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WAS PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY MURDERED BY THE BRITISH SECRET SERVICE?

As what else would you expect, for someone who called his king “blind, mad, despised”, called the British aristocracy “dregs of their dull race, mud”, and suggested that the “rulers” might “drop, blind in blood” with or without an Army putch¹; a student expelled from University because of his “first public diatribe against Christianity”, as the *Short Oxford History of English Literature* calls, even today, his “Necessity of Atheism”²; who tried to instigate a rebellion, which translates as civil war, in Ireland; a young man with potentially strong political connections; someone who could have become, in 1848 – had he lived that long – the Lenin of England? The truth might be simple. They may have killed him.

“Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry, has been drowned, now he knows whether there is God or no.” With those words was his death greeted, by the Tory newspaper “The Courier”.³ Overjoyed, weren’t they? – and ambiguous in phrasing; a strong wink: “has been drowned”. By whom?

Descriptions of the circumstances of his death on 8th July 1822 are many, confused, and contradictory. So this is much more than an arbitrary conjecture, more than a folklore of popular legend. With him were his ex-Royal Navy friend Edward Williams, and Charles Vivian, an English boatboy aged 18; but was there also an Italian boy, a fisherman’s son, in the boat – wouldn’t he have judged the storm correctly, and told them to steer for the shore? Shelley’s earlier depressiveness was used by biographers to suggest something like a suicide, but it could not have been a suicide pact – why would the other two Englishmen in the boat kill themselves? “There was a rumor at the time that (the boat) had been rammed by a fishing boat, whose crew believed that the rich Lord Byron was on board with gold; years later a fisherman confessed to this.” So, did a band of Italians attack them, thinking it was Byron also in the boat, with gold for Greece – but how could they have imagined he would sail such a small boat (8m) all the way to Greece, about one and a half thousand kilometers? Was

¹ In the sonnet “England in 1819”, of course.

² Sanders, A. (ed.), *Short Oxford History of English Literature*, second edition. Oxford. 2000. p. 382.

³ N. I. White, *Shelley*. 1947. II, 390-391. Quotation contributed first by Nikola Bubanja, my assistant in Kragujevac.

But available also at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0%2C12084%2C1129144%2C00.html>

Shelley seen, in one moment, to stand in the boat and shout something – a “No!”? ⁴ They had a raft, a life-saving device, why didn't they hold on to it?

Encyclopedia *Britannica* tells us that late in 1820, “*Oedipus Tyrannus; or, Swellfoot the Tyrant*, his satirical drama on the trial for adultery of Caroline (estranged wife of King George IV), appeared anonymously but was quickly suppressed.”⁵ Suppressed? – by whom, the local grocer, or by the government? How does that click with freedom of speech? The University took one illegal action against him, even *burned* his brochure, to shut him up; the government took this second illegal action, of suppression, but he would not shut up; so, perhaps as the final step, he “was drowned”, as the newspaper gloated the next day. The storm was an ideal moment. The James Bond would probably just pay a few local Italians, knowledgeable about the sea, to sail after Shelley and drown him. Then he would go away without a trace, but the money, which went from the agent's hand to the assassins' hands, probably would have left some trace in the archives of the British Secret Service, and *this* perhaps could be found today, if there is a will. Interestingly, the CD encyclopedia Encarta also tells us in the grammatical Passive Voice that Shelley “was drowned”. Not just drowned; *was* drowned.

In his book *Shelley, A Life Story* (1965), Edmund Blunden, who talked to many people who personally remembered the witnesses, clearly proves that Shelley's fragile boat was twice rammed by a stronger vessel, and left to sink, with a considerable sum of money and other valuable items inside; robbers would have grabbed at least the cash. And the British government was very well aware of Shelley's movements; a British consul was at that time extricating Shelley from the legal aspects of an earlier incident, with an officer in Pisa, in which Shelley almost was shot. On another occasion, not long after, some Italian guards had a “misunderstanding” with Shelley, and again he easily could have been killed.⁶

To some of us who live in South-Eastern Europe, such things, when the evidence is circumstantial but overwhelming, ring very familiar. Regimes in this part of the world have carried out thousands of political murders; this obviously looks like one. Three times attempted, the third time successfully. So, it would be decent of the British government to do what they honestly can, now, almost two centuries (actually, 183 years) later. I invite them to start an investigation, to do the best research they can, and if they find, in their records, any evidence whatsoever that Shelley was murdered, to tell the world.

⁴ <http://www.wilsonsalmanac.com/shelley.html>

⁵ CD *Britannica* 1999.

⁶ Blunden, E., *Shelley, A Life Story*. 1965. London, Oxford University Press, pp. 278, 290. For this information I am also indebted to Nikola Bubanja.