

# BOOKS RECEIVED

by Geoffrey Elan

## The Ultimate Whodunit

HEARING BY THE GRAND JURY ON THE DEATH OF WILLIAM K. DEAN, *transcribed, edited, and published by Margaret C. Bean* (\$27.95 ppd., available from the Jaffrey Chamber of Commerce, Box 2, Jaffrey, NH 03452)

FOR MORE THAN SEVEN DECADES the people of Jaffrey, New Hampshire, have been haunted by the unsolved murder of a mildly eccentric local character named William K. Dean ("Who Killed Dr. Dean?" June 1987). Dean was clubbed,

strangled, and dumped into a cistern on his hilltop farm in August 1918, shortly after telling a friend he had information about possible espionage. Among the suspects were his senile wife (who told authorities that Billy was dead, "in the deep water," before the body was found); banker Charles Rich, the last man known to have talked to Dean (he was sporting a prominent black eye the morning after the murder took place); and a mysterious out-of-towner named Colfelt (suspected by many of being a German spy).

The following April a grand jury spent eight days hearing witnesses behind closed doors at the county courthouse in Keene. No indictments were handed down, and the testimony, recorded in now-obsolete Pitman shorthand, was put away — along with physical evidence like the rope used to strangle Dean — and forgotten.

*Dr. William Dean (left) was murdered on August 13, 1918, a date investigators found circled on his wife's calendar (below) with the words "Billee die."*

— photograph by Mark Corliss, courtesy  
Cheshire County Superior Court



1918 AUGUST 1918						
SUN.	MON.	TUE.	WED.	THU.	FRI.	SAT.
6th New Moon	14th First Quarter	22nd Full Moon	28th Last Quarter	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

In connection with crop rotation must come judicious applications of chemical manures.

— photograph from *The Dean  
Murder Mystery* by Bert Ford

When the courthouse was renovated in 1979, the 20 notebooks were rediscovered, and Margaret Bean entered the picture. Daughter-in-law of a Jaffrey businessman who remembered the crime, she happened to know Pitman shorthand. She was granted permission to see the notebooks in 1981 and spent the next six years painstakingly transcribing the testimony. Last year she published the transcripts (profits will go for a town historical project) — 351 pages in all.

It may be the ultimate whodunit because nobody knows whodunit. You get the same tangle of evidence, supposition, and gossip — cryptic signal lights, rumors of financial misdeeds, a wacky “criminal psychologist” who claimed he could see the murderer’s face in a bloodstain that frustrated the grand jury 71 years ago.

But even if you can’t figure out who killed Dr. Dean, *Hearing by the Grand Jury* is a fascinating and troubling piece of New England history, the dark underside of *Our Town* (written just a few miles away in Peterborough). Margaret Bean admits some sympathy for Rich, the banker. He was never charged with the crime, but people in town murmured about the implications of that black eye (he said he was kicked by a horse) for the rest of his life. It explains her choice of an epigraph from Agatha Christie: “There is nothing more cruel than talk, and there is nothing more difficult to combat.”

Another famous unsolved New England murder is that of Andrew and Abby Borden in Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1892. Their daughter Lizzie was acquitted in court and convicted everywhere else. A very rare book on the subject (only four copies are known to exist), published in 1893, is now available in facsimile. It’s called *The Mystery Unveiled: The Truth About the Borden Tragedy* (\$11.20 ppd., King Philip Publishing Co., 466 Ocean Ave., Portland, ME 04103). Author Todd Lunday probably a pseudonym ingeniously points to Lizzie’s guilt by inventing a murderer he calls Villain and then proving that Villain is innocent. It’s a treat for those familiar with the crime. □□

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