“Death's Deeds”: A Bi-Located Story
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Published online: 14 Feb 2012.

To cite this article: A. Lang M.A. LL.D. etc. (1907) “Death's Deeds”: A Bi-Located Story, Folklore, 18:4, 376-390, DOI: 10.1080/0015587X.1907.9719793
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1907.9719793

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
We all know that stories never die. A good thing told about a wit of any remote date is attached, in all following generations, to a series of later humorists. The famous Beresford ghost story (the basis of Scott's ballad, "The Eve of St. John"), is not only found in a chronicle of the twelfth century, and in a sequence of tales ever since, but is actually current to-day with a living lady for the heroine! Finally, the inventions of pre-historic antiquity, which are the stock-in-trade of Household Tales, peasant Märchen, and early epics, are localised in various places. The incidents of an European ballad are said to have occurred, for example, at the meeting-place of Ettrick and Yarrow, or beside the troutful Douglas burn.

This fact, the tendency to revive and renovate old stories by giving them a contemporary date and a familiar locality, is now perfectly well understood. But I have found a puzzling case of "story bi-location," and would be glad to know how we are to explain it. Did the self-same strange thing happen twice, or more frequently, on either side of the Atlantic, within some twenty years, or is the European narrative a deliberate plagiarism from West Indian facts?

Though the dead are the sufferers in this affair (and...
also the actors, according to popular opinion), the sturdy Rationalist need not be nervous: I am not telling a ghost-story; a thing excommunicated (if there be evidence for it) by scientific folklorists. I must confess that a little historical research has been needed, and historical precision is sadly alien to anthropological methods.

On May 8, 1859, in Paris, Mademoiselle de Guldenstubbé and her brother, the Baron de Guldenstubbé, told to Mr. Robert Dale Owen (late American Minister at Naples) their version of the bi-located story. He published it in 1860, in the American edition of his *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (English edition, 1861, pp. 186-191). The two Guldenstubbés were son and daughter of a Baron of that name, who, they said, in 1844 was president of a Committee which in that year investigated strange occurrences in the Lutheran cemetery of Ahrensburg, Isle of Oesel, in the Baltic. The evidence was thus given fifteen years later than the events. I must add that the younger Baron, the narrator, declared that he saw a very strange phantasm of the dead, at Paris, in his rooms, 23 Rue St. Lazare, in March, 1854. The events at Ahrensburg, of 1844, were therefore within his own recollection, if, in 1854, he was old enough to have an establishment of his own. He also published (or was it his father?), in 1857, a book on automatic writing, which was attributed to the agency of "spirits." A distinguished member of the Society for Psychical Research informs me that the author of this book was "a thorough-going spiritualist of the most credulous and superstitious type." Mr. Dale Owen, however, regarded the younger Baron as honest, and nobody says that he was a deliberate liar with circumstance.

His story was that, in June, 1844, a chapel, that of the Buxhoewden family, in the cemetery of Ahrensburg, became noisy; that the noise (*Getöse*) frightened horses
into fits, and that, when the chapel was opened (July, 1844) for the burial of a corpse, the coffins were found displaced, and "lying in a confused pile." They were replaced, and the chapel was locked. The elder Guldenstubbé, father of the narrator, with two of the Buxhoewden family, secretly visited the chapel, again found the coffins all in a heap, had them put in order, locked the chapel, and consented to an investigation. A Committee of the Consistory, including the Baron, the Bishop, the Burgomeister, an atheistic doctor (M. Luce), a Syndic, and a secretary, with two clergymen, were the Committee. They reopened the chapel; all the coffins but three were "in a painfully dissolute state." No robbery of jewels buried in the coffins had occurred. The pavement of the vault was taken up; it had not been disturbed. The place was put in order once more, and the doors were locked and sealed with the official seal of the Consistory. Wood ashes were strewn everywhere, to detect footsteps, and a military guard was posted for three days and nights. The Committee then returned, and found all in order: seals undisturbed, ashes un­trodden, but the coffins were standing on their heads. The lid of one was open, and a hand, that of a suicide, protruded.

An official report was drawn up, which "is to be found among the archives of the Consistory, and may be examined by any travellers, respectfully recommended, on application to the secretary of the Consistory." The troubles continued, till the dead were taken out and buried in earth.1 Dale Owen (1860) adds that the next generation will perhaps regard this tale as "an idle legend of the incredible."

In 1899 Dr. Alfred Russell Wallace had a controversy with Mr. Frank Podmore about Poltergeister, or unex­plained disturbances, and gave the Ahrensburg story as

1 Footfalls, pp. 186-193.
a good sample. Mr. Podmore naturally answered that the evidence is at third-hand, and that nobody professed to have seen the official document. On October 21-November 4, 1906, Mr. Solovovo wrote to Mr. Podmore from St. Petersburg, saying that he had applied to the Lutheran Consistory at Riga, on Feb. 4-16, 1899, and, on Feb. 19-March 4, received a reply. In the archives of the Consistory of Oelsen (and in those of the church in Ahrensburg, as Mr. Solovovo found) were no documents about the disturbances of the coffins. The Oberpastor of the church (that of St. Laurentius) added that the present Baron Buxhoewden, owner of the chapel, some years ago, had “failed to find anything either at Ahrensburg or at Riga.”

Are we to conclude that Mr. Dale Owen’s Baron de Guldenstubbé invented (or rather plagiarised) the whole story, so rich as it is in detail? I could not take it on me to say that; for the document, if it existed, was one which persons of education and common sense might think it desirable to destroy, while the Buxhoewden family, on reflection, might regard it as an unpleasant record. I know how often a gap occurs in State Papers and other public records, just at the moment when we are aware that a royal murder plot, or any other shady transaction, was being arranged. The newspapers, if any, of Oelsen for 1844, ought to be consulted. It is certain that old people in the island remember the affair.

I now turn to the other and earlier version of the story. The scene is a family vault, that of the family of Chase, at the church named Christchurch, in Barbadoes.

The dates of disturbances precisely parallel to those at Ahrensburg, are from August 9, 1812, to April, 1820. The earliest printed record known to me is of 1833, in Sir J. E. Alexander’s Transatlantic Sketches, vol. i., p. 161 (London, 1833).

1Journal S.P.R., February, 1907, pp. 30-32.
Sir James writes: "It is not generally known that in Barbadoes there is a mysterious vault, in which no one now dares to deposit the dead. It is in a churchyard near the seaside. In 1807 the first coffin that was deposited in it was that of a Mrs. Goddard; in 1808 a Miss A. M. Chase was placed in it; and in 1812 Miss D. Chase. In the end of 1812 the vault was opened for the body of the Honourable T. Chase; but the three first coffins were found in a confused state, having been apparently tossed from their places. Again was the vault opened to receive the body of an infant, and the four coffins, all of lead, and very heavy, were much disturbed. In 1816 a Mr. Brewster's body was placed in the vault, and again great disorder was apparent in the coffins. In 1819 a Mr. Clarke was placed in the vault, and, as before, the coffins were in confusion.

"Each time that the vault was opened the coffins were replaced in their proper situations, that is, three on the ground side by side, and the others laid on them. The vault was then regularly closed; the door (and a massive stone which required six or seven men to move) was cemented by masons; and though the floor was of sand, there were no marks of footsteps or water.

"The last time the vault was opened was in 1819. Lord Combermere was then present, and the coffins were found thrown confusedly about the vault, some with the heads down and others up. What could have occasioned this phenomenon? In no other vault in the island has this ever occurred. Was it an earthquake which occasioned it, or the effects of an inundation in the vault?" (The last opening was really in 1820).

In Schomburgk's History of Barbadoes, published in 1844, there is a similar version. I have in my hands a manuscript, undated, but old, signed "J. Anderson, Rector," written on the back of a coloured sketch of the
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coffins. Schomburgk says that such a sketch was made in 1820 (April 18), when the vault was opened by Lord Combermere, Governor of the island, and the coffins were found in wild disarray. My sketches of the coffins, in order and disorder, with Mr. "Anderson's" written account, belong to my brother-in-law, Mr. Forster Alleyne, of Porters, Barbadoes, whose father, the late Mr. Charles Thomas Alleyne, was in the island in April, 1820, when Lord Combermere opened the vault. I am not certain that Mr. Charles Alleyne spoke of the affair to his son; but Mr. Forster Alleyne tells me that he heard of it from an eye-witness named in Mr. Anderson's document, Sir Robert Bowcher Clarke. The evidence is thus better than that of Baron de Guldenstubbé, but as Christchurch was destroyed in the hurricane of 1831, I am not certain that its registers survive.

It is a curious fact that Mr. Alleyne's copy of Mr. "Anderson's" record varies from a synoptic version signed not "J. Anderson, Rector," but "Thomas Harrison Orderson, D.D., Parish of Christ Church, Barbadoes." This synoptic copy was printed by a Mr. Robert Reece, junior, who got it from Mr. Orderson (named elsewhere by him "Harrison"), and is published in a pamphlet pleasingly styled Death's Deeds (Skeet, London, 1860). A MS. note in the copy before me attributes the tract to "Mrs. D. H. Cussons." As to Mr. Orderson, Mr. Alleyne (May 20, 1907) informs me that he has examined the old record of funerals at Christ Church, Barbadoes. From the end of 1803 to 1820, Mr. Orderson signs all the records: "Harrison" is a misprint: Anderson was not Rector during the disturbances: this name is also a misprint.

The Death's Deeds version begins with what the "Anderson" version omits. "July 31, 1807, Mrs. Thomasin Goddard interred in vault which, when opened,
“Death’s Deeds”:

was quite empty.” I shall call the Orderson version “O.,” the Anderson version “A.” A. and O. both record: “Feb. 22, 1808, burial of infant daughter of Hon. Col. Chase in a leaden coffin.” (So, too, the Book of Christ Church.)

A. and O. both give July 6, 1812: “Dorcas Chase buried, the two other coffins were in their proper places. They were leaden coffins.” (So, too, the Book of Christ Church.)

A. and O. agree that on August 9, 1812, The Hon. Thomas Chase was buried. (So, too, the Book.) The two leaden coffins were found out of place, that of the infant (Feb. 22, 1808), had been thrown from its corner to the opposite angle. If any dead person had done this it must have been Dorcas Chase (July 6, 1812); at least Mrs. Goddard and Mary Anna Maria Chase had previously been tranquil.

Now comes a discrepancy between A. and O.

O. gives “Sept. 25, 1816, Samuel Brewer Ames, an infant, was interred” (so, too, the Book), “and when the vault was opened the leaden coffins were removed from their places, and were in much disorder.”

“Nov. 17, 1816, the body of Samuel Brewster was removed from the parish of St. Philip” (so, too, the Book), “and was deposited in the vault, and great confusion was discovered among the leaden coffins.”

Samuel Brewster, an adult, is another person than Samuel Brewster Ames, an infant.

A. says nothing about the infant Samuel Brewster Ames, buried on September 25, 1816, but has “September 25, 1816, vault opened for Samuel Brewster, a man whose remains had been removed from St. Philip’s, where he was shot in the insurrection of April, 1816, to Christ Church. Great confusion among the coffins.” A. gives no interment of November 17, 1816. How are we to account for these variations in the two synoptic records?
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The Book of Christ Church answers the question. A. has merely omitted the infant Samuel.

A. and O. both give for July 17, 1819, the burial of Thomasin Clarke. So, too, the Book. "Again great confusion." Both A. and O. allege, in different phrases, that on each occasion the coffins were carefully replaced in order, and the vault regularly closed by masons.

A. and O. both give the inspection by Lord Combermere and others on April 18, 1820. A. gives a coloured sketch of the coffins as left all orderly on July 7, 1819, and another of the disorder in which they were found on April 18, 1820. A. adds, "The vault is about 12 feet long, and about 6 to 7 wide. Five times were the coffins found in confusion. All the coffins were of lead, except Thomasine Clarke's, which was of wood." Now A., we saw, gives but four cases of disturbance, while O., by aid of the infant Samuel, gives five. It thus seems that the writer of A. omitted the infant Samuel, and dated the adult Samuel's burial on the wrong day. The sketches given by O. vary much from those in A.

Since writing so far, I received from my kinsman, Mr. Forster Alleyne of Barbadoes, a third synoptic version. He copied it "from a very old copy on thin blue paper once in the possession of" a sister of Sir R. Boucher Clarke, who was at the last opening of the vault.

This version, signed by Thomas H. Orderson, Rector, I give in full. Within are sketches of the coffins in order and in disorder.

Copy.


July 6, 1812. Vault opened for Dorcas Chase. Mary Ann Maria Chase's coffin was found in its proper place.

Aug. 9, 1812. Vault opened for the Honbl. Thos. Chase. The two coffins above-mentioned were found out of their
proper places. The infant's especially, which had been thrown to the opposite angle of the vault.


Nov. 17, 1816. Vault opened for Samuel Brewster. Great confusion among the coffins.

July 7, 1819. Vault opened for Thomazin Clarke. Coffins found in great confusion.

At each time of the Vault being opened, the coffins were carefully replaced in their proper places, and the mouth of the Vault regularly closed by masons.

April 18, 1820. In consequence of a noise being heard one night in the Vault, it was opened next day in the presence of Lord Combermere and two other persons of first respectability, and the same confusion prevailed among the coffins, all of which were of lead, except Thomazin Clarke's, which was of cedar.

Signed THOMAS H. ORDERSON,
Rector.

The within was copied from a drawing made on the spot by order of Lord Combermere. [Plates VI. and VII.]

This third version increases the resemblance to the Ahrensburg story, by mentioning that "a noise was heard one night in the vault," which caused Lord Combermere to have the vault opened for the last time, on April 18, 1820. Mr. Orderson, obviously, had to make many copies, and slightly altered them, being weary of repeating identical phrases.

Turning to Schomburgk's History of Barbadoes (1844), we learn that fine sand was laid to detect footsteps of marauders, as wood ashes were used at Ahrensburg. Private marks were also found undisturbed, like the seals at Ahrensburg. As at Ahrensburg, the coffins were finally buried in the earth, and I daresay nobody exhumed them to see how they were behaving. Schomburgk gives, like A., four, not, like O., five disturbances. A. mentions the making of the sketches by one of Lord Combermere's
PLATE VI.

SITUATION OF THE COFFINS WHEN THE VAULT WAS CLOSED.

JULY 7TH, 1819.

(BARBADOES STORY.)
PLATE VII.

SITUATION OF THE COFFINS WHEN THE VAULT WAS OPENED.
APRIL 18TH, 1820.
(BARBADOES STORY.)

To face p. 384.
suite. The author of Death's Deeds says that Lord
Combermere corroborated personally to her the account
which she gives, on the authority of "a medical gentleman,
a native of the island." This account enumerates four
disturbances, not five, and says that (July 7, 1819) Lord
Combermere sealed the vault with his official seal. In
the "Memoirs and Letters of Lord Combermere" (1868),
the whole story is given with copious detail, the source
being a privately printed narrative by a native of the
colony. This narrative is that used by the author of
Death's Deeds: I have not obtained a copy.

We have heard of R. Reece,\(^1\) junior, who printed O.
On January 4, 1864, he wrote to Major Clarke a letter on
the affair; he was himself present at the opening of the
vault in 1820. But now he calls "T. A. Orderson" by a
new name, "The Rev. Thomas Harrison, D.D., late Rector
of Christchurch." Misprints certainly cause this variation.
This form of the O. version is longer, as to the 1820 affair,
than O. as given in Death's Deeds.

Finally, we know, or rather we have been told, that the
Ahrensburg troubles were caused by a coffined suicide.
Schomburgk (1844) says nothing of a suicide in the
Barbadoes case, so Baron de Guldenstubbé (1859) did not
crib that from Schomburgk's book. But Reece (1864)
says that the negroes in Barbadoes attributed the troubles
to a suicide, Dorcas Chase (buried July 6, 1812), who
"had starved herself to death owing to her father's cruelty,
wherefore the other corpses were desirous to expel her."
Reece adds that Colonel Chase also died by his own
hand. "He was an immense man, and his coffin, which
was of lead, was necessarily of prodigious weight, yet his
was thrown to and fro with the greatest violence, and
turned topsy-turvy. Certainly no earthquake could have
been so violent as to have effected it."

\(^1\)R. Reece to Major Clarke, January 4, 1864. The Lamp, June, 1864,
pp. 136, 137.
"Death's Deeds":

It will be observed that the Oelsen and the Barbadoes tales are precisely similar in every respect, including the supposed cause of trouble, the presence of the corpse of a suicide. Despite the variations between A. and O., I suppose nobody will deny that the odd events did occur at Barbadoes (1812-1820).

The puzzle is to account for the story of their recurrence at Ahrensburg in 1844.

I now give the story as located in England. Sir James Clerke (1833), already cited, says:

"In England there was a parallel occurrence to this some years ago at Staunton, in Suffolk. It is stated that on opening a vault there, several leaden coffins, with wooden cases, which had been fixed on biers, were found displaced, to the great consternation of the villagers. The coffins were again placed as before, and the vault properly closed, when again another of the family dying, they were a second time found displaced; and two years after that they were not only found all off their biers, but one coffin (so heavy as to require eight men to raise it) was found on the fourth step which led down to the vaults, and it seemed perfectly certain that no human hand had done this. As yet no one has satisfactorily accounted for the Barbadian or the Staunton wonder."

Does any one know a village named Staunton in Suffolk?

From the date of Sir James's Staunton case, it appears not to be a copy of my next case, which Mr. F. A. Paley, the well-known scholar, dates some twenty years before 1867. Allowing a margin of seven years that brings us to 1840, seven years after Sir James's narrative of 1833.

Mr. Paley writes (Notes and Queries, 3rd series, vol. xii., Nov. 9, 1867, p. 371):

1 [Lewis's Topographical Dictionary of England (1831) gives no Staunton in Suffolk, but two united parishes of Stanton All Saints and Stanton St. John, situated about eight miles north-east of Bury St. Edmunds.—Ed.]
"Disturbance of Coffins in Vaults. As attention has been directed to this rather curious and perhaps novel subject, I beg to add an instance which occurred within my own knowledge and recollection (some twenty years ago) in the parish of Gretford, near Stamford, a small village of which my father was the rector. Twice, if not thrice, the coffins in a vault were found on re-opening it to have been disarranged. The matter excited some interest in the village at the time, and, of course, was a fertile theme for popular superstition: but I think it was hushed up out of respect to the family to whom the vault belonged.

"A leaden coffin is a very heavy thing indeed; some six men can with difficulty carry it. Whether it can float is a question not very difficult to determine. If it will, it seems a natural, indeed the only explanation of the phenomenon, to suppose that the vault has somehow become filled with water.

"I enclose an extract from the letter of a lady to whom I wrote, not trusting my own memory, as to the details of the case:

Penn, Oct. 15, 1867.

'I remember very well the Gretford vault being opened when we were there. It was in the church and belonged to the . . . family. The churchwarden came to tell the rector, who went into the vault, and saw the coffins all in confusion: one little one on the top of a large one, and some tilted on one side against the wall. They were all lead, but of course cased in wood. The same vault had been opened once before, and was found in the same state of confusion, and set right by the churchwarden, so that his dismay was great when he found them displaced again. We had no doubt from the situation and nature of the soil, that it had been full of water during some flood which floated the coffins. I daresay . . . is still alive, and could give the date, and
I almost think... saw what had happened. I feel no doubt myself that lead coffins could float. We know a large iron vessel will, without any wood casing, and I suppose the flood subsiding would move them. The vault had been walled up, so that no one could have been in it.''

"F. A. PALEY."

"Cambridge."

Here the lady makes a guess at the flotation of leaden coffins. An empty iron vessel can float, therefore a lot of leaden coffins can float, can be turned topsy turvy, and so on, when water enters a vault in a church. Perhaps Mr. Paley was justified in his scepticism on this point.

In any case the presence of "casual water" in quantities capable of displacing leaden coffins, cannot account for the repeated disturbances of one vault alone, in Barbadoes, on five occasions, in eight years. The water would have washed the sand on the floor about the coffins, and would have left other unmistakable traces of its action. Again, Barbadoes is not, apparently, within the seismic area; it was undisturbed by the destructive earthquakes of the last few years in the West Indies. Earthquakes so local as to disturb, five times, an area of a few feet, and nothing else in the island, are not credible earthquakes.

It is not possible for me to find the cause of the disturbances, but I ask, are the other narratives instances of mythically localising in various places a known set of facts, or, if not, what are they?

I should add that, while the Book of Christ Church, a contemporary record, verifies the Orderson list and dates of burials, the Book contains no reference to the disturbances. They had no business in the mortuary record.
I must again thank Mr. Alleyne for all the trouble he has taken.

I am also grateful to Miss Alice Johnson, Secretary of the Society for Psychical Research, for notes on the identity of the two Barons Guldenstubbé. I am not sure as to which of them wrote the book on "Direct" (not automatic) writing. Miss Johnson informs me that Baron Buxhoewden, in a recent letter to Mr. Solovovo, mentions that old people at Oelsen remember the disturbances of the coffins. The "casual water" theory is now in some vogue. I may add that, as no traces of disturbance of the walls, floor, or roof of the vault were found at Barbadoes, I cannot adopt the theory that enemies of the Chase family caused the trouble. Nor can I admit, as the cause, gas emanating from the coffins. Why should only the Chase coffins be so violently gaseous? Any influx of casual water, again, would leave unmistakable traces of its presence.

A. LANG.

POSTSCRIPT.—Since this paper was printed, Mr. Forster Alleyne has renewed his researches in the true spirit of the historian. He has been rewarded by finding a complete autograph record by Mr. Lucas, who, in some accounts, is mentioned as having been present at the final opening of the vault by Lord Combermere, and this record is countersigned by the Rev. Dr. Orderson, Rector of Christchurch, Mr. Lucas, a member of the Parliament of the island, begins by quoting the case at Staunton, Suffolk, from The European Magazine of 1814. He says that, when he and Lord Combermere, with others, had discussed the Barbadoes case on April 18, 1820, they walked straight to the vault, and had it opened, finding wild confusion among leaden coffins, but not in those of wood. He denies that there was
any trace of the presence of water, and dismisses the idea of recurrent local earthquakes of limited area. He can guess at no explanation of the facts. It is obvious that an explosion of gas in a coffin could not move it without exploding it, as in the case of the coffin of Henry VIII at Windsor. But Mr. Lucas says nothing of any injury to any coffin. Mr. Alleyne has also found allusions to the subject in the correspondence of one of his family in 1820. The evidence for the facts is thus complete.—A. L.