milk his cows at his Jaffrey farm. He ended up bludgeoned, strangled, legs and arms rope-bound, his murdered body wrapped in a potato gunny sack, weighted with a 27-pound field stone, carried and dropped into a 9-foot deep cistern.

At the time, the texture of life in the United States had changed radically, as Americans entered World War I on April 6, 1917. Extreme patriotism and nationalistic paranoia took root.

For several months, lights that looked like signals were spotted from Grand (Mount) Monadnock, as if sculpted in determined sequences. The flashings appeared to be directed east toward Boston Harbor.

Some of the paranoia fed into the ensuing explanations that the newly arrived Colfelts soon became known either for their affiliation with Germany by birth, New York City by choice or, of late, renters Dr. William and Mary Dean, who were in need of income.

Jack Coey creates a careful shuffling of suspicious characters, including townie Charles Rich, a banker of note in Jaffrey at the base of Grand Monadnock.

“In New Hampshire,” he writes, “the County Prosecutor has to order an autopsy from the County Medical Examiner, and, in this case, county attorney. Charles Rich and Roy Pickard didn’t order an autopsy that Mary Dean, although being an unconvincing suspect in her husband’s killing, would have been routine.”

Instead, Rich and Pickard arranged for Mary Dean to become a patient in the sanitarium in Worcester, Mass. She had already become mentally unstable with dementia.

Meanwhile, townspeople talked more and more of seeing flashing lights from the mountain during the summer of 1916 at the same time the Lawrence and Margaret Colfelts settled in Jaffrey. The Deans rented the Colfelts house because they were struggling on the farm to make some basic money.

Lawrence Colfelt said they wanted to rent out the Deans’ place to move closer to their college student daughter Natalye, who attended Radcliffe in the Boston area. The Colfelts had money; the Deans did not.

Jaffrey residents Matt Garfield and his son were also in the picture. When they emerged from the Dean house looking for the doctor, Garfield remembered a friend telling him about a cave off the Pumpelly trail where, as rumors spread, German spies hid with their codes of mountain lights. The son said: “What’s this?”

“Looks like Dr. Dean killed a chicken or something,” he told the boy, after Garfield saw more traces of blood in the grass. “Something happened here.”

Scouting the grounds and house for Dean, Coey writes, Charles Rich and the town undertaker walked up the road to the main house where the searchers were waiting. They all saw the black eye on Rich's face — a horse's powerful kick at Rich's face. The wound was unusual for a man of Rich's stature. No one asked him about the injury because of the urgency of dealing with the dead body they had just found — William Dean's body at the bottom of the well.

"I guess it's a case of suicide, isn't it?" Rich said.

"I don't think so," countered Garfield. "How can a man tie his knees and pull a cover over himself at the same time he's drowning?"

Boston Department of Justice agent Feri Weiss had traveled from Boston to Peterborough in April 1918 just to investigate reports of lights from Grand Monadnock. This came as a result of a congressional law passed in June the year before — the Espionage Act of 1917, stating that any aid or comfort given to the enemy was subject to fines or imprisonment.

Meanwhile, the Department of Justice filed reports from the Monadnock Region about German spies signaling boats in the Atlantic from the summit of Monadnock. German spies, people ventured, were following troop movements from Fort Devens in Massachusetts.

Mrs. Morison was one of many involved in watching for the signal lights; she requested Boston officials to send agents. It only took her a few days to find agents Valkenburgh and Weiss after they arrived in Peterborough. She had them move to her house so they could watch for lights with the telescope in her library. The two agents had rooms in the third-floor servants' quarters, and ate most of their meals in the kitchen with the domestic help. After dark, Valkenburgh and Weiss would use the telescope to scan the Mount Monadnock ledges.

During the summer of 1916, Coey writes, Johann Von Bernstorff, the German ambassador to the U.S., "made two exploratory trips to Dublin."

Word spread that Dr. Dean had been buried without an autopsy. The rumor originating from the Rich household spread through Jaffrey village that Mrs. Mary Dean killed her husband in a jealous rage. Then people noticed that Rich did not attend Dr. Dean's funeral. Theories of unleashed killers in the woods abounded, some coming from Colfelts. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have been investigating the buildings on the Dean farm and am pleased to announce, I have found important, new evidence that I feel will explain why Dr. Dean was murdered.

"Inside the cardboard box, which I found in the former residence of the Colfelts, contains 50 or so postcards made up from photographs taken by Colfelt's daughter for her college friends. Seemingly innocent postcards until you examine them more closely. All 50 postcards contain the same objects, but it is the order of how the objects are arranged that becomes significant.

"What you observe is that the order or sequence of the objects changes every eighth postcard or so, and I submit to you, Gentlemen, that this is a code used by the Germans to communicate intelligence."

Also surfacing was the conclusion of an impromptu autopsy at the cemetery that confirmed what the two agents wanted to verify — that the violence needed to fracture the skull and break the neck of Dr. Dean could not have resulted from Mrs. Mary Dean but required two men.

The Department of Justice report of Dec. 13, 1918, returned the verdict: Murder by Person or Persons Unknown.

In his epilogue, Coey quotes agent Feri Weiss: "If there ever was any miscarriage of

justice, it was before this Grand Jury. It is clear that the Attorney General, as well as the County Solicitor, and perhaps even Judge Kivel, are in a conspiracy to whitewash the suspects, namely Rich and Colfelt.”

Agent Weiss concludes: “It is the Agent’s sincere hope that a Federal Grand Jury still be convened so that this case will get the attention it deserves and not be put off by the trickeries of unscrupulous officials and politicians.”

Steve Sherman reviews books related to New England by subject or author on alternating Sundays. Submit newly published books and a news release to The Keene Sentinel, 60 West St., Keene N.H., 03431, or query stvsherman@aol.com.