

The murder behind the stamp

by Christopher L. Murphy

British Columbia's magnificent parliament buildings in the city of Victoria overlook a picturesque harbor and have become a major tourist attraction in the region. A Canadian postage stamp issued in June 1935 (Scott 226) shows the stately buildings framed in an ornate and orderly border characteristic of that period of time.

The scene behind the scene in the tranquil setting, however, tells a far different story from that which the stamp portrays. The architect of the famous buildings, and also of the Empress Hotel shown on Scott 1467 (a 1993 stamp), was Francis Mawson Rattenbury. A brilliant and talented architect, Rattenbury had an eye for beauty, as evidenced by both his work and his beautiful bride, Alma.

On the morning of March 24, 1935, just two months prior to release of the parliament stamp, Francis Rattenbury, age 68, was brutally attacked at his villa in Bournemouth, England, and died a few days later. The cause of his death was attributed to several vicious blows to the head with a wooden mallet. Subsequent investigations revealed a possible conspiracy involving Alma Rattenbury, the architect's beautiful wife, age 39, and the family chauffeur, George Stoner, Alma's 18-year-old lover. Also revealed was the apparent use of cocaine and heroin by Alma and George.

One of Britain's most famous murder trials resulted when Alma Rattenbury and George Stoner were arrested on suspicion of murder. The question, however, which is still unanswered, is: Who struck the fatal blows, Alma or George?

Curiously, while under the influence of morphine, which was administered by her doctor, Alma apparently admitted to the crime in statements to a police investigator at the scene. She stated that her husband, in one of his suicidal moods, dared her to hit him with a mallet. Francis, it appears, taunted his wife with the words, "You have not got guts enough to do it." Alma, thereupon, hit him several times and hid the mallet. After the questioning, Alma is alleged to have asked the inspector, "He is not dead is he? Are you the coroner?" But then, after coming to her senses, she told the inspector, "My lover did it," and tried to bribe him with 10 pounds to keep silent.

This evidence, however, was not used in the trial because it was reasoned that Alma was not capable of a proper statement at the time, due to the morphine injection. As the trial progressed, Alma implied that Stoner was responsible for the crime. The implications, coupled with Alma's situation as a respectable woman with children, resulted in the blame for the crime being fully directed to Stoner, a single, uneducated drug addict.

With no funds for a proper defense, Stoner was quickly convicted of the murder.

On May 31, 1935, Stoner was sentenced to death by hanging and sent to prison to await execution.

Four days later, apparently distraught over her lost love, Alma committed suicide. She stabbed herself several times with a dagger after wading into the Avon River. This act

was witnessed by a local dairy worker who tried in vain to save the troubled woman.

In an ironic and amazing twist of fate, now that Alma was dead, public sympathy was directed to Stoner, with nearly 350,000 signatures pleading for his reprieve. Consequently, he escaped the gallows on the basis of insanity occasioned by the influence of cocaine. The death penalty was thereupon commuted to penal servitude for life. A model prisoner, Stoner served only seven years of his sentence. After release in 1942, he joined the armed forces and took part in the Normandy landing. He was reported as still being alive in the year 1988.

George Stoner alone knows what really happened on that fateful day in March 1935. And, it does not appear he plans to enlighten the rest of the world. However, we can be certain that a part of more than five million postage stamps and many stately stone buildings will echo his name for generations to come in connection with his grim secret. ☒



A proud Francis Rattenbury toasts his lovely wife, Alma, who was 29 years his junior.



Francis Mawson Rattenbury in the early 1920s. This photograph shows how the architect appeared when he first met Alma. Alma's pet name for Francis was "Rats."



Canada Scott 226 pictures British Columbia's parliament buildings, designed by Francis M. Rattenbury.



The Empress Hotel, shown on this 1993 stamp, also was designed by Rattenbury, who was later murdered.



The irresistible Alma Clark had little trouble stealing the heart of Francis Mawson Rattenbury, who became her third husband.



George Stoner, Alma's lover, with whom rests one of British Columbia's darkest secrets.



The Rattenburys relaxing together at seaside.

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Aside: Francis Rattenbury received the EA Degree only, Mount Herman Lodge No. 7, Vancouver, B.C.

Reference: *Scott Stamp Monthly* magazine, July 1995, pages 12 and 13

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