



DEATH IN PARIS

The mysterious case of William L. Dayton

By Charles Priestley

“The Civil War was fought in ten thousand places,” intones the narrator, David McCullough, at the start of Ken Burns’s television documentary *The Civil War*, “from Valverde, New Mexico, and Tullahoma, Tennessee, to St. Albans, Vermont, and Fernandina on the Florida coast.” And, he might have added, in London, England, and Paris, France. Scholars will continue to argue over whether the South could actually have won.¹ There can be few serious students of the war, however, who would disagree with the premise that some form of European intervention – which, in effect, means intervention by Britain or France or both – would undoubtedly have influenced the course of the war and would very possibly have decided the eventual outcome. It has been aptly stated that, in order to win, the South had merely not to lose. Had Britain and France agreed to break the blockade, for example, as they were urged to do by both Confederate agents and local sympathisers, it seems probable that, in the end, the United States would have had little option but to accept the fact of Southern independence. It is true that the Union could reasonably have expected the sympathy and moral support of Russia, her chief friend in Europe, but she could not have hoped for very much more; for Russia, while well able to defend herself on land (as she had shown less than ten years previously in the Crimean War), would hardly have wished to risk her fleet against the Royal Navy. British and French support for, or at least recognition of, the Confederacy could thus have been crucial, and both sides showed themselves well aware of this from the start.

The war was therefore fought no less fiercely in Britain and France than it was across the Atlantic. There was no actual bloodshed, of course, in this particular theatre, no Sharpsburg or Gettysburg. Nor was there any real physical violence, if one excepts the attempt by a group of Yankee students from the famous Lycée Condorcet, armed with pea-shooters, to ambush Slidell on the Champs-Élysées on New Year’s Day, 1864 – a skirmish, incidentally, from which the veteran Confederate emerged victorious, bearing away, as a trophy, the coat of one of his assailants.² Nevertheless, there were casualties here, too, among them a 57-year-old lawyer from New Jersey hailed, by the Attorney

¹ See, for example, *Could the Confederacy Have Won the Civil War?* in *North and South*, Vol. 9, Number 2.

² Beckles Willson, *John Slidell and the Confederates in Paris (1862-65)* (New York, 1932), pp. 151-3; John Bigelow, *Retrospections of an Active Life* (New York, 1909), Vol. II, pp. 120-1. Willson, quoting from the Eustis Papers, gives the boy’s name as Truro, and says that he was from New York. Bigelow spells the name “Trouro”, and states that he was from New Orleans; this seems improbable.

General of that state, as having “died in the service of his country” and “joined that heroic band of younger members” of the state bar who had “freely given their lives for the same great cause.” This was the United States Minister to France, William Lewis Dayton, who died in mysterious circumstances on December 1, 1864.³

Dayton was born in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, on February 17, 1807. He graduated from the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) in 1825 and then studied law, being admitted to the bar in 1830. Seven years later, the people of Monmouth elected him to a seat in the New Jersey legislature as a Whig, a position which he held for only a few weeks before being appointed an associate justice of the state’s Supreme Court. A judge’s salary, however, proved inadequate for the demands of his growing family, and he therefore resigned after three years and set up in private practice. In 1842, he was appointed by Governor William S. Pennington to the seat in the U. S. Senate left vacant by the death of Dayton’s cousin, Samuel Lewis Southard, being re-elected in 1845 for the full six-year term.

Dayton was not a particularly prominent or active member of the Senate, being noted only for his determined opposition to any measure which might be construed as increasing the power of the Slave States. This position, however principled, cannot have been a popular one in the New Jersey of those days, and in March, 1851, Dayton duly lost his seat and returned to the law. Five years later, he joined the newly-formed Republican Party, which promptly nominated him, at its first National Convention, as its Vice-Presidential candidate. Taking up his private law practice once again after the Republican defeat in November, 1856, he was almost immediately appointed Attorney General of New Jersey. Then in April, 1861, Abraham Lincoln, the newly-elected Republican President, named him United States Minister to France.⁴

The infant Confederacy, meanwhile, was also engaged in selecting its representatives to the various European nations, and especially to the two key countries, Britain and France. It might be supposed, at first sight, that Britain would have been a more fruitful field for Confederate endeavours than France. For a start, sympathy for the South in Britain was widespread, and grew as the war continued; it cut across party lines, could be found at all levels of society and was particularly strong in the Established Church, the Church of England. Furthermore, Britain, more even than France, needed Southern cotton; it has been estimated that between four and five million people, or something like one in seven of the population, depended directly or indirectly for their livelihood on the cotton trade.⁵ The problem, however, was that the British Government proved strangely reluctant to commit itself, preferring to pursue a policy of, in Calhoun’s phrase, “wise and masterly inactivity.”⁶ We know now that British recognition of the Confederacy was only briefly a serious possibility in September, 1862, and the failure of Lee’s invasion of Maryland ended even that possibility. In short, Palmerston and his cabinet, like Gilbert’s House of Peers, “... throughout the war, did nothing in particular, and did it very well”⁷ at least in their own estimation, although they managed thereby successfully to antagonise both sides in the conflict. British sympathisers with the South, certainly, never entirely gave up hope of persuading their government to

³ *Proceedings of the Supreme Court Relative to the Death of Justice Ogden and Mr. Dayton*, in *The Daily True American*, Trenton, New Jersey, March 3, 1865. The relevant pages are among the William Lewis Dayton Papers in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Box 4, Folder 8.

⁴ *American National Biography* (New York, 1999), Vol. VI; *The Daily True American*, March 3, 1865.

⁵ Frank Lawrence Ousley, *King Cotton Diplomacy*, (2nd Edition, revised, Chicago, 1959), pp. 8-11.

⁶ Though it was used before him by John Randolph of Roanoke, and coined in 1791 by Sir James Mackintosh.

⁷ W. S. Gilbert, *Iolanthe*.

intervene, but it is not surprising that the Confederates themselves tended increasingly to concentrate their efforts upon France.

Southern diplomats and officials recognised, as did everyone else, that while British foreign policy was discussed in cabinet and debated in Parliament, French foreign policy was the result of the decisions of one man - the Emperor, Napoleon III. All written pleas for recognition or any other form of intervention were thus addressed to him, either directly, as in Paul Pecquet du Bellet's *Lettre à l'Empereur*,⁸ or indirectly. Napoleon was generally supposed to favour the South, if only because it was clear from early 1862 that he had plans for Mexico, and it was therefore obviously in his interests to have a friendly power across the Rio Grande. What the more optimistic advocates of recognition had failed to grasp, however, was that Napoleon's long years in exile had left him, like Charles II of England before him, determined never "to go again to his travels", and this basic fact informed all his actions. Certainly he had come to power in 1852 through the popular vote, expressed in a plebiscite. Opposition to his regime, however, while not always overt, came from all parts of the French political spectrum, from the Legitimists, who still hoped for the return of the Bourbon monarchy, through the Orleanists to the Republicans. He had therefore to tread carefully. The experiences of his first forty years had taught him to dissemble, and he had developed a facility for leaving all who had dealings with him convinced that he agreed wholeheartedly with them - without once ever actually saying so. (This, incidentally, almost certainly explains the later disagreement over what precisely he had said in his meeting with the British Members of Parliament John Arthur Roebuck and William Schaw Lindsay in June, 1863, and the consequent failure of Roebuck's motion for recognition in the House of Commons). The truth, in fact, is that there was never any possibility of the Emperor's acting independently of Great Britain where intervention was concerned. Slidell, the Confederate Commissioner to France, was indeed frequently depressed by or impatient at what could be seen as French prevarication and procrastination.⁹ Nevertheless, long after Benjamin had withdrawn Mason from London and dismissed the British consuls in the Confederacy, Slidell and others, both native and foreign, continued to place their hopes in France. As late as February, 1865, for example, the British economist John Welsford Cowell published a pamphlet urging French intervention, his main argument being that this would enable France to steal a march over her old rival, England!¹⁰

In its relations with France, in fact, the Confederacy had one distinct advantage - the strong links between the Creoles of Louisiana and the mother country. A recent article by Professor Salwa Nacouzi of the University of Poitiers¹¹ makes the point that in 1860 those citizens of Louisiana of French origin who could afford to do so continued to send their children to study in Paris, first at one of the great *Lycées* and then at law school or medical school. France, too, was where the Creole aristocracy still tended to go on vacation, to attend performances at the Paris Opera or to take the waters at Vichy. The outbreak of the Civil War found many of these Creoles in France, and determined to

⁸ Paul Pecquet du Bellet, *Lettre à l'Empereur : de la Reconnaissance des Etats Confédérés d'Amérique* (Paris, 1862).

⁹ See, for example, Slidell's letter of March 26, 1862, to Hunter, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series II, Vol. 3, p. 372, and his letter of July 17, 1864, to Mason in the Mason Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ John Welsford Cowell, *La France et les Etats Confédérés* (Paris, 1865). For a summary of Cowell's argument and a brief biography, see Charles Priestley, *France's Opportunity: an Englishman's Plea for French Intervention in Crossfire*, the magazine of the American Civil War Round Table (United Kingdom), Vol. XXI, No. 76, April 2005.

¹¹ Salwa Nacouzi, *Les Créoles Louisianais Défendent la Cause du Sud à Paris (1861-1865): Latinisme contre Anglosaxonisme*, in *Transatlantica*, 2002.

defend there the cause of the South, “*prenant la plume, ne pouvant prendre l’épée*” (“taking up the pen, not being able to take up the sword”), in the words of Paul Pecquet du Bellet.

Confederate propaganda in Britain, whether produced by Southerners or by local sympathisers, tended to stress the South’s essentially Anglo-Saxon nature, and to compare it favourably with the “scum and refuse of Europe”¹² which was supposed to compose the population of the North. The Louisiana Creoles in Paris, however, not surprisingly adopted a rather different argument. By focusing on the writings of three Louisianans – Paul Pecquet du Bellet, Charles Deléry and Alfred Mercier – Professor Nacouzi shows how these Creoles chose rather to emphasise a common Latin heritage. She points out that they see themselves as “*Français d’Amérique*” rather than as Americans. In their writings, the Yankees are depicted as hypocritical, intolerant Anglo-Saxon Puritans, in contrast to the generous, open-hearted Latin and Catholic South.

But the Confederate Government did not, of course, leave the defence of the South in Paris entirely in the hands of exiled Creoles, however prolific their written efforts. The original Confederate mission to Europe, in the spring of 1861, had included Judge Pierre A. Rost, who, although brought up in Louisiana, had actually been born in France. The final choice for Confederate Commissioner, however, was John Slidell, who, despite his New York origins, had been living in Louisiana since 1819, spoke good French and was an astute and experienced politician. Finally, the journalist and sometime diplomat Edwin de Leon, who had been despatched to Europe with a “secret-service fund” of \$25,000 “for the special purpose of enlightening public opinion” and had arrived in London in June, 1862, decided soon afterwards to base himself in France, as offering better opportunities for influencing the Press; after first publishing a pamphlet, *La Vérité sur les Etats Confédérés* (“The Truth about the Confederate States”), he worked diligently and with some success to persuade the French journals to accept articles favourable to the South – largely, it must be said, through judicious application of his State Department funds.¹³

To counter all of this effort, the Union had William Lewis Dayton. At first sight, Dayton would appear an odd choice for the post. He had no diplomatic experience, does not appear to have been in very good health and could neither speak nor read French. His photograph shows a stout, florid, middle-aged man with a determined but somewhat dyspeptic look. In fact, Lincoln, who had been greatly impressed by Dayton’s stand against slavery ten years earlier, had wanted to make him Minister to Great Britain. Seward, however, convinced the President to appoint to London Charles Francis Adams (almost certainly to the eventual advantage of the United States), and Dayton was sent instead to Paris.¹⁴ Here he set up the United States Legation with William S. Pennington, of the well-known New Jersey family, as his First Secretary and his own son, William L. Dayton, Junior, as his Second Secretary, and for over three years laboured to block any French move towards recognition of or assistance to the South. It is only fair to say, though, that much of the credit for the success of Union diplomacy in Paris must go to the younger and more energetic John Bigelow, who had travelled widely in Europe before the war, had good contacts in both France and England and could speak French. Bigelow was sent out to Paris in August, 1861, officially as Consul

¹² The phrase was used by the Radical M.P. John Arthur Roebuck at a banquet in his Sheffield constituency on August 14, 1862.

¹³ Edwin de Leon, *Secret History of Confederate Diplomacy Abroad*, ed. William C. Davis (Kansas, 2005).

¹⁴ *American National Biography*.

but in practice “to look after the press”.¹⁵ He remained in close contact with Seward throughout, and appears to have carried out his task with little reference to Dayton; indeed, one has the impression that he became somewhat impatient at times with the Minister’s slower and more cautious style of diplomacy.

At any rate, by the end of 1864 Dayton’s honest and straightforward manner had gained him the respect of his French hosts, and he could justifiably feel that he had handled a difficult mission with skill and success. The strains of his position, however, had inevitably affected his health. He was ill more and more frequently, and “an increasing addiction to the pleasures of the table” did little to help. On the evening of December 1, 1864, he died of a brain haemorrhage while visiting the apartment of “a notorious courtesan” in the Hôtel du Louvre.¹⁶ The funeral service was held the following Tuesday, December 6, at the American Church in the Rue de Berri. Members of the French Government and the diplomatic corps attended, and Bigelow gave the main address, before introducing Professor Laboulaye of the Institute of France, a staunch and influential friend of the Union.¹⁷ The body was then sent back to the United States and buried in the Riverview Cemetery in Trenton, New Jersey. So much for the basic facts of the Minister’s death; there is rather less agreement as to the details.

Who was this “notorious courtesan”, and what was the United States Minister to France doing in her apartment that December night? The fullest, as well as the most sensational account of the death appears in a book published in 1932 by a Canadian author, Beckles Willson, and entitled *John Slidell and the Confederates in Paris (1862-65)*. Henry Beckles Willson was born in Montreal in 1869. After a successful career as a journalist and newspaper editor in the United States and Britain, he became a freelance writer, producing a number of books. He served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France during the First World War and then settled in Paris. He died in Beaulieu-sur-Mer, in the South of France, in 1942, Paris being then occupied by the Germans.¹⁸

Willson’s book on Slidell has a number of failings for what purports to be a serious work of history. To begin with, it has no index and no bibliography, a curious omission. It is clear, however, that the author has consulted many of the surviving documents of the period, as well as the memoirs of such key figures as Bigelow and James Dunwoody Bulloch. He tells us, in his foreword, that he had also had access to various letters and documents belonging to the family of George Eustis, Slidell’s secretary, as well as to material collected by the historian Henry Vignaud,¹⁹ another member of the Confederate mission. Finally, his long residence in Paris had given him an opportunity to meet many who, while not personally involved, had known the participants in the events he describes.

It is thus unfortunate that the book is, in many matters of detail, highly inaccurate. Where Willson quotes directly from a reliable source, such as the various papers in the Library of Congress, he can, of course, be trusted. In all other cases, he has to be treated with caution. In his two final pages, for example, he manages to give both the wrong date for the deaths of Slidell and Judah P. Benjamin and the wrong number for Benjamin’s house in the Avenue d’Iéna.

¹⁵ Bigelow, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 365.

¹⁶ *American National Biography*. The author of the entry on Dayton is Professor Norman B. Ferris, of Middle Tennessee State University.

¹⁷ Bigelow, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 237-241. The church was demolished after the site was sold to *The New York Herald-Tribune* in 1931.

¹⁸ Damien-Claude Bélanger, *Quebec History*, (Marianopolis College, 2004).

¹⁹ Later famous as an expert on Christopher Columbus.

Willson's account of Dayton's death was taken, he tells us, from a pamphlet published in 1869 entitled *The True Account of the Death of Minister Dayton*, described, apparently, by Henry Vignaud as "exaggerated, but not improbable". The main character is a certain Sophie Bricard, a young singer from New Orleans who had been studying at the Conservatoire in Paris. Like the other Louisiana Creoles in Paris, she was a fervent Confederate, and her rendition at various concerts and fund-raising evenings of such pieces as *La Bannière Bleue* (presumably a French version of *The Bonnie Blue Flag*) and *Aide-Nous, Ô France Aimée* had made her the toast of the exiled Southern community – or at least, it appears, of the male portion of it. Shortly after Slidell's arrival in Paris in February, 1862, she was lucky enough to be given a part in *Florian*, a new operetta by Jacques Offenbach, which was due to open at the Bouffes-Parisiens Theatre. Slidell was, of course, encouraged to attend, as did both Dayton and the Emperor. Invited backstage after the second act, Slidell found Offenbach presenting the company to the Emperor. On catching sight of the Confederate Commissioner, Sophie Bricard fell to her knees and, with an impassioned gesture, begged Napoleon to aid her "suffering country" ("*mon pays souffrant*"). Appalled by this breach of protocol and deeply embarrassed, Napoleon left the room at once, but the story circulated rapidly and caused great affront to the Unionists in Paris, which was exacerbated by Mademoiselle Bricard's insistence in the following performances on wearing a Confederate flag on her bosom and deliberately emphasising "certain ambiguous lines in her part", until ordered to desist by the Prefect of Police.

The operetta soon ended its run, and Sophie, who, whatever her other gifts, does not appear to have been a particularly talented singer, had no further engagements on the Paris stage. Shortly after this she married a man named Eccles, who later conveniently disappeared – to join the Confederate Army, some said. The new Mrs. Eccles now rented an apartment in the Hôtel du Louvre, where she gave regular parties for her various admirers, including a number of Confederate naval officers, in a large room decorated with framed portraits of Confederate notables and with a Confederate flag draped over the piano. During this period, she was memorably described by an unimpressed visitor of Unionist sympathies as "a shameless Jezebel of Secession."

The story then moves on to the evening of December 1, 1864. Dayton was just finishing his dinner when he was handed an anonymous letter informing him that his First Secretary, Pennington, had for some time been conducting a "scandalous liaison" with "the former Sophie Bricard, now known as Mrs. Eccles, and a rebel spy", and that Pennington would be at her apartment that very night. (The U.S. Legation at that time was in Dayton's apartments, which were in the street which forms an outer circle around the Etoile, at the upper end of the Champs-Élysées. Originally known, for convenience, simply as the Rue Circulaire, this street had, by a decree of March 2, 1864, finally received a name, or rather two names, the northern half becoming the Rue de Tilsit and the southern the Rue de Presbourg; Dayton's apartments were in what today is 6 Rue de Presbourg).

Since his son, William L. Dayton, Junior, was about to leave for the Palais-Royal Theatre, a short distance across the square from the Hôtel du Louvre, Dayton decided to accompany him. The carriage dropped them off at the Palais-Royal, and the Minister then went on alone to the hotel. (The Hôtel du Louvre was not then in its current position on the west side of the Place du Palais-Royal, but in the similar building on the east of the square now occupied by the antique shops of Le Louvre des Antiquaires; its owners moved it in 1875 to create more space for their retail business. The side of the

building facing the square, however, is unchanged, and the words *Grand Hôtel du Louvre* can still clearly be seen just below the second-storey windows).

Mrs Eccles's apartment was on the third floor, and the Minister was breathing heavily from the climb when he reached her door. Here he was greeted by the lady herself, who informed him, once she had recovered from her surprise at this unexpected visit, that his secretary was not there. Confused and embarrassed, Dayton suddenly swayed and seemed about to fall. A glass of brandy revived him, and his hostess then proceeded to explain that, so far from being a "rebel spy", she had for the past year been working for the Union. Confederate representatives in Paris had, apparently, been expressly forbidden by Benjamin to have anything further to do with her, on the grounds that she was "a young woman of dubious morals, whose championship would compromise the Cause". Disgusted at this ingratitude, after all that she had done for the South, she had decided, she said, to transfer her allegiance, and had been in contact with both Pennington and Bigelow. Already half convinced, the susceptible Dayton was completely won over when she produced letters bearing the address and seal of the U. S. Consulate.

She then persuaded the Minister to share a bottle of champagne with her, and a friendly conversation ensued. Finally, Dayton begged Sophie to sing for him. Going over to her piano, she smilingly complied, choosing a piece from *Florian*. All was going well when she suddenly heard a groan, followed by a dull thud. Turning round, she saw her visitor lying on the floor, apparently in some kind of fit. The doctor was summoned, but before he could arrive Pennington entered the apartment. It was now apparent that Dayton was dead. Clearly, the body could not be left where it was. Enlisting the help of Sophie's black servant and of the doctor, who had now appeared, Pennington succeeded in getting the body down the stairs and persuading a reluctant cab-driver to drive it to the Legation. There was then a delay, for at this point Mrs. Eccles emerged, dressed to go out and determined to accompany them to the Legation in order to explain everything to Mrs. Dayton. Managing, at last, to convince her that, in the circumstances, this was perhaps not a particularly good idea, Pennington thrust a gold piece into the coachman's hand and the cab set off at a trot. The following morning, it was announced that the United States Minister to France had died at the Legation of an apoplectic stroke.

Such is Willson's version of events, and it has been accepted without question by a number of other authors. An article on Dayton's death by Serge Noirsain in the CHAB NEWS quarterly, for example, repeats Willson's story almost word for word, with the addition of a few descriptive details presumably from the author's imagination, such as that the Minister was "on the verge of sipping a good Old French Cognac" when the letter arrived.²⁰ Monsieur Noirsain does, however, allow himself to speculate that Dayton's reason for going to the apartment may have been rather different, and that his death may have occurred in somewhat more compromising circumstances; here he cites the cases of Mata Hari and Christine Keeler.²¹ Professor Nacouzi, too, although her article on the Creoles in Paris does not mention Dayton, accepts at face value Willson's account of Sophie Bricard's choral activities on behalf of the South in the early days of the war.

²⁰ Serge Noirsain, *The Strange Death of Mr. Dayton*. The article is available on the Association's website in an English translation by Gérard Hawkins. Despite the kind efforts of Monsieur Hawkins, I have been unable to locate a copy of the original French version.

²¹ The British call-girl whose liaisons with the British Secretary of State for War and an official at the Soviet Embassy led to the former's disgrace and resignation in 1963.

It is certainly a good story, but how accurate is it? Preliminary investigations are not encouraging. In the whole of Offenbach's enormous body of work, for example, there is not one piece called *Florian*, nor anything with a similar title. Nor is there a character of that name in any of his operettas.²² Furthermore, enquiries to the relevant university and other libraries in New Orleans have produced no trace of a Sophie Bricard.

At this point, then, it is time to look at what we have in the way of real evidence. Almost certainly only one person actually witnessed the death, but we do have a number of more or less contemporary accounts which, when taken together, allow us to draw certain conclusions.

First, there are the press reports. Typical of these is that by the Paris correspondent of *The Times* of London. Written on Monday, December 5, four days after the death, his account reads as follows: "It appears that [Mr. Dayton] left home about 9 o'clock in the evening of Thursday to pay a visit to an American family residing at the Hôtel du Louvre. He had been only a few minutes there when he felt dizziness in the head, accompanied by a violent pain. His friend gave him some vinegar to bathe his temples and a bottle of salts, which seemed to revive him. He lay down on the sofa for some time, and appeared to slumber. After some time his friend, not hearing him breathe, took him by the hand and found it quite cold. A doctor was sent for, but when, after the lapse of an hour or so, he came, he found it was too late; he had been dead some time." Apart from the confusion over precisely who it was that Dayton was visiting, this account is interesting in that it contradicts Willson's statement that it was given out that the Minister had died at the Legation, rather than in the Hôtel du Louvre.

The Trenton, New Jersey, *Daily True American* for March 3, 1865, quoting the Attorney General's²³ eulogy on his departed colleague, gives additional, and rather touching, detail: "On the evening of his death, he called on an acquaintance from New Jersey at his hotel. Not finding him in, and wearied with the ascent of the stairs, he called on a lady friend to rest a little while. He conversed pleasantly for a few minutes, and then asked her to play for him the "Star Spangled Banner", which she did. He then requested her to sing "Home, Sweet Home," and she complied. He said, "I wish I was there," and, apologizing, he cast himself on a sofa and gave a slight groan. The family physician was sent for – an hour elapsed before his arrival – and he said he then had been an hour dead. So that the banner of his country, and his home were the last objects present to his mind before he went home forever." This version of the death, incidentally, is the only one apart from Willson's which mentions any singing.

Secondly, both William L. Dayton, Junior, and the doctor in question made statements immediately after the event, these statements being among the Dayton Papers at Princeton. According to the younger Dayton, "After dinner on the 1st of December, 1864, about 7 o'clock my father and I got into a cab near the Arc de Triomphe and rode to the corner of the street nearest the Palais Royal theatre. We then entered the Palais Royal Arcade and walked slowly together around looking into the different windows along the western gallery. I walked with him perhaps one third the length of that Arcade. At that time he seemed in his ordinary health. I remarked nothing which indicated special weakness or failing. I then said I thought I would go into the Palais Royal theatre awhile. "Well" he replied "go on", and he walked on as if with the intention of sauntering along and looking into the windows. That was the last I saw of

²² Correspondence with Robert L. Folstein of the Jacques Offenbach Society, 2003. See also the Society's Newsletter, Nos. 23 and 24 (March and June 2003).

²³ See Note 3, above. The Attorney General of New Jersey at this time was Frederick T. Frelinghuysen.

him until I was sent for towards midnight when I found him lying in Mrs. Eckel's apartment on a sofa dead.

"He dined with his usual appetite and seemed if anything in somewhat better spirits than usual that day."

"He did not say where he was going when he left me; he had previously said that he felt as if he ought to take a little air and exercise, not having been out much the previous few days."

The doctor involved, Dr. Edward John Beylard, had previously treated Dayton. His statement, signed and dated December 9, 1864, runs: "At half past ten on Thursday evening the 1st of Dec., a German woman speaking bad French [sic]²⁴ called at my apartment, No. 7 Rue d'Anjou St. Honoré, and said that she wanted me to go to the Hôtel du Louvre where Mr. Dayton, the American Minister, had suddenly been taken quite ill. I went in a carriage which was waiting immediately, and reached the hotel about a quarter before eleven. I was taken to Mrs. Eckel's apartment and on opening the door found Mr. Dayton lying on the sofa as if asleep. Mrs. Eckel said immediately "Mr. Dayton is very dangerously ill and has had an attack of some sort." Fearing that she might say something that might alarm him I proposed to her to pass into the adjoining room and tell me what had occurred. She replied that it was useless to leave the room for she thought he was dead; he was perfectly insensible. I looked for his pulse without finding it and applied my ear to his heart, but found no sign of life. His hands were quite cold and my impression at once was that he had been dead for some little time. He was lying on his right side upon the sofa in an easy position as if he had just come in from the street and had laid himself down to take a little sleep. Mrs. Eckel then went on to say that Mr. Dayton had called about 8 o'clock to see Mr. Vanderpoel at the Hôtel; not being able to see him, he had come into her room; that he complained of head-ache, but however had talked some little time with her still complaining of head-ache, dizziness and not being able to see well. He then sat down on the sofa and she offered him various restoratives, which appeared to have no effect. He suddenly began to snore and to make quite a noisy expiration from the mouth which, she said, had lasted ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time she thought he had ceased to breathe. It was evident that he had died of a rupture of a blood vessel in the brain. I at once proposed to have the body taken home. Mrs. Eckel preferred that some members of the family should be sent for to come and see the condition in which the body was found, before it was removed from the apartment. That course was taken. Mr. Dayton's sons were sent for, arrived in due time, returned to the Legation to prepare the rest of the family for what had occurred while I took charge of the remains and had them taken to the Legation."

As an afterthought, the doctor added: "I omitted to state that shortly after I entered, Mrs. Eckel drew from her pocket a sheet of foolscap with writing on both sides and mentioned that Mr. Dayton had called to see her on some important business and that the paper was a *brouillon* (draft) of something that was to be written out for Drouyn de Lhuys [the French Minister of Foreign Affairs]; that he had called the evening previous and not finding her at home had left his card."²⁵

Finally, we have Bigelow's version of events, as recorded in his autobiography. Although written more than forty years after the Civil War, this work consists, in the

²⁴ Neither word would be spelled with a capital letter in French, which was therefore perhaps the doctor's first language.

²⁵ Dayton Papers, Box 6, Folder 5.

main, of letters and other documents with a linking commentary. It is clear, then, that Bigelow had preserved an enormous number of papers from the period, and was not relying on his memory alone. He repeats the story told him, he says, by Dr. Beylard on the morning of December 2, 1864. Bigelow's account thus follows the general outline of the doctor's statement, with, however, a number of additional details and some omissions.

First, Bigelow says that Dayton and his son had decided to take a walk after dinner and had "strolled down to the Palais Royal." Given the distance from the Arc de Triomphe to the Palais-Royal and Dayton's age and physical condition, this seems highly unlikely, and it is in any case contradicted by the son's account. He then says that, while the son went into the theatre, the father went off "to make a call or two. He appears to have gone first to his friends the Vanderpoels." As they were at dinner, however, Dayton did not stop, but "was next heard of at the apartment of a Mrs. Eckels [sic]." Bigelow goes on to say that, according to the doctor, Dayton "called upon his hostess to give three cheers for Abraham Lincoln, the news of whose re-election had recently reached Paris." Shortly after this the Minister complained of feeling unwell, and died in a few minutes. Bigelow then describes the doctor's efforts, with the help of William L. Dayton, Junior, who had been sent for, to get the body into the younger Dayton's carriage and back to the Legation "before the police could interfere." The proprietor of the hotel was most unhappy about this, and only agreed when Dr. Beylard promised to take full responsibility. Bigelow also says that, despite their protests, "Mrs. Eckels insisted upon riding up to the legation with the body to explain how it happened", on the grounds that her reputation was involved. Finally, he adds the homely detail, relayed to his wife later that day by Mrs. Dayton, that the Minister "had eaten very freely of pumpkin pie" the previous evening.²⁶

While it would be natural enough for Bigelow, writing for a general readership, to leave out the medical details, it will be seen that there is one rather more significant omission in his account; there is no mention whatsoever of the mysterious draft document for the French Foreign Minister mentioned in the doctor's statement.

But there was, after all, probably only one witness to the actual death, and perhaps we should now see what she has to say. Her real name was Lizzie St. John Eckel, and her evidence of what happened that night is included in the autobiography which she published in 1874, ten years later.

Her story of her life, if true, is an extraordinary one. First, she was, or at least claimed to be, the daughter of Maria Monk, a poor Canadian alcoholic and part-time prostitute who achieved fame in 1836 with the publication of *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, a lurid exposé of scandalous goings-on at the Hôtel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal.²⁷ Maria Monk's claims were denied by her mother, who stated on oath that her daughter had never been in a nunnery, and refuted by the impeccably Protestant Colonel William L. Stone, Editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, who investigated them thoroughly. That the book had, in fact, been written by a group of unscrupulous Protestant ministers, one of whom had been living with Maria Monk at the time, came out when they started to sue each other for a share of the profits.²⁸

²⁶ Bigelow, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 234-5, 237.

²⁷ Maria Monk, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk: the Hidden Secrets of a Nun's Life in a Convent Exposed* (New York, 1836).

²⁸ The Rev. J. J. Slocum was apparently the main author. *The True History of Maria Monk* (London, 1895) contains Maria Monk's mother's affidavit and a summary of Col. Stone's report, which he had published as a pamphlet.

Lizzie St. John was born in 1837 in New York and spent her early years in poverty. Tiring, finally, of his wife's drunken rages, Mr. St. John left in 1843, taking with him the three children, whom he placed with various female relatives in and around Amenia, Dutchess County, New York State. Lizzie appears to have been highly attractive to men from a very young age. Determined to better herself, she moved to New York City and took various menial jobs, until she was taken up and more or less adopted by a kindly judge, a friend of her relatives, and his wife, who paid for her to attend Madame Martinet's Academy. Here, at the age of 19, she attracted the attention of the rather older Samuel Eckel, of Tennessee, a former United States Consul in Talcahuana, Chile. They were married a few months later, and shortly afterwards moved to Washington.

Here the former Lizzie St. John was able to mix with a number of prominent people and "first learned the magical power of woman over man, and even over the destinies of a State." Continuing her intrigues after she and her husband had returned to New York, she found that she was able to use her charms to gain influence and her influence to gain money, obtaining government contracts and appointments for various interested parties and receiving a percentage in return. But her husband became too jealous, and in 1861 she left him and moved to Brooklyn. The outbreak of the Civil War gave her further opportunities to employ her wiles to her financial advantage; making use of the contacts made earlier in Washington, she provided a service for those New Yorkers who had friends or relatives in the South or who simply wished to ship goods across the lines.

In July, 1863, for reasons which are not entirely clear but which may well have been connected with her recent activities, she sailed for Paris, taking her young daughter with her - as well as a number of introductions from her contacts in New York. Here she swiftly blossomed into a full-blown "adventuress", to use the Victorian term. She soon gathered around her a group of young men-about-town, chiefly American, including, apparently, Pennington, Dayton's First Secretary. Through his influence, she was able to obtain an invitation to the first ball of the 1864 season at the Tuileries Palace, where she seems to have succeeded in bewitching the honest Dayton. This gave her an entrée into the upper levels of both French and American society in Paris, one of her conquests being the Duc de Morny, the Emperor's half-brother and one of the most influential men in France, who was actually introduced to her by the U.S. Minister.²⁹

Although her life continued much as before after Dayton's death, with her circle of powerful admirers growing ever larger, she tells us that she found herself becoming increasingly disenchanted with it. Gradually she started, despite herself, to turn to religion, until finally she was received into the Roman Catholic Church. She left France in 1870, just before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, and returned to the hills of Dutchess County where she had spent so much of her childhood. Settling just across the state line in Sharon, Connecticut, she built a church in honour of St. Genevieve and became a familiar figure in the community until her death in 1916 or 1917.³⁰

On that fateful evening in 1864, she tells us, she dressed herself with even more than her usual care, for she was expecting the United States Minister to "come and pass the evening" with her. She had written to him the previous week, explaining that she wished to see him "on a matter of importance"; in fact, an American entrepreneur who had set up a business in France wished to be made a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur and had promised her \$5,000 if she could obtain the coveted red ribbon for him, and she

²⁹ Mrs. L. St. John Eckel, *Maria Monk's Daughter; an Autobiography* (New York, 1874).

³⁰ Eckel, op.cit.; Leonard Twynham, *The Weird Sister of Sharon and Amenia* (?Sharon, 1932).

wanted to enlist Dayton's help. He had apparently called the previous evening, when she was out, and had left word that he would call again that evening.

As soon as the Minister arrived, she handed him the application, which he promised to have drawn up properly at the Legation and presented to the Minister of Foreign Affairs as soon as possible. He would do his best, he said, to make sure that it was dealt with promptly, because he was planning shortly to return to the United States; he had had enough of his post, and would be writing to Seward to tender his resignation. Horrified at this news, and at the consequent threat to her \$5,000, Mrs. Eckel turned all her charms upon the Minister. First fascinating him with amusing stories, she then assumed "a dreamy sadness" and exclaimed: "How sorry I am, that you are going away! For you alone can protect me against the envy and jealousy of the Americans." The conversation continued for some twenty minutes, until suddenly Dayton complained of a headache. Fetching some bay-rum, she began to bathe his head, while he begged her not to leave him. At last she asked if he would like to lie down, and went off to get a pillow. On her return, she found that he had fallen sideways on to the sofa and was breathing heavily, apparently asleep. She placed the pillow under his head and covered him with her opera-cloak. Some forty minutes later, at about 10 o'clock, she felt his hand, which was cold. Failing to rouse him, she summoned her German maid, and both realised that he was dead.

Her account now descends into melodrama, but she does tell us that she sent her maid for the doctor, who finally arrived shortly before midnight, and that she also sent word to Dayton's family. When Willie Dayton arrived and asked her what his father had been doing there, she replied that he had come to call on Mr. Vanderpoel, but finding him out had decided to visit her. The youngest Dayton son now appeared, and she drove back with the brothers to the Legation to break the news to Mrs. Dayton and her daughter, while the doctor arranged for the body to be sent home separately. The family kindly tried to insist that she spend the rest of the night with them, but she was unable to sleep, "so poignant were my sufferings", and finally drove home in the doctor's carriage through the fog. Once back in her apartment, she threw herself on the floor and "gave vent to the torrent of grief that was raging within me." Seeing this, her servant, too, began to weep, "for all that I must have suffered." The reader can decide how much of this was genuine sorrow at the untimely death of a good man and how much sheer frustration at the unexpected loss of a powerful protector.

The death of the U.S. Minister in Mrs. Eckel's apartment caused great excitement in Paris, and a few days later "an American official" called on her and "requested me to state to him the circumstances of Mr. Dayton's death, in order that he might inform Mr. Seward." This can only have been Bigelow, who, she had been advised, was her "worst enemy" in Paris. It is curious that he makes no mention of the interview in his memoirs. At any rate, she gave him, she says, a long and largely imaginary account, carefully concealing the real reason for Dayton's visit.³¹

Having heard all the evidence, we can now attempt a summing-up. First, it seems probable that Dayton went to Mrs. Eckel's apartment that evening because she had summoned him, and that she had summoned him for the reason which she gives; the last part of Dr. Beylard's statement appears to bear this out. Second, the story of his attempt to visit the Vanderpoels is almost certainly a fabrication of Mrs. Eckel's, invented on the spur of the moment in order to hide the truth behind his appearance in the Hôtel du Louvre. Third, for some reason Dayton did not wish to tell his son Willie where he was

³¹ Eckel, *op.cit.*, pp. 108-119.

going, but preferred to pretend that he merely wanted some fresh air. Fourth, we know from Willie Dayton's statement that father and son left the Arc de Triomphe in a cab at about 7 o'clock. The distance to the Palais-Royal Theatre is a little under two and a half miles, and they then spent some minutes walking around together before Willie entered the theatre and his father went off to the Hôtel du Louvre, some 400 yards away. Dayton would therefore have arrived at Lizzie Eckel's apartment at about 8 o'clock, just as she told Dr. Beylard. Fifth, we can say that death probably occurred shortly after 9 o'clock, although the Minister was not certified dead until the doctor's arrival a little before 11.00, the cause of death being, as Dr. Beylard says, "a rupture of a blood vessel in the brain." Finally, contrary both to French law and to the wishes of the hotel proprietor, the body was hurriedly removed from the hotel before the police could intervene.

Unfortunately, a number of questions remain. Who, for example, was Sophie Bricard? Did she actually exist? It would be easy, and tempting, to dismiss her as a creation of Beckles Willson's imagination, were it not for one curious piece of evidence. As has already been mentioned, while Willson is not a very reliable authority, he can at least be trusted when he quotes from others. Although, as so often, he fails to give the source, he does reproduce in his book part of a letter from "a youthful American visitor to Paris, written early in 1864," which reads as follows: "P. took me on Sunday night to one of Mrs. Eccles' receptions, formerly the notorious Sophie Bricard of New Orleans. Her apartment is fairly large and gaudily furnished. It is in a hotel close to the Théâtre Français. She is very petite, looks about twenty-five [Lizzie St. John Eckel was 26 or 27 at this time] and has beautiful hair and eyes, but I don't care much for her expression. Learning from P. that I was from Missouri she was pleased to show me flattering attention; but as she is a rabid Secessionist I guess it would have disgusted her to know my real sentiments and that my two brothers are just now fighting in Grant's army. There were several queer-looking customers about, said to be naval men, but I suppose these regard Sophie's place a convenient rebel rendezvous. I must not forget to mention that there are large framed portraits of Jeff Davis, Lee, Beauregard, Benjamin and the rest about the place, and that the end of a big piano is draped with a rebel flag."³²

Assuming that it is not complete invention on Willson's part, what can this mean? We know, from her own account, which Lizzie St. John Eckel preferred to keep her origins a mystery during her time in Paris; might the character of Sophie Bricard then have been a creation of her own? She had been married to a Southerner and her activities while living in Brooklyn during the early part of the Civil War could certainly be considered as having aided the South. Did she, initially at least, continue the same sort of activity in Paris? Furthermore, there is a possible New Orleans connection. In March, 1862 (the year before Mrs. Eckel arrived in Paris), Jacques Offenbach had handed over the direction of the Bouffes-Parisiens Theatre to Alphonse Varney, father of the very much better-known Louis Varney. Alphonse Varney was born in the Crescent City, and had been Director of the French Opera there until 1851; he might well have been amenable to giving a pretty Southern sympathiser a part in one of his short-lived (and now forgotten) pieces.

Secondly, did Bigelow ever make use of Lizzie/Sophie, as Willson claims, to gain information? Much of what she learned from her highly-placed contacts might potentially have been very valuable to him, and it would have been unlike him not to

³² Willson, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-7.

attempt to get his hands on it. He tells us, perhaps a little too glibly: “I never had a spy in my employ during my official residence in France, nor did I ever pay anyone nor authorize anyone to be paid a penny for any secret information, procured at my instance for a mercenary consideration.”³³ What, however, if it was not “procured at his instance”, but merely passed on to him spontaneously as a result of a preliminary agreement? Again, why does Bigelow in his memoirs refer to “a Mrs. Eckels”? He had a highly efficient intelligence network, and must have known very well who she was. Why, too, does he not mention the interview which she says that he had with her after Dayton’s death and which, given his position as U.S. Consul, he almost certainly must have had?

This, of course, brings us to the final question. We know that Dayton died of a brain haemorrhage, but what was the immediate cause of this? Was it simply the exertion involved in walking the 400 yards from the Palais-Royal Theatre and climbing the three flights of stairs to Mrs. Eckel’s apartment? Or did the lady in question resort, as Serge Noirsain suggests, to some rather more active means of persuading the Minister to help her to obtain her \$5,000? After all, as she puts it herself: “I now felt, that the time was precious, and that I must do all I could to enlist his sympathies ... Mr. Dayton was an open-hearted, candid, pure-minded man; and one, who was totally off his guard against the seductions of a woman like myself.” This would certainly explain Dr. Beylard’s reaction when, on finding his friend and patient dead, he “came up to me, and stood in an attitude, as though he were going to strike me.”³⁴ Could it also explain his eagerness to remove the body before the arrival of the police?

Why, too, did the Minister not tell his son where he was going? It may well be, of course, that Dayton’s interest in Mrs. Eckel was purely paternal, or at most that he was guilty of nothing more serious than a middle-aged man’s foolishness when confronted with an extremely attractive (and highly unscrupulous) young woman. Certainly it can be argued that, if there had been anything improper in his relationship with Lizzie Eckel, either then or earlier, the family would hardly have continued to treat her as they did; even if we discount her evidence that she was invited to stay with them after the death (and there seems no real reason to do so), the Dayton Papers at Princeton contain two later letters from her to Willie Dayton which show that she was on friendly terms with them, one asking for an introduction to Drouyn de Lhuys and the other thanking Willie for having helped her obtain a ticket to a ball.³⁵ On the other hand, though, if they had immediately started to shun her, would that not have been taken as confirmation of what all the gossips and scandalmongers must have been saying?

There is a clue, perhaps, in a curious letter to Bigelow from Seward dated February 13, 1865, and reproduced in Bigelow’s memoirs. In this, the U. S. Secretary of State says that he has “received, read, and burned your note of the 27th, as you suggested.” A footnote explains that this refers to Bigelow’s *official report* of the death of his predecessor.³⁶ If this is so, why did Seward have to burn it after reading it? Clearly, there was something in it which Bigelow wished hidden. Who was it, then, that he was trying to protect – himself, Mrs. Eckel or the late William L. Dayton?

³³ Bigelow, *France and the Confederate Navy 1862-1868: an International Episode* (New York, 1888), p. 168.

³⁴ Eckel, op. cit., pp. 111,115.

³⁵ Dayton Papers, Box 6, Folder 4.

³⁶ Bigelow, *Retrospections*, Vol. II, p. 329.