

## **HENRY HELLYER (1790 - 1832)**

### **THE MYSTERY SOLVED – WHY HE KILLED HIMSELF**

On Saturday, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1790, at the now demolished old church of St Giles in Blendworth, Hampshire, a baby was baptised to John and Betsy Hellyer. The baby was named Henry. He was their third child, quickly followed by five or six more. The children were variously baptised in Blendworth, Portsea and Portchester. Henry came roughly in the middle of this vast family and, like so many 'lost in the shuffle' and a middle child, was inclined to be adventurous (Sulloway, 1997).

His father was a mercer. He raised Henry to be a deeply religious man, literate and accomplished. Henry trained as a surveyor and architect. He applied for a job as surveyor with the Van Diemen's Land Company. The Company was formed in 1825 to exploit the second oldest penal colony in Australia for the production of wool. The island is now known as Tasmania and lies off the south coast of the mainland. It is known for its temperate rain forest and unexplored dense wilderness – the largest in the world.

Henry duly took up his duties, leading teams of men (mostly convicts), with bullocks and horses through much of the north west of the island. He surveyed as he went then later drew up his maps (Rollins, 1988). To conduct the surveys meant hacking through dense temperate rain forest and clambering up and down gorges, one of which (The Fury Gorge) is the deepest in Australia. His surveying was remarkably accurate, a true feat of professionalism.

Henry named the highest point of a ridge St Valentine's Peak as he conquered it on 15<sup>th</sup> February. From the top of the Peak, he dreamed of a landscape like that of his home and neighbouring counties – Hampshire and Surrey – countryside with villages, hedges, walls, fields with animals, fine churches and country houses for the rich.

Sadly, he was wrong about the land. The climate and geography were unsuitable for sheep. Tired and sick from a wound in his groin, he retreated to the company's base at Stanley.

As a senior officer of the company he might have expected to be treated with respect. His papers and those of his boss Edward Curr show that this was not the case. He was subjected to malicious gossip that might have sprung from envy about his appointment, shortly to be taken up, as Government Surveyor. His boss in the Van Diemen's Land Company, whom he had known for years, refused to intervene on Henry's behalf. In despair that his future was ruined, emotionally isolated and far from his family, feeling helpless and hopeless, Henry shot himself on the 2nd September 1832. The headstone to his grave can be seen in the cemetery at the foot of The Nut in Stanley.

Henry Hellyer is seen as a hero in Tasmania. The house he designed for his boss still stands at Highfield looking down at Stanley and across at The Nut.

So why did he kill himself when he was on the verge of a bright future in Tasmania? Fortunately the mystery has been resolved through research into his copious journals and other papers, including letters written by his boss and the record of the inquiry into his death, conducted by his own boss.

A psycholinguistic method (Pennebaker et al., 2006) was used to analyse everything written by Hellyer and all the relevant papers in the collection of the Van Diemen's Land Company (which still exists). This psycholinguistic approach involves examining the kind of vocabulary people use that betrays their emotions and attitudes. It has been rigorously researched and is so valuable (and often uncannily accurate) that it is used by lawyers to ascertain whether people are lying, and by psychologists to determine what people are really feeling behind what they say.

The analysis began with the first papers available – the journal Henry wrote on his journey out to Australia. This showed that he was depressed from the moment he left

England and that his depression mounted throughout his time in Tasmania until the final bloody act when he shot the top of his head, alone and despairing after finishing his suicide note.

His complex and fascination suicide note was particularly revealing. As a religious man he knew his Bible through and through, and *The Book of Common Prayer*. He also showed that he read widely as he quoted from William Wilberforce, Cobbett and Robinson Crusoe. He subtly used quotations to string together an explanation for shooting himself that would only make sense to someone as learned and as religious as he. He pointed the finger at Edward Curr (his boss), but also at people who had been spreading a nasty rumour about him that was sure to ruin his reputation and career. This is explained in full in Gwyneth Daniel's book *Utmost Extrication* (Daniel, 2010).

Why should a spot of rumour mongering bother Hellyer so much? Research into his language showed that he probably suffered, in addition to depression, from an anxiety state – a kind of phobia – that meant he couldn't stand being teased (Platt et al., 2009). What he saw as references by men who shared with him the officers' mess at Stanley to untrue and smutty gossip might just have been barrack-room-style teasing. Indeed, his view of these people was very much in line with the way the victims of bullying see their tormentors. As is typical of institutional bullying, management – the authorities – looked the other way, and the bullies got away with it.

His failure in his pet project of finding land inland for sheep inland in the Hampshire and Surrey Hills was a blow too many. Added to what he felt was bullying, with no support from his boss, must have been an appalling situation to be in. His depression, which had been increasing anyway since he left England, then accelerated rapidly. This showed up well in the analysis, where certain feature of his language made this abundantly clear.

Psycholinguistic analysis of the transcript of the inquiry (quite improperly carried out by his boss Edward Curr, who proved himself later on the mainland to be an untrustworthy man) showed that there was a cover-up with degrees of lying going on. The worst liar was Edward Curr himself, but it looked as if he might have persuaded his senior officers to collude in the smoke screen. Who could blame them? If they didn't go along with him (as they had to later), they might have been in danger of losing their jobs. Besides, Hellyer, a well liked and seen to be truly sane, was dead anyway.

At the inquiry, only convict and free servants appeared to be speaking the truth. One of them, fifty years later, told a newspaper journalist (Daniel, 2010) that there was something fishy going on the night of Hellyer's suicide. Strangely indeed, he said that Edward Curr knew about Henry's death even before someone was sent up in the morning to Highfield (the house Hellyer designed for him) to tell him. How this could be unless Curr was down in the settlement and knew something about Hellyer being locked into his room?

Gwyneth Daniel's analysis puts forward the argument that Edward Curr was seen to be managing the company base badly. There was heavy drinking when the ships brought in the regular deliveries of alcohol, and probably indiscipline. After Hellyer's suicide, a policeman was shortly appointed. Significantly, Curr, in time, was removed from his post.

Finally, from the linguistic analysis, it seems without doubt that Hellyer was heading for suicide one way or the other. His work exhausted him and made him ill. He had no wife or family to relax with. He had no friend close by in Tasmania whom he truly trusted. More, he was let down by the one person he told about his fears and requested support from - Edward Curr. In Gwyneth Daniel's view, had Henry met a similar problem later, being so depressed, he would almost certainly have killed himself anyway. Further, she takes the view this was a typical bullycide. Henry was highly unusual, he did not fit in, he was alone and had the means to end his life. He was in emotional agony, known as 'psychache' (Shneidman, 1988). This heroic took advantage of the opportunity for the final act of courage – to raise a pistol to his forehead and blow the top off his head, thereby fleeing to his Saviour, as he put it in his suicide note.

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