

REVIEW BY MARK TAHA

THE RIPPER AND THE ROYALS - Melvyn Fairclough (1991, Duckworth, £14.99)

Yes - another variant on the old Masonic conspiracy theory. We hear the old story of Prince Eddy marrying Annie Crook and fathering a daughter by her, the Freemasons carrying out the killings to silence women who knew too much. It's claimed here that Mary Kelly had been first Annie Crook's fellow-shop assistant and then her daughter's nursemaid.

The names of Sir William Gull and John Netley of course appear; apparently Gull "actually killed and mutilated four of the victims... [but] acting under orders [from] people more prominent than he... really responsible". We hear the old story about Police Commissioner Warren conducting a cover-up by destroying the "Juwes" writing - "one Freemason... chalked up, another... had it removed" - everything familiar to ripperologists - with one exception. Apparently, Gull and Netley had an accomplice - no less than Lord Randolph Churchill. Apparently he, and not the Duke of Clarence, was the mysterious "S" named by Dr. Thomas Stowell and he, the leading Freemason in Britain, masterminded the conspiracy - which didn't stop at the Ripper killings; apparently, Randolph Churchill, Edward VII - then Prince of Wales - and others in the Establishment coolly decided that Prince Eddy was not to be allowed to become king. After an attempt to assassinate him in 1891, masterminded by Churchill and carried out by Netley and an accomplice named "Fingers Freddy", had failed, he was "frightened into submission." It seems that he didn't actually die in 1892 but was instead kept shut away in Glamis Castle in Scotland until his death in 1933. The Earl of Strathmore, the Queen Mother's father, agreed to keep him there in exchange for the promise of the marriage of one of his daughters to a future king; the original idea was for the Queen Mother to marry Edward VIII but of course she instead married his brother George VI. It also seems that Edward VIII gave up the throne partly because he'd heard of the plot and also heard that his father was actually the son of Grand Duke Nicholas, the former Czarovitch, who'd had a brief fling with Princess Alexandra in 1864.

Mr. Fairclough also reports fresh "Sickert revelations"; apparently, Prince John, George V's retarded youngest son, had died as a baby and Joseph Sickert's brother Charles had been substituted for him. Queen Alexandra failed him as her only great-grandchild. In addition, we're informed that Emma Smith was indirectly a "Ripper victim", murdered by Netley and Fingers Freddy because she knew too much, Annie Crook was a relative of Annie Crook's friend and tutor James Stephen, and that Mary K Kelly actually got away to Canada, a friend of hers being murdered in a case of mistaken identity.

Mr. Fairclough's evidence includes, apart from Joseph Sickert, Inspector Abberline's private diary and a photograph claiming to show the Duke of Clarence in 1910, aged 46. He also mentions earlier secret royal marriages - George III's to Hannah Lightfoot (I was at school with somebody who claimed to be descended from them) and a young George IV's to Maria Fitzherbert. Unfortunately, he also takes the writings of American anti-Masonic fanatic William Morgan seriously, following in the footsteps of Stephen Knight.

Well, it's a theory - and I don't believe a word of it. While I have no doubt that the Duke of Clarence fathered a child by Annie Crook - he'd hardly be either the first or last royal to do that kind of thing - I don't for an instant believe that he married her. And is not more likely that Queen Alexandra favoured Prince John because of his being mentally retarded?

Furthermore, Mr. Fairclough claims that Prince Eddy was not ^{actually} mentally stupid, merely hard of hearing. I hardly see how he reconciles this statement with his tutor James Stephen's view that he "couldn't possibly derive much benefit attending lectures at Cambridge... hardly knows the meaning of the words to read" and Mr. Fairclough's statement that his "knowledge of European history... sadly lacking... rarely read anything except letters from friends... unable to hold a conversation on social problems or politics... feeble knowledge of constitution... heavy drinking... dissolute ways... extremely poor monarch." Looking at many of her monarchs - for instance, Queen Victoria's predecessors - I hardly think these things would have disqualified him; in fact, plotticians would probably see them as advantages.

As for Lord Randolph Churchill - there is no record at Freemasons' Hall of his ever being a Mason. The claim is that he joined under the name Rudolph Spencer - but

there's no record of him either. And is it really likely that he'd have been the top Mason in England while still in his thirties?

Considering him as a possible Ripper—he certainly had reason to be "down on whores" as he was dying of syphilis and gradually cracking up; in his dying days, author Frank Harris' observation that he was mad was answered with the words "Was he ever sane?" On the other hand, while someone like that might have been capable of carrying out the murders, would he have been able to coolly and meticulously plan the conspiracy? And would he have been the man to defend the Establishment, so to speak, when both Queen Victoria and Prime Minister Salisbury detested him, the latter having been glad to accept his resignation in 1886? Nor was Lord Randolph any great friend of the Prince of Wales, who'd had him barred from Society for eight years and seduced his wife. In fact, Lord Randolph was to order "Beastly Bertie" out of his house the following year.

Furthermore, Sir William Gull was over seventy and in poor health; he could hardly have carried out the murders. And the claim that the murders were Masonic ritual killings prompts the question—why would the Masons want to take such a risk rather than simply quietly killing their victims? Murder was common enough in the East End after all.

To sum up—this is an entertaining book and would be adequate as fiction. However, I find the theory of Melvyn Fairclough about as credible as the existence of Rita Fairclough.