



HISTORY &
CULTURE
**The
Importance of
Being Audrey**



HAPPY BIRTHDAY
Geena Davis



John Bodkin Adams

Murderer, Doctor (1899–1983)

John Bodkin Adams is best known for standing trial in the suspicious deaths of 163 former patients in England.

Synopsis

John Bodkin Adams was born on January 21, 1899, in Randalstown, Ireland. Though Adams was not a particularly successful doctor, he was continually placed in the wills of his elderly patients. He also had a tendency to use extremely dangerous drugs, which raised the suspicion of the police, who found 163 of the deaths of his patients questionable. The trial failed to find him guilty of murder.

Crimes

The case of Dr. John Bodkin Adams is a contentious one due to the fact that the general practitioner was never actually found guilty of murder or professional negligence. However, years after his own death conflicting views remain about whether Bodkin Adams was guilty of murder or euthanasia. To some he is regarded as a forerunner of the medical mass murderer Dr. Harold Shipman, while others believe that he simply carried out mercy killings at a time when painkillers were the only way to alleviate terminal suffering.

Dr. John Bodkin Adams was a general practitioner in the elegant Sussex seaside town of Eastbourne. An Irish loner, he was seemingly unconcerned about benefiting from gifts and legacies from his elderly, rich patients.

The middle-aged doctor was not known to be an outstanding practitioner, but he was recognized as being compassionate and considerate, particularly to his elderly patients who trusted him. There were, however, other aspects about his modus operandi that caused concern, mainly his tendency to use dangerous drugs, and what some critics have described as a pathological interest in his patients' wills.

Edith Alice Morrell was a patient of Dr. Adams who had been partially paralyzed after suffering a stroke. Adams supplied her with a cocktail of heroin and morphine to ease her discomfort, insomnia and symptoms of 'cerebral irritation' that were a condition of her illness.

During the period of her palliative treatment, Mrs. Morrell made several wills in which Adams received money and items of furniture. But in other wills he was omitted.

NAME
John Bodkin Adams

OCCUPATION
Murderer, Doctor

BIRTH DATE
January 21, 1899

DEATH DATE
July 4, 1983

PLACE OF BIRTH
Randalstown, Ireland

PLACE OF DEATH
Eastbourne, England,
United Kingdom

AKA
Dr. John Bodkin Adams
Doctor John Bodkin
Adams
John Adams

FULL NAME
John Bodkin Adams

Three months before Morrell's death on November 13, 1949, she added a clause to her will stating that Adams was to receive nothing. Despite this clause Dr. Adams, who maintained that Morrell had died from natural causes, still received a small amount of money, cutlery and a Rolls Royce.

The second alleged victim of Dr. Adams did not occur until seven years after Mrs. Morrell had died. Gertrude Hullett was another patient of Dr. Adams who fell ill and then into unconsciousness. Despite not even being dead, Dr. Adams called a local pathologist, Francis Camps, to make an appointment for an autopsy. When Camps realized that Hullett was still alive he accused Adams of 'extreme incompetence'.

On July 23, 1956, Gertrude Hullett died and Adams recorded the cause of death as a brain hemorrhage. An official investigation however, arrived at the conclusion that she had committed suicide. Camps argued that she had been poisoned with sleeping pills. Like Mrs. Morrell before her, Hullett left several valuable items to Dr. Adams, including a Rolls Royce.

Gossip surrounding Adams began circulating around the close-knit seaside community. Whether there was truth in the allegations that Adams was an 'angel of death,' preying on vulnerable wealthy widows, or was an 'angel of mercy,' kindly alleviating suffering, was up for conjecture.

It appears that the death of Hullett in 1956 precipitated a state of affairs that was to bring Adams to the attention of the authorities.

Investigation and Trial

The gossip in the town finally led the police to investigate and they arrested Adams on suspicion of murder. The general rumors that swept the genteel seaside resort were that Adams' bedside manner was to persuade a wealthy widow to write a will which left him money before administering a lethal concoction of drugs.

Accusations and hearsay had reached such a peak that the local police had little choice but to undertake an investigation. At the same time the press got hold of the story and almost in a 'trial by media' manner helped reinforce the view that Adams was a doctor with a sinister agenda. One headline, Inquiry into 400 wills, no doubt helped fuel the view that Adams was a potential killer.

The police investigated for several months during 1956. Then on October 1 of that year they confronted Dr. Adams with their suspicions concerning the death of Mrs. Morrell. In his defense Adams argued that his ill patient, suffering terribly from pain, wanted to die. He argued that it was no crime to ease the suffering of the terminally ill. But it was the legacies left in the patients wills that caused the police to remain suspicious over Adams motivations.

Adams' trial took place in March 1957. Adams defense made a point that the charge was based mainly on testimonies from the nurses who had tended to Mrs. Morrell.

It transpired that Mrs. Morell had been cared for on a 24-hour basis by a team of four nurses. The nurses testified that it had been Dr. Bodkin Adams's practice to inject his patients with grossly excessive doses of pain-killing drugs such as morphine and heroin. Despite their deeply shock and suspicion of this behavior, they felt that as nurses there was little could they do.

The situation looked bleak for Dr. Adams until the defense cross-examined the first of the nurses who had given such damning evidence. Lawrence managed to procure from her the fact that all injections given to Mrs. Morrell had been carefully recorded in a notebook, together with details of her condition at all stages during her illness. This procedure was standard practice for any terminally ill patient.

When the defense produced not just one but eight notebooks, overlooked by police investigations, they proved to contain every detail of Mrs. Morell's treatment for several years before her death. The nurses themselves had also written in them, and during examination of the notes it was discovered that their memories failed to correlate with their verbal evidence in court.

Could it have been the case that these nurses had allowed themselves to be influenced by malicious gossip circulating in the town?

Also in Adams' favor was the fact that only one of the prosecution's two expert medical witnesses was prepared to say that murder had been committed. The defense was also able to demonstrate that he was not a reliable witness.

Dr. Adams defense had managed to prevent him being forced to appear in the witness stand and as a result no evidence from Gertrude Hullett's case, including the testimony of a nurse, was allowed to be produced in court. This particular nurse, who had worked with Adams while attending Hullett in July 1956, had allegedly remarked to him, You do realize, doctor, that you have killed her?

On April 15, 1957, it took the jury only 45 minutes to find Adams not guilty.

Despite the not guilty verdict, the police still thought Adams was guilty, not just of two murders, but the deaths of many patients. The press appeared to share this opinion. A Fleet Street journalist at the time is known to have said that word on the street was that Adams had killed so many, and seemed so likely to kill so many more, that the police had been obliged to prosecute even though their case was 'not quite ready'.

After the trial Adams resigned from the National Health Service. He was later convicted that same year for forging prescriptions, and ordered to pay a fine of 2,200 pounds. As a result he was struck off the Medical Register.

Adams spent his remaining days in Eastbourne, in spite of his tarnished reputation with some still believing that he had murdered at least eight people. Others, notably patients and friends, remained convinced of his innocence.

In 1961, Adams was reinstated as a general practitioner. On July 4, 1983, Adams died age 84. At the time of his death, his fortune was 402,970 pounds. He had been receiving legacies until his death.

Article Title

John Bodkin Adams Biography

Author

Biography.com Editors

Website Name

The Biography.com website

URL

<http://www.biography.com/people/john-bodkin-adams-17172156>

Access Date

January 21, 2017

Publisher

A&E Television Networks

Last Updated

April 2, 2014

Original Published Date

n/a

BIO NEWSLETTER

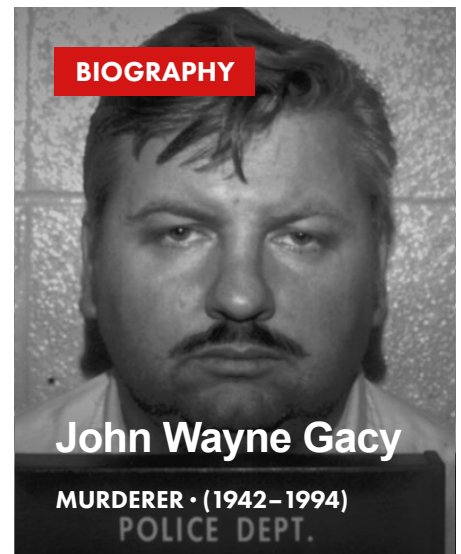
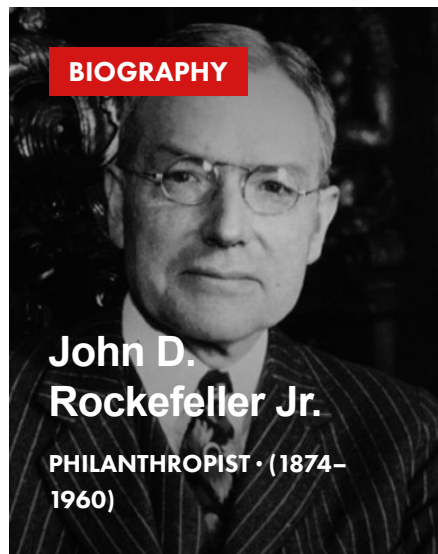
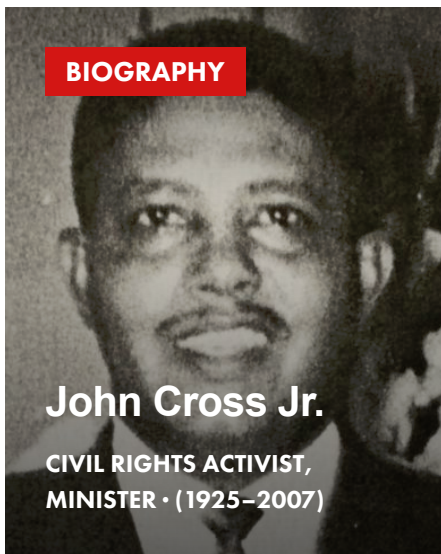
Sign up to receive updates from BIO and A+E Networks.

email address

SUBSCRIBE



MORE STORIES FROM BIO



SEE MORE