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# HOMICIDE AT ROUGH POINT

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THE UNTOLD STORY OF HOW DORIS DUKE  
THE RICHEST WOMAN IN AMERICA  
GOT AWAY WITH MURDER

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COVER UP AND 1000 YEARS FOR REVENGE

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# COMING OF AGE IN NEWPORT

In the summer of 1973 the Navy's shocking announcement that it was pulling out of Rhode Island <sup>166</sup> was temporarily eclipsed in The City By The Sea by the start of production on a new adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jazz Age classic, *The Great Gatsby*, starring Robert Redford in the title role and Mia Farrow as his obsession, Daisy Buchanan. Rosecliff, the Bellevue Avenue mansion designed by Stanford White and built in 1902 for silver-heiress Theresa Alice Fair Oelrichs, <sup>167</sup> doubled for Gatsby's lavish West Egg mansion and Hammersmith Farm stood in for Daisy's East Egg estate. <sup>168</sup>

While Fitzgerald's plot demanded "cottages" within driving distance of Manhattan, his description of the Buchanans themselves perfectly suited the idle rich of Newport: "They had spent a year in France," he wrote, "then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together." <sup>169</sup>

Apart from my two year stint at The Reading Room, my own perspective on "those people," came from two "members of service," Albert and Dorothy Holmwood. My mother had sworn them in as U.S. citizens

in her capacity of Deputy Clerk in The Superior Court and they soon grew so close that my sister and I thought of them as “Uncle Bert” and “Aunt Dorothy.”

Bert was born in 1900 in Buxton, Derbyshire, England, Dorothy, a year younger, was a delicate blue-eyed Scottish lady from The Isle of Skye. Even as a young man Bert was an imposing figure: six foot three, and a former member of the Coldstream Guards, he made his first crossing to America in 1926 on the RMS Celtic.<sup>170</sup> After securing employment, he returned to the U.K., booking passage in September of 1927 aboard the RMS Mauretania, this time with his bride-to-be.<sup>171</sup> They were married July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1928 in Oyster Bay, Long Island.<sup>172</sup> In those days Bert went into service as a valet and Dorothy as a housemaid.

By 1931 Bert had risen to become the butler at Miramar, the estate three doors down Bellevue Avenue from Rough Point. There he presided over a staff of twenty. Over time, Dorothy became a much-in-demand lady’s maid who worked for legendary socialites like Perle Mesta, the inspiration for Irving Berlin’s *Call Me Madam*. She also attended Celeste Holm, Bette Davis’s co-star in *All About Eve*.

Bert and Dorothy knew the history of every “summer cottage” in Newport and at holiday gatherings they would hold forth as I took in every word. Until I started serving them myself at the age of 14, my own view of the Summer Colony was largely positive; shaped by Dorothy and Bert who became the trusted majordomo for one of the wealthiest and most storied millionaires in America: surgeon, geographer and explorer Dr. Alexander Hamilton Rice Jr.

## A REAL LIFE INDIANA JONES

Known at Harvard as “Ham Rice,”<sup>173</sup> he was the grandson of a Boston mayor who went on to become Massachusetts governor and a Member of Congress.<sup>174</sup> After earning his A.B. from Harvard College and M.D. from Harvard Medical School in 1904, Ham volunteered to work on the surgical staff of Ambulance Américain, a cadre of civilian doctors serving Europe under the leadership of Dr. George Crile, who later co-founded the renowned Cleveland Clinic.<sup>175</sup> Starting in 1907, Dr. Rice made the

first of seven expeditions to the Amazon Basin, ultimately exploring and surveying 500,000 square miles aboard the steamer yacht *Alberta*.<sup>176</sup> For his service during WW I he was awarded the French Légion of Honor,<sup>177</sup> but the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* had a fateful impact on the next 25 years of his life.

In 1912, Eleanor Elkins Widener, the daughter of a Philadelphia street-car magnate, her husband George and their son Harry traveled to Paris in search of a chef for their new hotel, The Philadelphia Ritz Carlton. On April 10<sup>th</sup> they boarded the *Titanic* in Cherbourg, hosting the ship's captain, Edward Smith himself, on the very night of the disaster.<sup>178</sup> After the “unsinkable ship” hit the iceberg, George and Harry were lost, but Eleanor took the oars of a lifeboat with her maid and survived.<sup>179</sup>

Soon after she returned to the States, she donated the 2021 equivalent of \$70 million to found the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard.<sup>180</sup> It was at the library's dedication in 1915 that she met Professor Ham Rice, a dashing explorer and certified Boston Brahmin,<sup>181</sup> of whom it was said, “He knew head *waters* the way other society folk knew head *waiters*.”<sup>182</sup>

At the time of her first husband's death, famed Gilded-age architect Horace Trumbauer had completed drawings for a 30,000 square foot French neo-classical style mansion on 7.8 acres overlooking Cliff Walk in Newport. Earlier, for coal baron Edward Julius Berwind, he'd designed another spectacular Newport French Chateau called The Elms.<sup>183</sup>



**Miramar, the summer cottage of Dr. Alexander Hamilton Rice Jr. and Eleanor Elkins Widener Rice. (Library of Congress photo)**

Eleanor decided to go ahead with construction on Miramar, the 27 bedroom “cottage” which included a 6,000 square foot carriage house and a 10,000 bottle wine cellar with a 20 foot stone basin capable of icing up to 200 bottles of champagne at once.<sup>184</sup>

The mansion opened on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1915 with a costume ball, described by *The New York Times* as “the largest social event of the summer.”<sup>185</sup>

That October, Eleanor and Dr. Rice were married in a quiet Boston ceremony in order to avoid the publicity of their previously announced wedding at Boston's Trinity Church. The nuptials before 12 friends required a judge to sign a special court order,<sup>186</sup> and soon the intrepid Mrs. Rice was accompanying her husband on expeditions deep into the South American jungle.<sup>187</sup>

In 1922 Trumbauer designed a lavish four-story townhouse for the Rices at 901 Fifth Avenue<sup>188</sup> and they later purchased an oceanfront winter estate in Palm Beach.<sup>189</sup> Throughout his adventures, Dr. Rice held a professor's chair in geography at Harvard and founded the University's Institute of Geographical Exploration, though he later became embroiled in a bitter dispute with the University over the custody of his 10,000 volume collection of books and maps, which he ultimately left to The Naval War College in Newport.<sup>190</sup>

## PARTIES UNTIL DAWN

In his well received 1952 book, *The Last Resorts*, Cleveland Amory described Dr. Rice as "the country's first ranking clubman," listing "43 societies and 26 clubs in his Who's Who autobiography."<sup>191</sup> Covering "The annual Tennis Week Balls at Miramar," which Amory described as among "the particular bright spots" of the Summer Season, he went into detail on how Mrs. Rice handled the events, which "lasted all night in the great Newport tradition."

Shortly after midnight she would disappear and take a nap. Early in the morning she would reappear fresh as a daisy and cheerfully breakfast with the late stayers. Equally exemplary was the 55<sup>th</sup> birthday party of Dr. Rice held at Miramar in 1931, as at this affair 55 people were seated at two tables and the dinner had such dignity that (an) Ambassador rose and made a short speech. "I wish a representative of the press might be with us tonight," he said, "to see for himself that Newport is not all 'Monkey Dinners.'"

The latter reference was to an infamous turn-of-the-century soiree thrown by Mrs. Marion “Mamie” Stuyvesant Fish, then Newport’s reigning eminence gris, in which invitees were summoned to meet a certain “Prince del Drago,” from Corsica, only to encounter a simian in full formal dress.<sup>192</sup> It was a true low point in the history of The Summer Colony’s forays into wretched excess.

But Eleanor Elkins Widener Rice always held her head high and conducted herself with grace. Then, in 1937, Dr. Rice was accompanying her and their daughter to Paris when Mrs. Rice died suddenly of a heart attack while shopping on the eve of Bastille Day. She was 60.<sup>193</sup>

Twelve years later, also in Paris, Dr. Rice married Dorothy Farrington Upham, then 59, who had been presented in 1933 at The Court of St. James in London.<sup>194</sup> Her first husband, a member of The New York Stock Exchange, had committed suicide 15 years earlier.<sup>195</sup>

One of the highlights of Bert Holmwood’s career came in 1955 when he presided over a gala birthday celebration which the second Mrs. Rice, known as “The Madam,” gave for her husband at Miramar on the occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was attended by 700.<sup>196</sup>

On that night the 200 bottle champagne basin was put to good use.

## A REAL LIFE JOHN GIELGUD

In 2012, *The New York Times* did a profile of James Silvia, whose grandfather had been an ornamental gardener, at Miramar. After hiring on for a low-level position there in 1952, Silvia described Albert Holmwood as “a charming man in the front of the house,” but “a beast in the pantry,” He noted, however that “If you searched for the classic butler, Holmwood would be it; on the telephone he sounded like John Gielgud.”<sup>197</sup>

In 1976, 20 years after Dr. Rice’s death, Bert was interviewed by Terry H. Schwadron, a reporter for *The Providence Journal*.<sup>198</sup> Then in semi-retirement, the veteran butler was asked to assess the accuracy of the highly popular British television import *Upstairs Downstairs* and an American network pretender called *Beacon Hill*; both precursors to *Downton Abbey*.

“The houses (the actors) were working in were too small,” said Bert. “A gentlemen would never have had his kitchen and his pantry together like that. It was too crowded to be real.” He also opined on a recent party he’d been asked to supervise. “They sent some help in from Providence. One of the men was actually wearing *brown* shoes. Well, I absolutely could not use him in the front of the house. I had to put him in back behind the counter.”

Reading that piece made me recall an incident in New York City in March of 1969 that was “vintage Uncle Bert.” It occurred in what was known as my “Middler Year” at Northeastern when I was halfway through the five years necessary to earn a B.A.

## AUDACITY VS. DIPLOMACY

From my first summer at *The Daily News*, two years earlier, I had my sights set on Columbia J-School’s graduate program and I’d already made one trip to The City in August, of ’67 armed with some of my clips from that summer. I didn’t have an appointment, but I took the train down from Kingston, RI. The fact that I wouldn’t be able to formally apply until the fall before my graduation in 1971 didn’t seem to impede my exuberance. When I got off the subway at Morningside Heights and gazed up at The Joseph Pulitzer building, I stopped. Seeing the word JOURNALISM carved into the stone on the side of the building gave me the kind of jolt a young seminarian might have received on approaching St. Peter’s Square.

The lobby Directory listed the Admissions Office on the top floor. After getting off the elevator, I found myself lucky on three counts: first that Dean Christopher Trump (a handsome Canadian unrelated to “45”) was lunching alone in his office; second that his Assistant wasn’t there; and third, that he greeted me kindly when I knocked on his door, then barged in.

He sat with me and examined three or four of my pieces on The Cup races and the Folk Festival. He then handed me an application and said, “Make sure you get it in early this fall,” at which point I confessed that I wouldn’t be able to send it for three more years.”

I gritted my teeth and waited to see how that disclosure would fall.

The Dean, paused, then smiled.

“You know Peter, if you were applying to the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, I’d say what you did just now wasn’t particularly *diplomatic*. But as far as this game goes, audacity is considered a strength.”

I exhaled, thinking to myself, “He even used the same term Gardner Dunton of *The Journal* had used to describe the marvelous profession I was bent on entering.

At that point the phone rang, and as I got up to leave, he said, “Keep in touch.”

Naturally I took him literally, so in March of 1969, after I’d written that exposé on slum housing and with infinitely more clips in my folder, I called ahead to schedule another meeting.

The night before I got to The City, Manhattan had been hit with what Newporters would call “a wicked snowstorm,” but I couldn’t wait to get down there and show Dean Trump the four-part series. After that, Uncle Bert and Aunt Dorothy, who were house sitting at “The Madam’s” two floor maisonette at 960 Fifth Avenue, invited me over for an early dinner.

## THE BUTLER’S BUTLER

The snow had let up that morning, but the streets were still slushy. Uncle Bert instructed me to come up to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor via the separate service entrance, which I did. When he opened the door to the kitchen, I could smell a nice leg of lamb that Dorothy had just prepared. I rushed in and hugged her and was about to shake the ex-Coldstream Guard’s hand when suddenly, he looked down at my shoes, which were covered with grime and salt.

He eyed me in a way that was more fatherly than judgmental.

“Now what’s this, I see?”

“What? My shoes? Uncle Bert I’ve been out--”

He held up an index finger, signaling silence. Then he smiled.

“A young man with his eye on the Ivy League can’t be walking the city with shoes that look like that...”

“Alright, I’ll tell you what? Tomorrow, when I hit Penn Station for the trip back, I promise to visit one of those shoeshine stands.”



But he wouldn't have it.

"Sit down boy and unlace them."

I complied. Then, before I could protest, he went to a cupboard and pulled out an elaborate box with multiple polishes in tins and bottles, along with assorted brushes and buffing rags.

Within minutes, a man who had served one of the greatest archeologists and explorers in the world, brought my shoes to a spit and polish shine.

When he finished, he handed them back and gave them his imprimatur.

"Now that's a pair of brogues a young man on his way up can be proud of." As Dorothy leaned in and hugged him, he said, "Now let's have a proper meal."

## THE COTTAGE ON COGGESHALL

After Dr. Rice's death in the mid 1950's his heirs left the sprawling estate to the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island<sup>199</sup> and the second Mrs. Rice moved to an upscale converted Firehouse on Coggeshall Avenue, the street parallel to Bellevue.<sup>200</sup> It was connected to a property that included the extensive greenhouses that had, for decades, supplied flowers and fresh vegetables to Miramar. Next to the firehouse, into which Mrs. Rice had installed an elevator, were a pair of identical cottages separated by a covered walk. In one of them lived James Murdoch, the Scottish gardener for Miramar, his wife and their adult son. Bert and Dorothy had the mirror image cottage across the walkway.

It was there in summer that my mother, father, and sister Mary would visit them. After tea we would spend time in the greenhouses where a red talking parrot (from Dr. Rice's expeditions) would entertain us with salty language.

During the first twenty-five years of his service to Ham Rice, Bert and Dorothy would winter with him and his first wife in Palm Beach. Later, they attended the Rices when they were in residence at 901 Fifth,<sup>201</sup> but they always summered on Coggeshall Avenue.

In 1965, the Madam's health began to decline. That spring her jewelry was auctioned off by Park-Bernet Galleries for \$1,342,560, a world record at the time for a sale by a single owner.<sup>202</sup>

One of the Holmwoods' closest friends was William Brown, known as Wiggle, who visited them on Coggeshall with his daughter Eileen nearly every afternoon after he retired.<sup>203</sup>

"The history of what happened in so many of those estates was handed down, generation to generation in story form," Eileen told me in an interview for this book. "Almost every estate had a caretaker who lived with his family on the property: like John Almeida who took care of The Ledges for Howard Cushing or Dan Mello whose father and his before him, took care of Harbor Court, John Nicholas Brown's estate which is now The New York Yacht Club."

On my own family's visits to Coggeshall, the Holmwoods would tell those stories of other summer colonists; always protecting the privacy of The Rices. Between what we heard from them at their "summer place" and at the annual Christmas celebrations at our house, we got an inside view of what went on behind those massive iron gates. Most of the tales were amusing, but one, which was downright bizarre, will be chronicled in the Chapters ahead.

All of it prepared me well for my first real paying job at one of America's oldest private men's clubs—a sanctuary that predated The Union League in Philadelphia and The Oglethorpe Club in Savannah: the venerable Newport Reading Room.<sup>204</sup>

## Murdered “On the night before the rest of his life.”



**HOMICIDE AT ROUGH POINT** chronicles ex-ABC News correspondent and best-selling author Peter Lance’s investigation into one of the least known, but infamous unsolved homicides in recent American history: the brutal death of gay interior designer and war hero Eduardo Tirella, outside the gates of Doris Duke’s Newport, R.I. estate in October, 1966.

“**HOMICIDE AT ROUGH POINT** is a page-turning epic for our time. Proof that when a narcissistic billionaire assumes, they can get away with murder, there’s a reporter out there willing and able to expose them.”

— Nicholas Pileggi, author of *Goodfellas* and *Casino*

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— Nicholas Gage: former organized crime correspondent for *The New York Times*

