

TURING SUICIDE VERDICT IN DOUBT

Jack Copeland, 23 June 2012

Turing left a short story. Although only a few pages long and incomplete, it offers an intimate glimpse of its author. The central character—a scientist by the name of Alec Pryce who works at Manchester University—is a thinly disguised Turing. Pryce, like Turing himself, always wore what Turing described as 'an old sports coat and rather unpressed worsted trousers'. Turing called this Pryce's 'undergraduate uniform', saying it 'encouraged him to believe he was still an attractive youth'. At just the wrong side of 40, Turing must have been feeling his age. Pryce, whose work related to interplanetary travel, made an important discovery in his twenties that came to be called 'Pryce's buoy'. The nature of the discovery is left unexplained, and Pryce's buoy is obviously a proxy for the universal Turing machine. Turing wrote revealingly 'Alec always felt a glow of pride when this phrase was used'.

He continued, 'The rather obvious double-entendre rather pleased him too'. 'He always liked to parade his homosexuality', Turing said, 'and in suitable company Alec would pretend that the word was spelt without the "u".' Pryce, we are told, has not had a sexual relationship since 'that soldier in Paris last summer'. Walking through Manchester, Pryce passes a youth lounging on a bench, Ron Miller. Ron, who is out of work and keeps company with petty criminals, makes a small income from male prostitution. He responds to a glance Alec Pryce gives him as he passes, calling out uncouthly 'Got a fag?'. Shyly, Alec joins him on the bench and the two sit together awkwardly. Eventually Alec plucks up courage to invite the boy to have lunch at a nearby restaurant. Beggars can't be choosers, Ron thinks meanly. He isn't impressed by Alec's brusque approach and 'lah-di-dah' way of speaking, but he says to himself philosophically 'Bed's bed whatever way you get into it'.

It was in December 1951 that Turing first met Arnold Murray—the Ronald Miller of his short story. 'Ronald' is of course an anagram of 'Arnold'. Turing picked up Murray in Manchester's Oxford Street and the two ate together. Their first time was a few days later at Turing's house, Hollymeade, in Wilmslow. Afterwards Turing gave Murray a present of a penknife. Probably the unemployed Murray would have preferred the cash instead. The next time they had sex Murray stole £8 from Turing's pocket as he left

Hollymeade in the morning. Not long after this the house was burgled. Even though the finger of suspicion pointed at Murray and his seedy friends, Turing spent the night with him one more time. In the morning he led Murray to the local police station. Turing went in, but not Murray. In the course of reporting the burglary Turing gave the police a wrong description and this, as the newspaper reporter covering his subsequent trial wrote luridly, 'proved to be his undoing'. During questioning, Turing admitted to having had sex with Murray three times. The burglary dropped out of the picture, eclipsed by this sensational new information. As the police knew all too well, each of the three occasions counted as two separate crimes under the antique 1885 legislation still in force. The two crimes were the *commission* of an act of gross indecency with another male person, and the reciprocal crime of *being party to* the commission of an act of gross indecency. Six criminal offences. After Turing made his statement, he said to a police officer: 'What is going to happen about all this? Isn't there a Royal Commission sitting to legalise it?' But not until 1967 was homosexuality decriminalised in the UK.

Three weeks later, at the end of February 1952, Turing and Murray appeared in court. The charges were read out and both men were committed for trial. The court granted Turing bail of £50, but refused to let Murray out of custody. Following a distressing wait of more than four weeks, the trial was held in the quiet Cheshire town of Knutsford, at the end of March. Turing's indictment began grandly 'The King versus Alan Mathison Turing', but George VI had recently died, and 'Queen' had been written above the hastily crossed out 'King'. Turing pleaded guilty on all six counts, as did Murray. Putting on a brave face, Turing joked 'Whilst in custody with the other criminals I had a very agreeable sense of irresponsibility'. 'I was also quite glad to see my accomplice again', he admitted, 'though I didn't trust him an inch'. Turing's friend the mathematician Max Newman was called as a character witness. Newman said 'He is completely absorbed in his work, and is one of the most profound and original mathematical minds of his generation'. It must have been good to hear those words, even on such a black day.

Murray's counsel attempted to shift the blame onto Turing, saying that he had approached Murray. If Murray 'had not met Turing he would not have indulged in that practice or stolen the £8', the barrister argued crassly. But the barrister's tactics worked. Despite a previous conviction for larceny, Murray got off with twelve months good

behaviour. Turing's own counsel hoped to steer the court away from a prison sentence, and alluded to the possibility of organo-therapy. His counsel said: 'There is treatment which could be given him. I ask you to think that the public interest would not be well served if this man is taken away from the very important work he is doing.' The judge sentenced Turing to twelve months probation and ordered him to 'submit for treatment by a duly qualified medical practitioner at Manchester Royal Infirmary'. Turing wrote 'No doubt I shall emerge from it all a different man, but quite who I've not found out'. It was not exactly the eulogy he deserved from the nation he had saved. But in repressive 1950s Britain things could have been worse. Prison would probably have cost him his job, and with it his access to a computer. Already his arrest had cost him something else that mattered to him: he would never be able to work for GCHQ again, he told a friend. Turing, the perfect patriot, had unwittingly become a security risk.

As we all know, the so-called 'treatment' consisted of flooding his body with female hormones for a year. Turing said: 'It is supposed to reduce sexual urge whilst it goes on, but one is supposed to return to normal when it is over'. He added 'I hope they're right'. Turing seems to have borne it all cheerfully enough. He even regarded the hormone treatment 'as a laugh', one of his friends told me. The whole thing was an episode to be got through. Turing took an amused and pragmatic attitude to his twelve months probation. He said: 'Being on probation my shining virtue was terrific, and had to be'. 'If I had so much as parked my bicycle on the wrong side of the road there might have been 12 years for me', he said.

A difficult spell blew up towards the end of his probation, with the arrival of a postcard announcing the visit of a Norwegian boyfriend, Kjell. Turing described his relationship with Kjell as one of 'Perfect virtue and chastity'. Turing said 'A very light kiss beneath a foreign flag, under the influence of drink, was all that had ever occurred'. But the last thing he needed was Kjell turning up in Wilmslow during his probation. The postcard drew an astonishing response from the authorities, who must have been monitoring Turing's mail. Kjell never reached Turing. Turing wrote to Robin Gandy: 'At one stage police over the N of England were out searching for him, especially in Wilmslow, Manchester, Newcastle etc'. Kjell found himself back in Bergen. The state was keeping a very close watch indeed on Alan Turing. He knew Britain's best

codebreaking secrets, and his arrest had come at exactly the wrong time. Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean defected to Moscow in the middle of 1951, sparking a scandal that in the public mind associated treachery, Cambridge intellectuals, and homosexuality. MI5 and SIS would not want to be caught napping again.

What Turing called the 'Kjell crisis' passed, and a few weeks later his probation came to an uneventful end. He was rid of the organo-therapy, and in the warm sunny spring of 1953 the skies were blue again. Despite the harshness of his personal life, Turing's career was at a new crescendo. The logician turned codebreaker turned computer scientist turned Artificial Intelligence pioneer had now turned biologist. In August of the previous year, as his probation dragged on, the Royal Society published his groundbreaking paper describing a new theory of how things grow. Now he was hard at work at the console of the Manchester computer, simulating the chemical processes that his theory described.

In March 1953 two Cambridge researchers, Crick and Watson, cracked the chemical structure of DNA. Watson related that on the day of the discovery 'Francis winged into the Eagle to tell everyone within hearing distance that we had found the secret of life.' Simultaneously, Turing was on the brink of discovering an even deeper secret. As we grow in our mother's womb, how does Nature achieve that miraculous leap from genetic material to actual anatomy? Then, a little over a year later, Turing died.

A 2009 headline in the *Guardian* read: **'PM's apology to codebreaker Alan Turing: we were inhumane'**. The article stated: 'Gordon Brown issued an unequivocal apology last night on behalf of the government to Alan Turing, the second world war codebreaker who took his own life 55 years ago after being sentenced to chemical castration for being gay'. In this long-awaited apology the Prime Minister said: 'While Turing was dealt with under the law of the time, and we can't put the clock back, his treatment was of course utterly unfair, and I am pleased to have the chance to say how deeply sorry I and we all are for what happened to him.' The Prime Minister continued: 'In 1952, he was convicted of "gross indecency"—in effect, tried for being gay. His sentence—and he was faced with the miserable choice of this or prison—was chemical

castration by a series of injections of female hormones. He took his own life just two years later.'

So it was official. Turing, persecuted by the authorities, had killed himself. Nowadays nearly everyone has heard that Turing committed suicide by biting into an apple dipped in cyanide. Is any of this true, though? The story that a scientist working on an electronic brain had committed suicide by eating a cyanide-laced apple appeared in the newspapers shortly after Turing died. It is true that an apple was found in his bedroom near his body, but the police never tested it for cyanide. The love of a good story filled in the rest. In fact, the presence of a half-eaten apple on Turing's bedside table offers no clue about how he died. It was his long-standing habit to eat a few bites of an apple last thing at night.

Why was the Prime Minister confident that Turing took his own life? It is true that the verdict recorded at Turing's inquest was that he committed suicide by taking poison while the balance of his mind was disturbed. However, the coroner who conducted the inquest appeared biased, and failed to carry out a thorough investigation. A reporter covering the inquest quoted the coroner, J. A. K. Ferns, as saying: 'I am forced to the conclusion that this was a deliberate act. In a man of his type, one never knows what his mental processes are going to do next'.

Would a more probing inquest have returned the same verdict? Quite possibly not. An open verdict, indicating uncertainty, would have been more appropriate. Let's re-open the case and review the surviving evidence. The official records of the inquest were destroyed by the coroner's office—inquest papers are routinely destroyed after 15 years—but fortunately Turing's mother Sara retained a copy of the various statements made before the coroner, and also of the pathologist's report. These documents provide us with the following data.

Turing was found dead in his bed at Hollymeade late on the afternoon of Tuesday June 8, 1954. His housekeeper Eliza Clayton arrived at about 5 p.m. to prepare his dinner. She had been away for a few days over the Whitsun holiday. Mrs Clayton let herself in at the back door as usual but there was no sign of Turing. The light was on in his bedroom. She knocked on the bedroom door and when there was no reply she opened it. 'I saw Mr.

Turing lying in bed', she said. 'He was on his back and appeared to be dead. I touched his hand which was cold.'

Eliza Clayton rushed out of Hollymeade to a neighbour's house and telephoned the police. She returned to Turing's bedroom with Police Sergeant Cottrell, who examined the body. Turing was dressed in his pyjamas and had put his wristwatch on his bedside table. Also on the bedside table was half an apple from which several bites had been taken. There was white foamy liquid around his mouth and a telltale smell of bitter almonds. Turing was lying on the bed 'in practically a normal position', Cottrell said. The bedclothes were pulled up to his neck. Yet cyanide poisoning is not a peaceful death, and the symptoms usually include vomiting and convulsions.

There is also a puzzle about Turing's shoes. These had been placed outside the bedroom door. Putting footwear outside the bedroom door at night was a common enough practice among the privileged classes—if servants were present they would apply polish early in the morning. The only thing is, it wasn't something Turing did. Mrs Clayton found the shoes outside his bedroom door. 'This was unusual', she commented. Did someone tidy up after Turing died, putting his shoes outside the door, pulling the bedclothes up to his chin, perhaps even laying him on his bed?

Turing had eaten a meal of mutton chops in the evening and then died sometime on the Monday night, it seemed. There is no doubt that he died from cyanide poisoning; the police pathologist's report is clear. The crucial question, though, is how cyanide got into his body. The situation is complicated by the fact that the police found a large quantity of cyanide in a small lab adjoining his bedroom. Turing called the lab 'the nightmare room'. In it the police saw a pan full of bubbling liquid. The pan contained electrodes that were wired via a transformer to the light fitting in the centre of the ceiling. Turing was fond of messing about with electrolysis, and was pleased by his success at gold-plating a spoon (another spoon, not yet plated, was found in the room). Cyanide was part of the process. A one-pound glass jam-jar full of cyanide solution was found on a table near the electrolytic apparatus. A bottle of cyanide crystals was discovered in the top drawer of Turing's chest of drawers.

Cyanide-assisted electrolysis may seem a curious hobby, not to mention a hazardous one, but Turing liked making things for himself. When his chess set was stolen

at Bletchley Park he carefully made new pieces out of clay, firing them in a tin over his open hearth. A week before Turing's death his friend Robin Gandy stayed at Hollymeade. They played Turing's 'desert island game' of trying to produce as wide a range of chemicals as possible by electrolysis, starting from common household substances. Even as a child Turing had been fascinated by this idea, writing from Hazelhurst School about his chemistry experiments. He said 'I always seem to want to make things from the thing that is commonest in nature and with the least waste of energy'.

So how did Turing die? The only three possibilities are suicide, accidental death, and murder by person or persons unknown. Let's review these possibilities in turn. The evidence for suicide is very slim. In the past Turing had talked about committing suicide to one of his close friends, but then many people do. It appears that no evidence whatsoever was presented at the inquest to indicate that he intended to take his own life. The modern guideline is that a verdict of suicide shall not be recorded unless there is clear evidence placing it beyond any reasonable doubt that the person did intend to take his or her own life. Nor it seems was any evidence presented at the inquest to suggest that the balance of Turing's mind was disturbed. His mental state appears in fact to have been unremarkable. Turing and Gandy passed an enjoyable weekend—Mrs Clayton the housekeeper said that 'they seemed to have a really good time'. Gandy said: 'When I stayed with him the week-end before Whitsun he seemed, if anything, happier than usual'. His neighbour Mrs Webb also found him perfectly cheerful. On Thursday June 3, just four days before his death, he threw an impromptu party for her and her little boy Rob, making them tea and toast. 'It was such a jolly party', Mrs Webb said.

Turing's great friend and codebreaking colleague Peter Hilton surprised me one day. We had gone out to the supermarket to buy a jar of his favourite New Zealand plum chutney. In 1954 Peter had been working in Max Newman's mathematics department at Manchester. He suddenly told me apropos of nothing that Turing had left a note in his university office before going home that last time for the Whitsun weekend. The note contained Turing's instructions to himself about what he was going to do the following week. If he killed himself, it was certainly not premeditated. Another close friend, knowing Turing as he did, wrote in a letter to Robin Gandy a few days after the death that he believed Turing would not have killed himself just on impulse.

Turing's friends were baffled by his death. He had endured his trial and the subsequent hormone 'therapy' with what Hilton described as amused fortitude. In any case, the doses of hormone had ended well over a year before. Turing's career was at one of its highest points and his research into growth was going very well, with the prospect of epoch-making results just around the corner. Don Bayley, Turing's good friend from the days of the wartime Delilah speech encryption project, wrote to Gandy saying 'It's a complete mystery to me because he did enjoy life so much'.

His mother Sara never believed he had killed himself. She wrote, 'He was at the apex of his mental powers, with growing fame ... By any ordinary standards he had everything to live for'. Sara thought he must have taken the cyanide accidentally. Turing was a klutz in the laboratory. Through sheer carelessness he got high voltage shocks, and he sometimes attempted to identify chemicals by sticking his fingertips into them and tasting. Tolerating a jar of cyanide crystals rolling about in his chest of drawers was just more of the same. Picturing someone accidentally swallowing a lethal dose of cyanide, even someone of Turing's monumentally careless habits, might seem to stretch the imagination a little too far. However, Don Bayley said to me that Turing was quite capable of putting his apple down in a pool of cyanide without noticing.

Sara suspected that Turing might have inhaled cyanide gas from the pan of bubbling liquid in his home lab. This is indeed a possibility. Illicit drug 'cooks' working in small, confined drug laboratories can die from accidental exposure to cyanide gas emitted from their chemical stews. Turing's 'nightmare room' was a small area left over when Hollymeade's upstairs bathroom was installed, so cramped as to be useless for domestic purposes. Both Sgt Cottrell and the police pathologist noticed a 'strong smell' of cyanide in the nightmare room. There is a roughly 50/50 chance that Turing was genetically unable to detect the odour of cyanide. Following inhalation of a relatively low concentration of cyanide, the onset of symptoms is not usually immediate. Turing might possibly have got into bed normally, donning his pyjamas and taking off his watch before the onrush of nausea and breathlessness. The post mortem report appears to indicate that the concentration of cyanide in Turing's liver was not as high as in other organs, and this finding is certainly suggestive of poisoning by inhalation of cyanide gas rather than by ingestion of cyanide solution.

The third possibility, that Turing was murdered, might seem far-fetched, yet stranger things have been done in the national interest. There was a Cold War on. At Bletchley Park Turing had hoped that an aptly named Operation Ruthless against German seamen would secure vital Enigma materials. Could there have been an 'operation ruthless' against Alan Turing himself, now that he had managed to get himself classified as one of Europe's security risks? In 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy had initiated America's hysterical 'McCarthy era', and by the end of 1953 McCarthyism was in full spate. McCarthy declared that homosexuals who were privy to national secrets threatened America's security. In Britain, David Cornwell—better known as novelist John Le Carré—worked for both MI5 and MI6 during the 1950s and the 1960s. Cornwell told the *Sunday Telegraph* in 2010: 'We did a lot of direct action. Assassinations, at arm's length.' 'We did some very bad things', he said. There is a bare possibility that Turing was murdered, but in terms of evidence the most that can be said for this hypothesis is that Turing was clearly on the security services' radar during the previous year's 'Kjell crisis'.

The exact circumstances of Turing's death may always remain unclear. It should not be stated that he committed suicide—because we simply do not know. Perhaps we should just shrug our shoulders, agree that the jury is out, and focus on Turing's life and extraordinary work.