

M. P. Dare: Antiquary, Writer... and Book Thief

by Gina Collia

It sometimes happens that a writer is just as interesting as his writing or, in some cases, even more so. This, for me, is the case with Marcus Paul Dare (1902-1962). When I first encountered his 1947 volume of supernatural tales, *Unholy Relics*, and found next to nothing about him online (or anywhere else at the time for that matter), I started digging about for information in various regional newspapers. I was more than a little surprised at what I found.

Dare was born in Leicestershire in 1902. His father was the curator of Wyggeston Boys' School, which Dare attended. Upon leaving school, Dare got a job at the *Leicester Daily Mercury* as a junior reporter. In his twenties, he published a number of articles in local archaeological journals. In 1931, he began working for the *Northern Daily Telegraph*, but he left to work for the *Times of India* in Bombay in the spring of 1932. In 1935, he returned to England and got a job at the *Nottingham Guardian*.

In March 1937, two hundred and fifty people applied to become keepers of Temple Newsom Mansion in Leeds, with a joint salary of £250 per year (with residence, coal and light thrown in). A shortlist of six was compiled, and Dare and his wife were on it. On 16 March, they were appointed joint keepers, subject to the approval of Leeds City Council. According to the *Yorkshire Post*, Dare had been educated at University College, Leicester, and had knowledge of French, Italian, Hindustani, Spanish and Latin.¹

Five months after Dare's appointment as keeper, a report appeared in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* concerning a storm at the Mansion. Dare was in the process of closing the windows on the top floor of the building when, as he was about to take hold of an iron bar attached to one of the windows, there was a flash of lightning, and he was hurled twenty feet across his bedroom. Apparently, he was none the worse for his experience.² One month later, Dare handed in his resignation. When approached by a reporter from the *Yorkshire Evening Post* to discuss his resignation, Dare said he could not talk about the matter publicly. From this point forward, things went downhill; though, considering the fact that Dare was struck by lightning not long after arriving in Leeds, perhaps they did that from the moment he left Nottingham.

In May 1939, at the age of thirty-seven, when he was archivist to Buckingham County Council, Dare was charged with the theft of a fourteenth-century Latin Vulgate Bible from Buckingham Parish Church. The Bible, which was worth about £150 at the time, had been presented to the church in 1471 and had been kept in a locked cabinet with a glass top. On 5 May, a local detective constable saw Dare leaving the church with a paper bag; ten minutes later, the policeman discovered that the cabinet where the Bible had been kept was empty. Dare was questioned that evening but denied all knowledge of the theft. The next day, a man matching Dare's description posted a parcel at Thame post office and sent a telegram to the vicar of Buckingham Parish Church saying, 'Old book

safe; reaching you Monday.' When formally charged with the theft, Dare elected to go to trial. He said that he had no recollection at all of what had taken place between removing the Bible from the case and later discovering it amongst papers in his own office. He claimed that his bout of memory loss was the result of having suffered from malignant malaria. He was committed for trial at Warwick Assizes and allowed bail.³

Dare appeared before Mr Justice Singleton at Warwick Assizes on 4 July 1939. He explained again that he had no recollection whatsoever of what had taken place on the day of the theft, and, after an hour and a quarter's deliberation, the jury announced that they could not agree upon a verdict. The judge ordered a retrial at the forthcoming Birmingham Assizes, and Dare's bail was renewed.⁴

Dare's case came before Mr Justice Lawrence at Birmingham Assizes on 13 July. The prosecution explained that a letter signed 'A Parishioner' had been sent to the vicar of Buckingham Parish Church; it stated that the book had been taken to demonstrate how unsafe it was to keep it in the locked cabinet. Dare explained:

'I went to the church to examine the medieval Bible. I cannot remember whether I was carrying a parcel when I left, because everything in my head was a complete blank until I found myself in my car driving to Chetwode, where I had to go. I had removed the Bible from its case, and must have had it with me, but I knew nothing of this until I got to my office. I then realised, to my amazement and distress, that I had, without reason or need, stolen the book. I do not remember even an impulse to steal it.'⁵

Dare explained that he had contracted malaria in Egypt in 1926. In 1932, while working as a journalist in India, he had malaria, dysentery and enteric fever all together. He said that he had once had a mental black-out in Nottingham whilst driving his car, and he had had no idea of who he was until he examined his own driving licence. The defence argued that Dare's illness had brought about hysteria, which had caused a 'dissociation of personality'.

The jury acquitted Dare after discussions that lasted only twenty-five minutes. Dare had to be assisted from the court in a state of semi-collapse, and, upon leaving the court, 'he broke down and sobbed.' One of those to shake him by the hand as he left court was the vicar of Buckingham, Rev. R. F. Bale, who had given evidence for the prosecution.⁶ During the trial, the council met to discuss Dare's situation and decided that he should be retained by Buckinghamshire County Council as the county archivist for a probationary period of six months, after which time his position would be reviewed.⁷

Unfortunately, things just went from bad to worse following his acquittal. The following year, Dare was in trouble again, this time for stealing a chalice and a stained glass window from a church. He was sentenced at Aylesbury to serve one year in prison, and, as a result, his marriage failed. Upon his release, he joined the army and served with the Intelligence Corps and the Field Security Police, but he was discharged on medical

grounds. He took a job at an Oxford bookshop, but he was sent to prison again in 1944, this time for eighteen months, for stealing books. Following his release, he married for a second time, and in 1947 he opened a bookshop in Ramsgate, but he was caught stealing books yet again in 1949, this time from local libraries, was sentenced to three months in prison and his business failed.⁸

Dare later moved to Cambridge, where, on 19 July 1962, he took his own life. He was, once again, working in a bookshop. And he was, once again, in trouble with the police. He was arrested at work, but he managed to escape and make his way home, where he took cyanide. He was taken to hospital and died shortly after his arrival.

During his trial in 1949, Dare asked to be admitted as a voluntary patient to a mental hospital rather than being incarcerated in a state prison. He was no criminal mastermind, that's for sure; his less-than-successful criminal career was either the product of sheer incompetence or a somewhat disturbed mind, and his history seems to suggest the latter. He certainly does seem to have been a troubled soul.

¹ *Yorkshire Post*, Wednesday, 17 March 1937.

² *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Saturday, 7 August 1937.

³ *Nottingham Evening Post*, Tuesday, 30 May 1939.

⁴ *Nottingham Evening Post*, Wednesday, 5 July 1939.

⁵ *Nottingham Evening Post*, Thursday, 13 July 1939.

⁶ *Gloucestershire Echo*, Monday, 17 July 1939.

⁷ *Evening Telegraph*, Monday, 28 July 1939.

⁸ Combined information gleaned from: Nelson, Geoffrey K. *Ghosts & Scholars*, No. 10, 1988; Meuross, Reg, introduction to *Unholy Relics*, published by Ash-Tree Press, 1997.

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