

2011 GAZETTE WRITING CONTEST WINNER

The Third Brother

An Exercise in the Higher Criticismⁱ

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The Lord Peter Wimsey Canon, so ably recorded by Dorothy L. Sayers, contains an interesting anomaly that should be of considerable interest to Wolfeans everywhere.

Peter Death Bredon Wimsey is the second son of the late fifteenth Duke of Denver. His elder brother Gerald is the sitting Duke. Their only other publicly acknowledged sibling is a younger sister, Lady Mary.

In some of Miss Sayers's chronicles, there is a prefatory profile of Wimsey by his maternal uncle Paul Delagardie. Here, Uncle Paul refers in passing to Peter Wimsey's "brothers" — plural. It is of considerable interest that in one of my American editions, the "s" in "brothers" has *visibly* been cut out of the leading.ⁱⁱ This suggests a deliberate attempt on someone's part to mislead the reader and obfuscate the search for truth.

It's fair to assume that Paul himself was not attempting to mislead. Indeed, this assumption is amply supported by the complete openness regarding matters of sex and progeny displayed not only by Paul but also by his admirable sister the Dowager Duchess Honoria, Peter's mother. We may take it, then, that the "Third Man" exists.

So Peter had an unacknowledged second brother. On which side of the blanket was this brother born? Regrettably, we must immediately **conclude that it was the wrong side. Had it been otherwise, Peter's elder brother, the sixteenth Duke, would not have been so notoriously obsessed about the lack of a "backup heir" to the dukedom, should his only son, the reckless Viscount St. George, meet an untimely end.**ⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly, it was not Duchess Honoria who was "outside the blanket" during her confinement. Not only would that have been far out of character, but Her Grace would not have been able to resist telling us. Therefore, Peter's second brother was the bastard son of

Mortimer Gerald Bredon Wimsey, fifteenth Duke of Denver. This parentage is wholly consistent with that Duke's known predilections.^{iv}

Let us return now to Uncle Paul. In the same "biographical note," Paul states that the Duke was "willing enough to turn his *other son* over to me. Indeed, at the age of seventeen, Peter came to me of his own accord."^v (Emphasis supplied.) That is, Lord Peter, born in 1890, had only one brother as late as 1907. We know also that the fifteenth Duke died in a hunting accident in 1911.^{vi}

What do we now know about this Third Brother?

- He was born illegitimately between 1907 and 1912 inclusive.
- The circumstances of his birth — indeed, his very existence — were hushed up and have continued so over the years. It is significant that a New York publisher chose physically to eradicate the written evidence of his Uncle Paul, as late as 1955.
- He was the son of a man of action, not of cerebration.
- He was the son of a man with a definite eye for the female sex, a trait shared by both his half-brothers as well.
- His half-brothers, each in his own way, also exhibited an extraordinary sense of duty: Gerald's to the Denver estate, Peter's to King and country.
- And he was half-brother to, arguably, the greatest amateur detective Britain has ever known.

To the student of the detective art, a name must leap to the mind. Call him "X" (a deliberate obfuscation which this person and his employer often used themselves in their many adventures).

All sources agree that X was born on October 23, but his year of birth is quite mysterious. In chronicles written by him during his working years, X implies^{vii} birth years ranging from 1908 to 1912.^{viii} But in a late work, X *himself* clearly states that he was eighteen in December 1926.^{ix} We may take it that X was born on October 23, 1908.^x

X also deliberately obscures his parentage and place of birth. He does consistently refer to having been born in Ohio, but is most evasive about the place (Zanesville? Chillicothe? "a farm"? He cites them all.) He refers to his mother sometimes as living, sometimes as deceased. His relationship with her is described now as close and affectionate, now as distant, now as hostile and the proximate cause of his leaving home. Most significantly, her identity is closely guarded at all times.

X's treatment of his mother is garrulous compared to that of his father, who is hardly mentioned at all. He is named twice (two different

names), but given X's other evasions and manipulations in this area, we have no reason to believe either. Significantly, though, on one point X is consistent: his father is dead. Indeed, as we now know, the father died when X was a toddler.

X lives and works in New York and is closely connected with the publishing industry. Besides having a well known "in" at a major New York paper, several of his cases have involved him with book publishers, one of which may well have been Harper & Row (see footnotes) with its name disguised.

X followed his half-brother Peter into the fascinating world of detection. Unlike Peter, but like his father and his half-brother Gerald, he is a man of action — perhaps the quintessential man of action. His sense of duty, to his employer and to his country during World War II, is without flaw. His eye for the ladies is legendary, although — at least as far as we know from his writings — he treats the fair sex as a gentleman should. In this he closely resembles his brother Peter, as documented by his Uncle Paul^{xi} and, in fact, throughout the Wimsey Canon.

I give you the Third Man, half-brother to Gerald, Duke of Denver, and Lord Peter Wimsey: Mr. Archie Goodwin of West Thirty-Fifth Street.

The reader may well ask: is this really possible? What can the connection be? How did the Wimsey family keep an eye on Archie Goodwin — as they surely would have, given the fundamental decency of all the Wimseys and Delagardies? Who was the intermediary?

Readers of the Corpus can perhaps guess the last answer at once. When Wolfe needs assistance in Great Britain, he calls upon a trusted and reliable British counterpart, Major E. G. Hitchcock, M.C., O.B.E. (retired). In recent years something of the history of the Wolfe-Hitchcock relationship has been revealed.^{xii} We find that Wolfe and Hitchcock go back to 1917, to World War I in the Balkans. They were not merely long-distance professional colleagues; they were comrades, their friendship tempered in war. When the young Archie Goodwin arrived in New York, surely it was Major Hitchcock who saw to it that Archie landed on his feet in the big city.

But what connection could there possibly be with the Wimsey family? In the same memoir, Major Hitchcock reveals — almost in passing — two vital facts: he was born in 1891 (one year after Lord Peter), and he was graduated from Oxford's Balliol College. Thus, he and Peter were "up" at Balliol at about the same time, with at least a two-year overlap — possibly all three years, as Peter did not "go up" until he was nineteen.^{xiii} Balliol is not a large place; it is inconceivable that Geoffrey Hitchcock and Peter Wimsey were not acquainted. Here is the missing connection:

it was Lord Peter who recruited Hitchcock to keep an eye on the young Archie, via his contacts in the United States — first among them his old friend and fighting companion, Nero Wolfe.

For the skeptical: as we know, Nero Wolfe is an intensely private person. Discounting longtime associates, Wolfe calls only five men (four since the death of Marko Vukčić) in the New York metropolis by their Christian names. He is also a profound skeptic, a very private person of mature judgment who gives his trust only to the few who earn it. Yet we are asked to believe not only that Wolfe almost casually hired this callow, cocky college dropout without references at the age of eighteen, but that he immediately began to call his new and untried assistant “Archie.”^{xiv} The mind boggles. But now that we know Archie was Geoffrey Hitchcock’s protégé, Wolfe’s uncharacteristic behavior is explained.

And finally: Archie calls the investigation of Bess Huddleston’s murder “Cordially Invited to Meet Death.”^{xv} This seems a very odd title, unless Archie is slyly giving us a different message. Wimsey often used his two middle names when traveling *incognito* on Government business.^{xvi} **In August 1941, as America’s entry into the war neared, did the Foreign Office entrust Peter Wimsey with a delicate mission to the United States? Can it be that Huddleston, New York’s “hostess with the most-est,” cordially invited Archie and Wolfe to meet — Death Bredon?**



The Duchess was always of the greatest assistance to his [Sir Peter Wimsey] hobby of criminal investigation, though she never alluded to it, and maintained a polite **fiction of it’s non-existence.**

— Paul Austin Delagardie, “Biographical Note,
Peter Death Bredon Wimsey, D.S.O.”