

TIMOTHY DWIGHT

The case of James Yates was far from unique. As historian Karen Haltunnen has shown in her pioneering study *Murder Most Foul* (1998), domestic murder—particularly “the slaughter of an entire family by its patriarchal head”—became an increasingly common subject in late 18th-century American crime literature. One of the most sensational of these incidents was the atrocity perpetrated in December 1782 by the Connecticut shopkeeper William Beadle.

The Beadle murders became the subject of sermons, broadside ballads, and pamphlets, including a shockingly graphic account written by his friend and neighbor, Stephen Mix Mitchell, one of the first men to arrive at the murder scene. Mitchell’s widely distributed narrative of the “horrid massacre” provided material for the following account by another of Beadle’s intimates, Timothy Dwight (1752–1817). A pastor, educator, and prominent member of the Connecticut Wits, America’s first poetic “school,” Dwight owes his place in our literary history to three ambitious poems: *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785), an epic-length expansion of the biblical story of Joshua; *The Triumph of Infidelity* (1788), a lengthy defense of orthodox Calvinism; and *Greenfield Hill* (1794), a pastoral celebration of New England village life. His four-volume *Travels in New-England and New-York*, published posthumously in 1821–22, is the source of this selection.

“A crime more atrocious and horrible than any other”

Wethersfield is remarkable for having been the scene of a crime, more atrocious and horrible than any other, which has been perpetrated within the limits of New-England; and scarcely exceeded in the history of man. By the politeness of my friend, Col. Belden, I am enabled to give you an authentic account of this terrible transaction, taken from the records of the third School District in Wethersfield. I

He or some one

shall not, however, copy the record exactly; but will give you the substance of every thing which it contains.

William Beadle was born in a little village, near London. In the year 1755, he went out to Barbadoes, with Governor Pinfold; where he staid six years, and then returned to England. In 1762, he purchased a small quantity of goods; and brought them to New-York, and thence to Stratford in Connecticut, where he lived about two years. Thence he removed to Derby; where he continued a year, or two; and thence to Fairfield. Here he married Miss Lathrop, a lady of a respectable family, belonging to Plymouth in Massachusetts. In 1772, he removed to Wethersfield, and continued in this town about ten years; sustaining the character of a worthy, honest man, and a fair dealer.

In the great controversy, which produced the American Revolution, he adopted American principles; and characteristically, adhered with rigid exactness to whatever he had once adopted. After the continental paper currency* began to depreciate; almost every trader sold his goods at an enhanced price. Beadle, however, continued to sell his at the original prices, and to receive the depreciated currency in payment. This money he kept by him, until it had lost its value. The decay of his property rendered him melancholy; as appeared by several letters, which he left behind him, addressed to different persons of his acquaintance.

By the same letters, and other writings, it appears, that he began to entertain designs of the most desperate nature, three years before his death; but was induced to postpone them by a hope, that Providence would, in some way or other, change his circumstances for the better, so far, as to make it advisable for him to wait for death in the ordinary course of events. But every thing, which took place, whether of great or little importance, tended, he says, to convince him, that it was his duty to adopt the contrary determination. During all this time he managed his ordinary concerns just as he had heretofore done. His

*The paper money emitted by Congress during the Revolutionary war.

countenance wore no appearance of any change in his feelings, or views; and not one of his acquaintance seems to have suspected, that he was melancholy. The very evening before the catastrophe, to which I have alluded, took place, he was in company with several of his friends; and conversed on grave and interesting subjects; but without the least appearance of any peculiar emotion.

On the morning of Dec. 11th, 1782, he called up a female servant, who slept in the same room with his children, and was the only domestic in his family; and directed her to arise so softly, as not to disturb the children. When she came down, he gave her a note, which he had written to Dr. Farnsworth, his family-physician; and told her to carry it, and wait until the physician was ready to come with her; informing her at the same time, that Mrs. Beadle had been ill through the night.

After the servant had gone, as appeared by the deplorable scene, presented to the eyes of those who first entered the house; he took an axe, struck each of his children once, and his wife twice on the head; cut their throats quite across with a carving-knife, which he had prepared for the purpose; and then shot himself through the head with a pistol.

Dr. Farnsworth, upon opening the note, found that it announced the diabolical purpose of the writer; but supposing it impossible, that a sober man should adopt so horrible a design, concluded, that he had been suddenly seized by a delirium. Dr. Farnsworth, however, hastened with the note to the Hon. Stephen Mix Mitchell, now Chief Justice of the State. This gentleman realized the tragedy at once. The house was immediately opened, and all the family were found dead, in the manner which has been specified.

I knew this family intimately. Mrs. Beadle possessed a very pleasing person, a fine mind, and delightful manners. The children were unusually lovely and promising. Beadle in his writings, which were numerous, professed himself a Deist; and declared that man was in his opinion a mere machine; unaccountable for his actions, and incapable of either virtue or vice. The idea of a Revelation he rejected with

contempt. At the same time he reprobated the *vices of others* in the strongest terms; and spoke of *duty*, in the very same writings, in language, decisively expressive of his belief in the existence of both duty and sin. The Jury of inquest pronounced him to be of sound mind and brought in a verdict of murder, and suicide.

The inhabitants of Wethersfield, frantic with indignation and horror at a crime so unnatural and monstrous, and at the sight of a lady, and her children, for whom they had the highest regard, thus butchered by one, who ought to have protected them at the hazard of his life, took his body, as they found it, and dragged it on a small sled to the bank of the river, without any coffin, with the bloody knife tied upon it; and buried it, as they would have buried the carcass of a beast, between high and low water mark.

The corpses of the unhappy family were the next day carried, with every mark of respect, to the Church; where a sermon was preached to a very numerous concourse of sincere mourners. They were then interred in the common burying-ground, and in one grave.

Mrs. Beadle was thirty-two years of age; and the eldest child about fifteen. Beadle was fifty-two years of age; of small stature; and of an ordinary appearance. He was contemplative; possessed good sense; loved reading, and delighted in intelligent conversation. His manners were gentlemanly; and his disposition hospitable. His countenance exhibited a strong appearance of determination; yet he rarely looked the person, with whom he was conversing, in the face; but turned his eye askance, the only suspicious circumstance, which I observed in his conduct; unless a degree of reserve and mystery, which always attended him, might merit the name of suspicious. Such as he was, he was cheerfully admitted to the best society in this town: and there is no better society.

Col. Belden adds to his account the following note.

“This deed of horror seems to have been marked by the indignation of Heaven in the treatment of the body of the perpetrator.”

“The ground in which he was first buried, happened to belong to the township of Glastenbury; although lying on the western side of

cannot
be buried

the river. The inhabitants of Glastenbury, thinking themselves insulted by the burying of such a monster within its limits, manifested their uneasiness in such a manner, as to induce the Select-men of the town of Wethersfield to order a removal of the body. Accordingly it was removed in the night, secretly, and by a circuitous route; and buried again at some distance from the original place of sepulture. Within a few days however, the spot, where it was interred, was discovered. It was removed again in the night, and buried near the western bank of the river, in Wethersfield. The following spring it was uncovered by the freshet. The flesh was washed from the bones. At this season, a multitude of persons customarily resort to Wethersfield, to purchase fish. By these and various other persons, in the indulgence of a strange, and I think unnatural curiosity, the bones were broken off, and scattered through the country."

Pride was unquestionably the ruin of Beadle. He was, obviously, a man of a very haughty mind. This passion induced him, when he had once determined, that the paper currency would escape a depreciation, to continue selling his goods at the former prices, after the whole community had, with one voice, adopted a new rate of exchange. Under the influence of this passion he refused to lay out his money in fixed property; although prudence plainly dictated such a measure. When he saw his circumstances reduced so as to threaten him with a necessary and humiliating change in his style of living; pride prompted him, instead of making new exertions to provide for his family, to sit down in a sullen hostility against God and man, and to waste the whole energy of his mind in resentment against his lot, and in gloomy determinations to escape from it. He doated upon his wife and children. His pride could not bear the thought of leaving them behind him, without a fortune sufficient to give them undisputed distinction in the world.

A gentleman, who had long been a friend to Beadle, offered him letters of credit, to any amount, which he should wish. Of this his friend informed me personally. Pride induced Beadle to refuse the offer.

In these charges I am supported by Beadle's own writings. He alleges this very cause for his conduct; and alleges it every where; not in so many words indeed; but in terms, which, though specious, are too explicit to be misconstrued.

Beadle, as I have observed, denied the existence of a Divine Revelation. Yet he placed a strong reliance upon dreams, as conveying direct indications of the will of God; so strong as to make them the directories of his own moral conduct in a case of tremendous magnitude. He appears by his writings to have been long persuaded, that he had a right to take the lives of his children, because they were *his* children; and therefore, in his own view his property, and to be disposed of according to his pleasure: i.e. as I suppose, in any manner, which he should judge conducive to their good. But he thought himself unwarranted to take away the life of his wife; because, being the child of another person, she was not in the same sense his property, nor under his control. This you will call a strange current of thought: but the manner, in which he solved his scruples, was certainly not less strange. His wife, under the influence of very painful impressions from his extraordinary conduct, particularly from the fact, that he continually brought an axe, and other instruments of death, into his bed-chamber, dreamed frequently, and in a very disturbed manner. One morning she told him, that in her sleep, the preceding night, she had seen her own corpse, and the corpses of her children, exposed in coffins, in the street; that the sun shone on them for a long time; and that they were ultimately frozen. This dream made a deep impression on Beadle's mind. In his writings he mentions it as having solved all his doubts; and as a direct revelation from Heaven, that it was lawful for him to put his wife, also, to death.

We have here a strong proof of the propriety, with which Infidels boast of their exemption from superstition, and credulity.

Had this man possessed even a little share of the patience, and fortitude, of a Christian; had he learned to submit to the pleasure of God with that resignation, which is so obvious a dictate even of natural religion; had that humility, which is so charming a feature of the

never hope in his life

Christian character, formed any part of his own; he might, even now, have been alive; and might in all probability, have seen his children grow up to be the support, and the joy, of his declining years.

He died worth three hundred pounds sterling. The farmers in Connecticut were, at an average, probably not worth more, at the same period. Every one of them; at least every one of them, whose property did not overrun this sum; might, therefore, with equal propriety, have acted in the same manner. What would become of the world, if every man in it, who was worth no more than three hundred pounds sterling, were to murder himself and his family.

I think you will agree with me, that we have, here, a strong specimen, of the weakness of Infidelity; and of the wickedness, to which it conducts its votaries.

Travels in New-England and New-York, 1821-22