

CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF THE DANDY

Thomas Griffiths Wainewright has been damned as a murderer from that day to this. After his transportation those who had been his friends and acquaintances were quick to pass judgement. They queued up to castigate him. John Forster, the critic and biographer of Dickens called him an “unscrupulous and unsparing murderer”.

His sister-in-law, Helen, had died of poisoning after she had swallowed from what the Attorney-general was to call a “fatal cup” and Wainewright was accused of saying that he had killed her “because her ankles were too thick”. He was said to wear among his many rings one with a secret compartment that contained the deadly poison strychnine. Victorian authors fell on the case with relish to produce spine-chillers.

Oscar Wilde was fascinated by him, describing him as “not merely a poet and a painter, an art critic, an antiquarian, and a writer of prose, an amateur of beautiful things and a dilettante of things delightful, but also a forger... and a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in this or any other age”.¹

As recently as the year 2000, the UK poet laureate, Andrew Motion produced what he called

¹. *Wilde. O. Pen Pencil and Poison.* Fortnightly Review. 1889

a “confection”, a fictional confession, purported to have been written by Wainewright in his dying days in Van Diemen’s Land. It was accompanied by copious notes and called *Wainewright the Poisoner*.²

But there is no proof that Wainewright administered poison to anyone. There were suspicious deaths among those close to him and one of them at least was murder in which he was probably complicit. So who was responsible?

New research into documents not seen for nearly two centuries has cast a different light upon his extraordinary life and on the deaths of his relations. And for the first time it can be disclosed what happened to the real killer.

It is time to look at the evidence again.

Thomas Griffiths Wainewright was born into privilege in Linden House, a mansion bought by books, which lay off the Great West Road in the pleasant little village of Turnham Green, five miles south west of the centre of London, notable for one of the largest battles in the English Civil War in November 1642 when the Parliamentarians blocked King Charles’ advance on London. Linden House

². Motion, A. *Wainewright the Poisoner*, Faber, 2000. After its publication a retired antiquarian bookseller, Marc Vaulbert de Chantilly, pointed out to Motion that it contained 250 factual errors. de Chantilly then produced a booklet castigating Motion’s methods and detailing every error. *Wainewright the Poisoner: an example of Andrew Motion’s “high scholarship”*. The Vanity Press of Bethnal Green, 2000. In the *Guardian* of 26 Feb. 2000, Motion congratulated de Chantilly on “like all biographers and scholars, adding to an existing store of knowledge.”



The imposing front of Linden House, Wainwright's childhood home in Turnham Green, London, to which he was to return after his grandfather's death and in which his uncle George and his mother-in-law were to die suddenly.

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stood in more than three acres of well-timbered ground, and was noted for its limes and for the lindens from which it took its name.³

The balustraded wall around the nine-bedroomed house cut off the noise of hooves and jingling reins from the busy High Road in the parish of Chiswick and its occupants strolled over trim lawns and neat gravel paths

It had a 300-foot frontage, a huge library, greenhouses, coach houses, stabling for seven horses, a kitchen garden and a very large lawn and

³. Linden House was demolished in 1879. A street of houses called Linden Gardens now stands on the site.

paddock, according to an auctioneer's catalogue in 1832. It was a 'capital house', commented one observer admiringly.

To the imposing portico and the great door set in the encompassing walls came the cream of London's literary society, for this was the home of Dr. Ralph Griffiths, bookseller, publisher and editor of the *Monthly Review*, which he had founded in 1749, the most influential literary journal of its kind in Georgian London,

Its only rival, the *Critical Review*, run by Tobias Smollett, denounced it as being conducted "by a parcel of obscure hirelings under the restraint of a bookseller and his wife, who presume to revise, alter and amend the articles occasionally."

Dr. Griffiths was the grandfather of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright – to whom he gave his middle name – and a formative influence on his infant life. Griffiths himself was a Shropshire village lad, who had started life as a watchmaker's apprentice at Stone in Staffordshire, then pulled himself up by ambition and hard dealing to become a bookseller in the capital.

He was a hard master to those "obscure hirelings" who ran his magazine for him. The splendours of Linden House were paid for partly by the toil of his contributors. One of the poorly-paid hacks who managed to break free was a schoolmaster named Oliver Goldsmith, later to become famous as the author of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *She Stoops to Conquer*. After five months as a sub-editor and 12 contributions he left disillusioned. Mrs Griffiths, who took a hand in running the magazine with her husband, accused him of unpunctuality and

idleness; Goldsmith retorted that she had rationed what he ate and cut what he wrote.

Like many such magazines, the privilege of appearing in it was thought sufficient not to merit any great payment for the labours involved.

In its heyday the magazine was earning £2,000 a year, a huge sum in those days, and more than £150,000 in today's money.⁴ The good Doctor Griffiths – his degree was honorary from the University of Philadelphia – was a very rich man and starved his contributors to feast his friends.

As he entertained in his mansion or whirled the few miles to London in one of his two carriages he could reflect with satisfaction on the good fortune he had striven so hard to earn. The *Dictionary of National Biography* described him as “lively, free-hearted and intelligent.” He was also snobbish, arrogant and extravagant; failings which he passed on in good measure to his grandson.

As well as the magazine there was another goldmine. He had bought for 20 guineas a manuscript by a former British Consul in Smyrna; his name was John Cleland, the title of the work *Fanny Hill or The Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. Dr. Griffiths published – and the erotic book was a

⁴ The 19th Century equivalent of sums of money to today's values throughout this book are taken from the Bank of England's online Inflation Calculator for 2017. As the Bank points out, the figures should be taken with caution as the definitions of goods and services included in the price index have changed. For example, a family's food and clothes today are very different to those of a typical family 200 years ago.