"A marionette in the hands of masterful men" the sage murder of 1893

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In 1893 the Nahoon Hotel on the outskirts of East London was the scene of a murder which roused intense public interest in the whole country. The hotel was a small hostelry with very few rooms, two well-supported bars, one for black and one for white patrons, and a skittle alley. At that time East London was a rapidly growing Cape port with its share of adventurers and speculators.

On Friday 12 May 1893 Joseph Sage, the hotel keeper, was found dead with a gunshot wound in his head. The Police

The Nahoon Hotel, East London c. June 1893. (All photographs from Cochrane's folio. By courtesy of the East London Museum).

Inspector and the Resident Magistrate thought that it was suicide as Sage was known to have been depressed int he preceeding weeks. he was buried on Saturday 13 May 1893.[1] At the time doubts were expressed over the cause of death with the *East London Standard* reporting that it took place under 'curious circumstances'.[2]

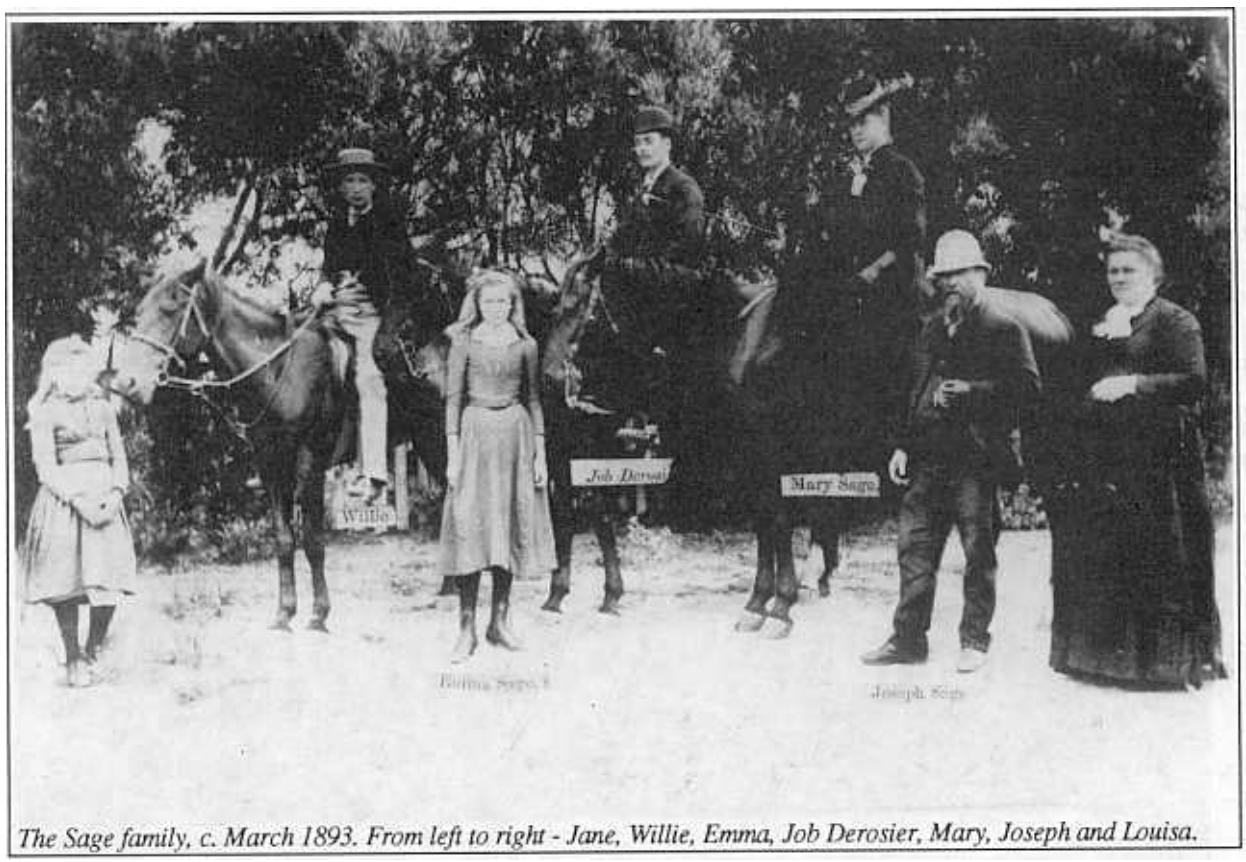
The Inquest and a Murder Charge

The Resident Magistrate, William Fleischer, conducted the inquest which proved to be so complex that it stretched out from 16 May until 9 June. Evidence was led which queried that the shot had been self-inflicted because of the awkward anglo of the bullet entry and the fact that the thumb and not the finger was on the trigger. There had been two attempts to poison Joseph Sage prior to his death. his daughter, Mary, had served soup to her father which proved to be very bitter and he had refused it. On one occasion the soup had been given to the dog which subsequently died. Sage had taken a sample to a chemist who had said that it contained strychnine.

An exhumation of Sage's body was ordered, the stomach contents were analysed and strychnine was found which pointed to a further poisoning attempt. The Police Inspector meanwhile found more witnesses to testify that a man who called himself Job Derosier had not only been seen at the

Nahoon Hotel but also had entered Mary Sage's bedroom on the fateful night.[3] In a dramatic development, Mary Sage and Derosier were arrested, charged with murder and imprisoned in Lock Street Goal.[4]

Kaffrarian from France during the 1850's to work on the Pirie Sawmill near Stutterheim. By 1893 Joseph Sage had made enough money to buy a steam saw and flour mill in East London and to purchase the Nahoon Hotel.[8] In her photographs Mary Sage appears as an attractive young



The Sage family, c. March 1893. From left to right - Jane, Willie, Emma, Job Derosier, Mary, Joseph and Louisa.

A Woman Accused of Murder

The news was a sensation. An attractive young woman was accused of being party to the killing of her father. It was reported that this "was one of the most remarkable and mysterous cases in the annals of crime in South Africa"[5] John Gately, an ex-Mayor of East London, expressed his horror in a letter to Sir Gordon Sprigg;

> "Our community is in great commotion from the death of Mr Sage, I don't know if you were acquainted with him but he was resident here for some time. Rumour has it he was poisoned ... and finally shot, but I suppose time will tell and his daughter is also alleged (six) to have a hand in it. If this latest be so, it exceeds in crime anything that I have ever known to have occurred in South Africa".[6]

After the trial, the printers Grocott and Sherry were quick to seize the opportunity and published a booklet entitled "The Sage Tragedy" which ran to two editions and sold 5000 copies.[7]

Mary Sage was the third daughter in a family of eight children. Her father and his brother had come out to British

woman with all the trappings of the good appearance of a middle-class lady. Her waist is tightly corseted, her blonde hair is neatly coiled, and her clothes are modest and fashionable.

The Preliminary Enquiry

On 27 June the Magistrate began the preliminary Enquiry which lasted until 7 July. A woman being accused of murder aroused intense interest with the newspaper reporting that the Court was crammed and, most unusually, there were many women present.[9] Lengthy evidence as given from a variety of witnesses all of which was published in detail in the local newspapers and then repeated at the main trial. One witness, Derosier's associate, a man called Francois Buroleau, appeared at the enquiry and made a statement, but had left the country by the time of the main trial.

The Trial

The main trial was held in the Eastern Districts Court in Grahamstown before the Judge president, Sir Jacob Barry, from 13 to 17 november 1893. The Court was packed to capacity and again there were may ladies present. The

newspaper reported that the street outside was crowded and there was a general air of excitement.[10]
Evidence revealed that Job Derosier was one of several aliases used by Leon Panin. He was a twenty seven year old Mauritian who had a criminal record for swindling and forgery. He had arrived in East London by the *SS African* in December 1892 ostensibly for his health and had become very friendly with the Sage family when staying at the Nahoon Hotel. A common bond was that he and Joseph Sage were both French-speaking.[11]

Derosier had been arrested in January 1893, shortly after his arrival in East London, on a charge of counterfeiting and Joseph Sage had kindly paid his bail. The case was

Mary Sage, c. January 1893.

withdrawn through insufficient evidence but the unpleasant sequel was that the bail money was stolen.[12] Meanwhile Derosier had ingratiated himself with the family and had made advances to Sage's daughter, Mary. According to her mother, he had become engaged to her.[13]

Relations with Joseph Sage deteriorated when Derosier insinuated that Mrs Rochat, a hotel guest, was responsible for the theft of money from the hotel as well as the missing bail money, a substantial one hundred and fifty pound. This led Joseph Sage to accuse Mrs Rochat of the theft, who then sued him for defamation of character. He was ordered to withdraw his remarks and made to pay her seventy pounds, a public humiliation for which Sage blamed Derosier.[14] To make matters worse, Derosier had then told Mrs Sage that her husband had committed adultery. A bitter quarrel ensued and Mrs sage had left her husband and had instituted divorce procee-dings.[15]

In her evidence, Mrs Louisa Sage said that Derosier had told her that he wanted to marry Mary and run the hotel. She said that relations between Sage and Derosier had cooled when it became clear that her husband was not prepared to hand over the hotel to the newcomer. She also said that Mary had told her that she was pregnant and this news had so angered Joseph Sage that he had threatened to kick Mary out of the house.[16]

On 18 April Derosier had left East London but evidence uncovered the fact that on the nights of 10 and 11 May, he was not out of town as he had claimed, but had entered Mary's room in secret with the help of a groom who worked at the hotel. Derosier was seen leaving the hotel at 4.15 am on the morning of 12 May. He had subsequently gone to Molteno where he stayed until the Monday, pressing the proprietor to make out a falsified receipt for 10-15 May. This was exposed as a fruitless effort to establish an alibi for his whereabouts at the time of the murder. Many of Derosier's other statements were proved to be lies.[17]

In Mary Sage's initial evidence she made no mention of Derosier's presence in her room. She subsequently made three written statements to the Resident Magistrate while she was in jail, each giving a different version of her involvement, her changes following courtroom revelations. In her first statement she admitted that Derosier had come into her room on the two nights preceeding the murder. In her second she blamed Buroleau, a friend of Derosier, for the poisoning attempts.

Job Derosier. Cochrane's note under the photograph reads "Job Derosier in the guise of a gentleman".

In her third statement and this was the story she adhered to, she admitted to two attempts at poisoning her father but denied emphatically that she had given any poison on the night of his death. She claimed that the two poisoning attempts were on instructions from Derosier and were conditional to his return. She explained that she had lied in her earlier statements in an effort to cover up for Derosier. The courtroom revelations of Derosier's unsavory record had turned her against him. She claimed that he had left her room to shoot her father and she had heard the shot.[18]

By the end of the trial it was established that Joseph Sage had actually died of a gunshot wound which was not self-inflicted. There was evidence of strychnine in Sage's stomach, which pointed to a further poisoning attempt, but he had not died from this. Derosier's movements and presence at the scene of the crime were well established, his many false statements had been noted and a motive for revenge had been suggested. It was also established that Mary had been into her father's room on the night of his death and had admitted to two earlier attempts to poison him. The jury had to establish whether Derosier had done the shooting and whether Mary had been an accomplice.

Derosier was found guilty of 'Wilful Murder' but Mary Sage was found 'Not Guilty' and released. Derosier was sentenced to death and subsequently hanged.[19]

Mary Sage's Acquittal

The question arises as to why the jury came to the decision that Mary Sage was not guilty when the evidence pointed to a very definite involvement. In his summary, the Judge President weighed up the situation which pointed to her guilt. He informed the jury that

> "if strychnine found its way into the deceased's stomach, some hand must have administered it. Was it the hand of the deceased or the hand of the daughter? .... we may infer that the two prisoners were concerned with the murder: and if you come to this conclusion, you will find both the prisoners guilty .... She may be guilty in a far less degree, but the law does not draw any distinction. If she aided and abetted the male prisoner she is a consenting party."[20]

The Police Inspector believed that both were equally guilty and that "there should have been a verdict against the female as well".[21] In the editorial comment, a local newspaper also believed in her involvement and guilt:

> "Mary Sage's own confession points to a very active complicity in the shooting of her father ... by the same evidence it is certain that she assisted him to do it."[22]

Female Criminal Records

In an analysis by Mary Hartman of feminine crimes which involved murders in the late nineteenth century in England and France, she points out that very few women were executed for murder and in her study of thirteen famous

Mary Sage and Job Derosier c. March 1893.

cases, no middle class woman were executed. She argues that there was a strict code of behaviour for ladies but in the reality of social change, some women deviated from the social norm and their perceptions of their changing roles were often confused.[23]

Hartman also argues that the reality of women's private lives during the Victorian period is usually hidden from view but when women became involved with the processes of the law their deepest secrets become open to public scrutiny so that observers can begin to understand the reality of their experiences. The fact that women had been accused of murder often obscured the fact that they faced typical problems and ordinary circumstances.[24]

In the case of Mary Sage, had Derosier proved to be an honourable man with the best of intentions with regard to marriage, her fall from grace would never have been known. In spite of the ideal that a young woman should be a virgin prior to marriage, the reality was that probably many were not and that Mary Sage was not altogether unusual.

The reasons why male juries exonerated hundreds of murderesses between 1880 and 1910 in the French courts was investigated by ruth Harris. She suggests that it was the way in which female nature, sexuality and psychology were represented which won them so many acquittals. In the interpretations of women's behaviour, the idea of hysteria had recently been introduced, where women seen to be 'suggestible automata and marionettes in the hands of masterful men who hypnotised them into enacting scenarios of slavish obedience.' In spite of the lack of judicial sanction, women used murder as a weapon against men who had injured them. Harris points out that the motivation of the women who were involved was coincidental with the morality upheld by the judges and so there was sympathy with a 'young female outcast' who had been corrupted ... 'a virgin abandoned after giving in to the amorous and duplicitous advances of a dishonourable man'.[25]

In 1893 Mary was twenty two years old and, in common with other girls of her age and class, she was living at home while preparing herself for marriage. Her two older sisters had married well and in her father's will made two years before, there was no provision for her.[26] This suggests that he believed that she would marry before he died. Mary was in the market for a prospective husband and the appearance on her doorstep of a presentable, well-dressed and apparently wealthy young man in the guise of Job Derosier seemed eminently suitable. Initially her family liked and accepted him, giving him the nickname 'Baby'.[27] She fell in love and believed him when he declared that he wanted to marry her. At the time it was accepted that young girls should be innocent and naive so it was not to be expected that she would have any insight into the kind of man that Derosier proved to be. Her fatal mistake was in giving in to his sexual advances prior to marriage.

Deviant Behaviour

The first intimations of disaster appeared when Derosier's bid to get the hotel failed and his relationship with her father soured. There was evidence that physical violence was common in the home. A guest at the hotel said that he took no notice of Mary's scream when she found the body of her father as he just thought that Sage was thrashing one of the children again.[28] Sage had attacked his wife physically when she said she was leaving him, threatening to shoot her and trying to hit her with a chair and a pot. Sochrane wrote that he had an ungovernable temper when he was angry and was very violent.[29] Physical abuse by the father of his wife

and children would not have engendered loving relations with his daughter. An Act passed in England in 1873 which allowed women to petition for separation from their husbands on grounds of assault indicates that there was a growing rejection of violence towards women.[30] It is suggested that the jury regarded Sage's violence towards his wife as unacceptable and this could have been taken into account when considering Mary's actions.

Mary Sage's claim that she was pregnant needs evaluating. It is not clear whether who really was as there were no comments about it at all at the trial in November, some eight months later. Possibly she had had a miscarriage but this seems unlikely as there was no reference to this in the gaol wardress's evidence which said that she had been healthy and had not had to see a doctor.[31] It seems more likely that Mary was mistaken in her own diagnosis but genuinely believed that she was. Young women of the time were so sexually naive that she might have thought that intercourse automatically meant pregnancy. Alternatively, she might have tried to use the possibility to persuade her father to accept Derosier into his hotel business. But if she did, she sadly miscalculated her father's response.

An unmarried girl who became pregnant and was not supported by her parents was in a serious position as very few middleclass white women were qualified to be self-supporting especially if there was an illegitimate child. With her father's rejection mary saw her loyalties lying with her lover rather than her father. At the point in her life when she thought that she was pregnant, Derosier announced that he was leaving and she had to face the horrifying fact that without the support of her lover she was in dire straits.

Mary Sage had been conditioned to obedience in accordance with the strongly patriarchal system under which she lived and she was prepared to obey a forceful man. When Derosier left for Natal, she believed that he would not come back to her unless she did as she was told. In a desperate attempt to get Derosier to return she asked James Stuart, a man who worked for Derosier, to go to Natal to try to persuade Derosier to return and Mary herself provided the money for his travel expenses.[32]

The glimpse of the fearful vision of her future without male support could easily have led to a state of hysteria which Harris suggests made women into 'suggestible automata'.[33]

The revelation of derosier's several aliases, previous convictions and unreliability were only made during the trial and must have been a terrible shock. This would account for her differing statements, her final rejection of Derosier and her accusation that her had shot her father.

In his summing up Advocate Sampson skilfully pointed out the position in which Mary had found herself. He said that

> "Mary had done the poisonings in a perfunctory halfhearted way ... she carried out nothing more than De Rosier [sic] told her ... Her sole object was to be able to tell De Rosier that she had carried out his instructions and so claim his return ... she had no malice against her father and beyond the desperate straits to get De Rosier back, she did not desire his death ... [34]

Harris's suggestion that juries were beginning to take into account physical factors such as childhood illnesses into account is born out in Mary Sage's case. Her mother described her as being 'weak-minded' and easily influenced in an effort to explain her actions.[35] The existence of a traumatic childhood accident which might have influenced her behaviour was suggested. Enquirers from the Bench elicited the information that she had met with an accident as a child aged 14, in which a gunshot had taken off part of her ear with the result that she had lost complete hearing, often had toothache and her face often swelled on that side.[36] It was significant that the judge enquired whether this had had any effect on her behaviour. Although her mother denied it, the suggestion had been made to the jury that it was a possibility worth taking into consideration.

The Interactive Process

Ruth Harris suggests that the reasons for clemency could also be found in the way that the women concerned were active participants in an interactive process with the male interpreters of the law. She maintained that the way the women represented themselves through a particular melodramatic style was crucial in contributing to the acquittals.[37] Mary Sage's appearance was likely to enlist the jury's sympathy. She was young and pretty, and during the trial her presentation of herself was in complete harmony in the way in which repentant woman should conduct herself. The newspaper commented approvingly that she sat bowed and dejected, and closely veiled throughout the trial.[38] It was rumoured that she might seek the seclusion of a convent.[39]

In analysing public response to women accused of murder, Mary Hartman points out that her study was not the first to document the extraordinary interest which these trials evoked among well-bred women. She argues that women were developing antipathy to male authoritarian structures and the double standard and that they saw that men were equally as guilty as 'fallen women'. Women were able to sympathise with the plight of the accused women if not their actions, as they could identify with their problems. Remarks made by the men showed that they were well aware that the females in the audience were supportive of women accused of murder.[40]

The public response to Mary Sage's situation supports Hartman's contention. The newspapers all commented on the unusual female presence in the public galleries and the intense interest in the trial. A male reporter from the *Kimberley Advertiser* commented disapprovingly on

> "the large attendance of ladies, who were privileged to sit behind the curtains in the Judicial Bench, where they could see and hear but not be observed. Who gave permission I cannot say but the good taste of which has been commented on".[41]

That they were well-bred middle-class women is alluded to in the sarcastic comment the "the fair crowd", in 'tea dresses' had tea sent over from the Hotel. The patronising comments revealed total disapproval of their absorbed interest

> "... give ladies the credit for having been remarkably quiet and for self-denial imposed on them to refrain from chattering, must be set off against the morbid desire to be present at proceedings when the evidence was hardly of the character that women of refinement and purity care to run after".[42]

Female Irresponsibility

Harris maintains that the particular way in which the women presented themselves was 'crucial in arousing genuine compassion, while at the same time rendering a portrait of feminine irresponsibility'.[43] Mary Sage's motivation in co-operating with Derosier was seen in the light of a helpless young woman who had given her love to the wrong sort of man. She was not expected to shoulder any sort of responsibility. Advocate Sampson argued:

> "Perhaps she might be blamed for having an attachment for such a man, but there were women who, the more worthless and the more cruel the man, - the more staunch and devoted were they. She took his [Derosier's] statement as mere bravado ... she was overjoyed at his return and more concerned with him than what he said, ... a broken-down girl in the dock ... what she did, she did for the love of a man,and not to take part in the death of her father ... he hoped the jury would remember that she was a woman, and only twenty two."[44]

That this was an acceptable presentation of her position was indicated by the fact that according to the report, 'his magnificent peroration elicited a burst of applause'.[45]

Her acquittal indicates that the jury agreed with the sentiments. They recognised that her sexual transgression was the result of a promise of marriage, but while this was socially unacceptable behaviour, society would punish that but not the law courts.

During the Victorian period, the fact that women were dependent on their menfolk for economic survival and were expected to be subservient to them was recognised by the jury. Mary Sage's obedience to her lover following her father's rejection was a strategy which was understood as women had very few options available to them.

Her lover proved to be a duplicitous and dishonourable man and the jury found they could not blame her for acting the way she did and she was perceived to be a helpless victim of male vice. After having been rejected by her father, her participation in the murder was seen as the act of a desperate woman manipulated by an evil man who had hypnotised her into slavish obedience, a marionette indeed.

ENDNOTES

1. *East London Standard and Frontier Gazette*, 9 June 1893.
2. Ibid., 12 April 1893.
3. Ibid., 19 May - 13 June 1893.
4. Ibid., 13 June 1893.
5. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, (Grahamstown, 1893, p. 3.
6. The Letter Book of John Gately, 13 June 1893, p. 63.
7. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy; Full Report on the Trial of Job De Rosier and Mary Sage*, 2nd Ed., (Grahamstown, 1893).
8. *East London Dispatch*, 14 November 1882.
9. Ibid., 26 June 1893.
10. *East London Standard*, 14 November 1893.
11. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 4.
12. Ibid., p. 10.
13. Ibid., p. 20.
14. *East London Standard*, 7 April 1893.
15. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 18.
16. Ibid., p. 4.
17. Ibid., pp. 40-50.
18. *Kaffrarian Watchman*, 30 June 1893.
19. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 109.
20. Ibid., p. 106.
21. Handwritten comment in Cochrane's folio. A note on Cochrane's folio: This was compiled by the Chief Inspector of the Town Police, JB Cochrane. it includes official papers which he had kept, some newspaper cuttings, photographs and personal comments. It is held by the East London Museum and used by courtesy of the Board of Trustees.
22. *East London Standard*, 21 November 1893.
23. Hartman, Mary S., *Victorian Murdersses*, (Robson Books London, 1979), p. 2.
24. Ibid., p. 3.
25. Harris, Ruth, "Melodrama, Hystria and Feminine Crimes of Passion in the fin-de-Spiecle", *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 25, Spring, 1988, pp. 33-40.
26. *Kaffrarian Watchman*, 16 June 1893.
27. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 17.
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29. Handwritten comment inCochrane's folio.
30. Armand Duc, Nicole, "The Law's Contradictions" in Fraisse, G., & Perrot, M., (Eds), *A History of Women in the West; IV Emerging Feminism from Revolution*

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31. *Kaffrarian Watchman*, 30 June 1893.
32. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 35.
33. Harris, *Melodrama, Hysteria & Crimes of Passion*, p. 34.
34. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 99.
35. Ibid., p. 20.
36. Ibid., p. 56.
37. Harris, *Melodrama, Hysteria and Crimes of Passion*, p. 33.
38. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 64.
39. *East London Standard*, 21 November 1893.
40. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, pp. 2-3.
41. Quoted in *East London Standard*, 5 December 1893.
42. Ibid., 5 December 1893.
43. Harris, *Melodrama, Hysteria and Crimes of Passin*, p. 34.
44. Grocott & Sherry, *The Sage Tragedy*, p. 99.
45. Ibid., p. 99.