

Scandal in the Grand Harbour: Codrington v Codrington and Anderson

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An entertaining story always has a literary 'hook' from which to hang. This can apply equally to non-fiction as to fiction, as is the case with today's article. The hook today is a seemingly run-of-the-mill photograph of a military officer simply captioned "Colonel Anderson, 22nd Regiment, 1865." The picture came from an album assembled by Bruce Brine of the Royal Engineers and contains numerous photos taken in Malta, among which are those of fellow officers of his corps. Brine was an enterprising engineer who came to our islands as a lieutenant in 1859 and eventually reached the rank of major general.

I was intrigued to know whether there was a Maltese connection between Brine and Anderson, so I started researching. What I found greatly surpassed my expectations in terms of detail about the unassuming colonel: it seems Anderson did spend some time in Malta and that he was quite adept at striking up friendships here – especially with Helen Codrington.

Anderson was no slouch militarily, or socially: he obtained his commission as an ensign in the 83rd Regiment at the age of 17,

was promoted to lieutenant three years later, and captain eight years after that in 1849. In that same year he transferred to the 22nd, or Cheshire Regiment, and spent some years in India. In 1858 he raised the 2nd Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment, the latter being stationed in Malta from 1859 to 1865.

Helen was the wife of Admiral Henry John Codrington (1808-1877). The admiral was descended from a well-established military family: his father, Admiral Sir Edward Codrington, had fought in the Battle of Trafalgar as well as the Battle of Navarino and also served as Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean from 1826-1828. His brother, General William Codrington, had distinguished himself in the Crimean War, and was later Governor of Gibraltar (1859-1865).

In September 1858, Henry Codrington was appointed Admiral Superintendent of the Dockyard in Malta, and so he, Helen, and their two young daughters set sail for our islands.

Given their status, the admiral and his wife floated to the top of elite Maltese society (as contemporary newspapers termed it) receiving many invitations to balls and functions. The couple also played host to visiting dignitaries: in fact, when young Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, stopped in Malta for a few days in 1859, Mrs Codrington issued invitations for polite society to meet the prince at their home.

One newspaper, *The Cambridge Independent Press*, with much prescience but probably little foreknowledge of Mrs Codrington's clandestine exploits, commented wryly: "We greatly fear that these foolish feastings will be very injurious to the young Prince".

The conscientious admiral, however, took his job seriously – probably too seriously – and was something of a bore, claiming his work forced him to leave a party early and turn in before midnight, leaving his wife to return home at her own leisure – sometimes at two or three in the morning. This turned out to be a fatal error. Gallant garrison officers invariably escorted her home...

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The Codringtons returned to England in 1863, and when the admiral discovered that his wife had been stealing away for furtive liaisons at London hotels with then Lieutenant-Colonel David Anderson, he initiated divorce proceedings. Henry then charged his wife with adultery with Anderson, "and

diverse other persons". The resulting trial was the cause célèbre of its day; the many twists and turns that unfolded as the trial took its course meant that it has remained a curiosity till today; especially so as a result of the increased interest in gender studies and novelists' appetite for fascinating copy.

The following is a brief and much simplified account of what transpired.

The Codringtons were married at the British Embassy in Florence in April 1849 (Mr Smith, Helen's father, was a "gentleman of position" residing in that city) after which they enjoyed many years of uninterrupted happiness. In 1856, the admiral was sent to the Crimea to take part in that disastrous conflict. As chance would have it, he departed on the happy couple's wedding anniversary and so the dotting husband penned a tender note to his wife containing many expressions of endearment.

The couple decided that Helen should have a companion to keep her company during the admiral's absence. That companion was Emily Faithfull, the plain looking and independent-minded owner/publisher of the feminist *Victoria Press*. It appears that Miss Faithfull suffered from asthma, and so Mrs Codrington proposed sleeping with her in case of an attack. Upon the admiral's return in 1857 his wife refused to enter the same bed with her husband and insisted on sleeping with Miss Faithfull. In consultation with Helen's father it was



A contemporary view across the Grand Harbour by Colonel Edmund Hallowell. PHOTO: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

decided that Miss Faithfull should be dismissed, so she left their household in 1857.

When in the following year the Codringtons set out for Malta the married couple's separate sleeping arrangements remained very much unchanged. As stated earlier, the admiral generally retired early, allowing his wife to return home from any entertainments considerably later; she would take the official gondola across the Grand Harbour to their official residence which, although now demolished, was located on Vittoriosa's Marina Grande.

Witnesses testifying at the trial stated that one of her frequent

escorts was Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson, and that when the two occupied the enclosed cabin for the short, 15-minute journey the boat got out of trim; it was evident to the boatman that their combined weight on one side of the boat had caused it to swerve, thus struggling to steer a direct course. Whoever had accompanied Mrs Codrington invariably saw her to the house and remained there for some time.

In 1863, the Codringtons again returned to England – and so did Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson. When produced in court, Helen's diary entries indicated that Anderson visited frequently while the admiral was absent. To add insult to injury, one Sunday late in 1863 upon returning home from morning service, the admiral noticed Anderson leaving the Codrington marital home. Furthermore, the following day, Mrs Codrington and Anderson were seen entering the Grosvenor Hotel together.

In October 1863, Colonel Anderson broke some shocking news to his apparent amour: he was about to marry his cousin, Charlotte Christina Anderson. His jilted mistress penned an incredulous yet reasoned letter that dwelt mostly on the question of his motive, as well as the sincerity of his impending vows. Nevertheless, they married on November 18, 1863.

The trial started in February 1864 and many witnesses from the Codrington's Malta sojourn submitted their testimony.

It became clear from the admiral's butler that Mrs Codrington had also enjoyed the company of Lieutenant Mildmay (Rifle Brigade) in Malta. The latter was a frequent visitor to the official residence and the butler stated that he would patiently gather Mrs Codrington's hastily discarded clothing after Mildmay's calls. However, the butler's own character was brought into question when he was questioned about his improper treatment of fellow servant Teresa Borg.

Robert Rivers, a servant of Lieutenant Milmay, who was quartered in Fort Ricasoli, also testified that Mrs Codrington habitually visited his master when he was alone, staying for 30 to 45 minutes and leaving unaccompanied.

Mrs Coxon, a former friend of the Codringtons, even testified that the admiral's wife herself confessed adultery with Lieutenant Mildmay while in Malta.

"After the judge's summing up, the jury found that Mrs Codrington had committed adultery with both Anderson and Mildmay, and that Admiral Codrington had done nothing to cause his wife's misconduct"

In July 1864, the trial took an unexpected turn when, in her defence, Mrs Codrington alleged that the admiral had committed adultery and had also engaged in an act of gross indecency on Miss Faithfull. At this suggestion, the admiral's counsel claimed "surprise" as this was not a detail that had so far been revealed.

The case was postponed until November 1864 when the accusation of the admiral's adultery was withdrawn and Miss Faithfull (who had previously avoided appearing in court) stated that the fidgety admiral was forever tending the

fires in the house and was seen exiting Miss Faithfull's bedroom in his nightshirt – however, the young lady confirmed that no connection (the word used in the trial) had actually been made.

After the judge's summing up, the jury found that Mrs Codrington had committed adultery with both Anderson and Mildmay, and that Admiral Codrington had done nothing to cause his wife's misconduct. His lordship accordingly pronounced decree nisi. Anderson was called upon to pay the admiral's costs of £942-2s-4d, and Codrington was eventually ordered to pay his ex-wife's legal costs of £1,118-10s-0d.

In September 1875, an understated entry in numerous newspapers' obituary columns announced: "September 12, at South Street, Kensington, Helen Jane Codrington." The hapless Helen had apparently died in poverty of cancer. Furthermore, she has been cast into oblivion as a thorough search has not turned up any portraits of her.

Neither Mildmay nor Anderson's career seemed to have suffered as a result of the verdict. The former retired from the Army with the rank of lieutenant colonel and subsequently joined the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms, more commonly known as the monarch's Nearest Guard. Anderson retired as full general, having served as Commander of the Infantry Brigade at Gibraltar, and as the Governor of the Royal Military College. He was also received a Distinguished Service Award and ended his career with the prestigious colonelcy of the 22nd Regiment.

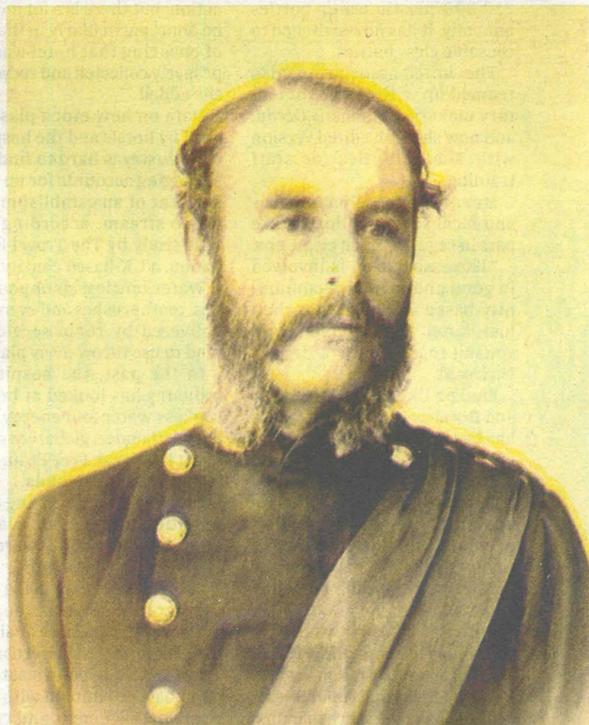
Research also revealed an astonishing additional fact that makes Anderson's subsequent career success even more surprising. It turns out that in the very month that Anderson was sailing for Malta with his battalion in 1859, a trial was taking place in London's Divorce and Probate Court: Anderson was being charged, by Captain Thomas Hansen Ratcliffe of his own regiment, of adultery with Ratcliffe's wife, while stationed in India in 1850.

There were some numerous intriguing twists and turns in that case too; the military authorities were of the opinion that Anderson had not seduced Mrs Ratcliffe, and that since she had entered the relationship of her own volition, Anderson was not guilty; however, civil judge, Lord Campbell, found that there was abundant evidence of adultery. Anderson was made to pay costs.

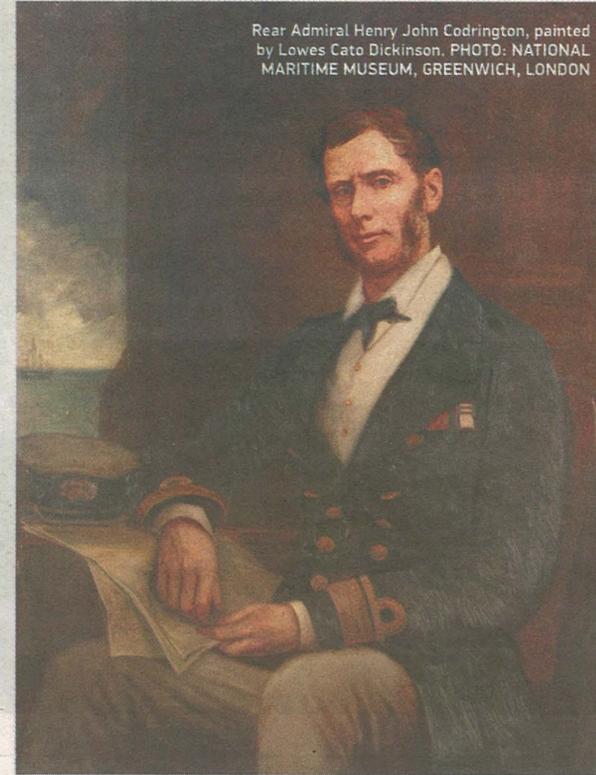
The lothario was indeed fortunate in having avoided dire consequences not once but twice for his lascivious behaviour.

20th or 26th Yes I am
pretty sure of being in town
except for a trip of a day or two.
Your uncle Christopher I hope
will be with me on the 15th
I'd glad shall I be to have him
under my roof again, for
he has been ill in Scotland
since he was with me at
East Maudslay.
Yours truly
H Codrington.
Edmund Charles Smith Esq
Clare Lodge
Cambridge

Sen^r United Service Club
Sat even^g 10 Oct
63
Dear Edmund
I received your
letter of 9th today.
It is very seldom I ever
go near the Admiralty
for the scurvy way in
which I have been treated
makes me avoid doing
so. Still if you wish
to get into any particular
ship, or to serve on a
particular station which
suits your health, I will



Colonel David Anderson, Cheshire Regiment. PHOTO: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Rear Admiral Henry John Codrington, painted by Lowes Cato Dickinson. PHOTO: NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH, LONDON