

# Imagination and Prison

by

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When I discovered the story of Constance Kent in 1978, I immediately thought what a novel it would make. I was writing my first novel at the time and knew the case would demand a very different treatment. Twelve years and three books later, I felt ready to tackle the project. The things that fascinated me then still fascinate me now. Constance Kent was a profoundly enigmatic individual. She confessed to a crime she almost certainly did not commit long after such confession would benefit anyone. She served a prison sentence of twenty years and lived another sixty after that. Her second life occurred in a new country under a new name, but she remained faithful to her “confession” until the end.

It is not Constance alone, however, that drew me to this story. The historical facts contain features that would stretch credibility in fiction: the comet that appeared on the night of the crime, the drowned sailor who comes back to life, the coincidences straight out of melodrama, the Dickensian names of the minor players, the allegorical place names. These features find a peculiar strength inside a set of circumstances which has both fairy-tale and tragic structure. King Lear, Hansel and Gretel, and The Wild Swans take turns. And, as if this were not enough, all the elements of a great romantic novel are there: church intrigue, the corrupt law, incompetent police, and the insensitive “expert.” The actual Road Murder, as it was called, foretold the classical whodunnit. Twelve people in a country house, one of whom is killed, the rest claiming to know nothing. If sensation fiction did not absolutely begin here (although the case largely inspired Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*), the genre of “true crime” did. Joseph Stapleton, a friend of the Kent family, published his account in 1861. Philosophical and scientific, it makes curious reading now. It is the first book of its kind. I will be coming back to Stapleton’s book, the patriarchal offensiveness of which was a major spur to my own re-investigation of the case which, by any standard, merits literary consideration.

Constance Kent was once described as “the most famous woman in England.” Madame Tussaud’s exhibited her effigy, and crowds gathered to catch a glimpse of her. She caused riots in the streets of Brighton and an upheaval in the Anglican Church. Today few people recognize her name. Many who do, know her only as a self-confessed murderess.

She was born in 1844 into a seemingly well-to-do English family. Her father, Samuel Savill Kent, was Inspector of Factories for Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire. About Mary Ann Kent, her mother, little is known, except that she was unhappy. She bore her husband eight children before Constance, but only three survived infancy. For reasons of health Samuel Kent moved his family from London to Sidmouth, where Constance spent her first four years.

Perhaps because the four babies preceding Constance had all died, a new nursemaid was hired to care for her. Mary Pratt was a handsome young woman and evidently capable, for her charge thrived. The Kents had

another child the following year, William, Constance's favorite sibling. Soon after his birth rumors began to circulate about the nursemaid and Mr. Kent. Anxious to protect his reputation in a civil post that demanded a high moral profile, Kent removed the family to Walton-in-Gordano, near Bristol. There Mrs. Kent lived in a separate wing from her husband. This house was grander than their previous one, and therefore Kent retrenched upon household expenses while maintaining a show of luxury. His wife often did not have a fire. His oldest son, Edward, was educated for the merchant marine rather than the navy. They stayed there four years before Kent took a lease on another opulent residence, far from any railway terminus, in Wiltshire. Baynton House in the hamlet of East Coulston is so deeply hidden in the folds of its valley that one feels one has entered another realm. A few weeks after the family's arrival, Mrs. Kent suddenly died, of "convulsions." No one but her husband was at home that day. When the family's troubles later became national business, much would be made of Mrs. Kent's "insanity," the purported reason for her seclusion. Samuel Kent was the sole source of this diagnosis, which was dignified in his friend Stapleton's book. (Stapleton never knew the first Mrs. Kent, for his acquaintance with the family dates from their removal to Road.)

Mary Kent was buried in the little churchyard beyond the ornamental lake and, after a suitable interval, Kent married Mary Pratt. Constance was then eight years old. The fondness Pratt had once shown toward Constance and William would soon shift entirely to her own children.

In 1854, the English entered the Crimean War. All Europe was talking of Florence Nightingale. Constance was among those smitten with her example. She conceived the ambition which she would one day realize, to become a nurse. Edward, Constance's older brother, sailed to the Bosphorus in the merchant marine. There he narrowly survived death by drowning. Indeed, his death was reported to the family. They were stepping into the carriage that would take them to Bath to buy mourning when the postman delivered a letter from Edward, announcing that he was still alive.

At home relations between parents and children deteriorated. Mary Pratt Kent used her two elder stepdaughters, Mary Ann and Elizabeth, as drudges. Constance had once been very fond of Mary Pratt Kent and had even mocked her own mother when her nurse encouraged her to do so. But after her mother died, Constance seems to have begun to understand certain mysteries. She became insubordinate and unmanageable. Pain in her legs made walking difficult. She was taken to a specialist who prescribed the wearing of special laced stockings. She was often punished, usually by being locked up. Her brother William was her only friend.

So affairs stood when in 1856 Mr. Kent once more went house-hunting. This time he settled on the proud, boldly exposed mansion called Road Hill House, just outside the village of Road in Wiltshire. (The house was actually over the county border, in Somerset, which technicality would later lead to confusion and acrimony among the police.) Here Mr. Kent suffered a public scandal. Constance and William ran away from home. Constance cut her hair short, threw it down the hole in the garden outhouse, and dressed herself in William's clothes. All these acts were later held against her. The children succeeded in reaching Bath, from which they intended to make for Bristol. There they were to get passage as sailor boys on a ship bound for the West Indies, where Edward was stationed. But when they asked for a room at the Greyhound Hotel, they aroused suspicion and were taken into custody by the police.

The newspapers seized on this little episode, which caught the imagination of Dickens, who later used it in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Since Kent's Inspectorship was largely concerned with seeing that children were not exploited in the textile mills, the mistreatment of his own children was an explosive issue. At age 55 he hoped to win a place on the Factory Board and could not afford to risk another such incident. Both Constance

and William were sent away to school. Shortly thereafter Edward died of yellow fever in Havana. And then little Savill Kent was born.

In late June 1860 both Constance and William were home from school on holiday. Constance had brought Savill a bracelet and spent the afternoon playing with him in the garden. Mrs. Kent was in the last month of her fourth successful pregnancy. Elizabeth Gough, the nursemaid, looked after the two-year-old Mary Amelia and the baby, Eveline.

The next morning Savill was missing from his crib in the nursery. Mr. Kent rode off to summon the police while the search continued. Late that morning two workmen thought to look in the garden privy. They fished up a blanket and saw the body, horribly mutilated. Under it was a female undergarment called a "breast-flannel."

When the police arrived, a rivalry commenced as to who should direct the investigation. A genuine police force had only recently come to the countryside, and so it is no wonder that the officers found the circumstances at Road Hill House beyond their training to untangle. Superintendent Foley, who would be immortalized by Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* as Superintendent Seagrave, stood so much in awe of the Kent family that he allowed Mr. Kent to dictate the course of the investigation. A bloody smear on a door and a blood-stained shift were discovered only to vanish. Foley was so embarrassed that when, some days later, a detective from Scotland Yard arrived to assist, all knowledge of the lost evidence was kept from him. Strangers, villagers, and journalists continued to swarm around Road Hill House. Indeed the crowd had shown such hostility that the Kents didn't dare bury Savill at Road. Early one morning Mr. Kent and William drove to East Coulston, where Savill was interred in the same grave as the first Mrs. Kent. Meanwhile, the detective, Inspector Whicher (Sergeant Cuff of *The Moonstone*), ascertained that a nightgown of Constance's was missing.

Although the investigation had initially concentrated on Elizabeth Gough and her "unknown lover," Whicher turned it upon Constance. Public sentiment had been running high against Kent, who was strongly suspected, and Gough; the implication of Constance outraged many. When the government refused to comply with the widespread call for another inquest, one not packed with Mr. Kent's friends, a retired barrister named Saunders set up an "informal court of inquiry" in Road. Although it only simulated official proceedings, Saunders turned up important testimony. By this time the case and its offshoots had taken on a semi-legendary status. Kent was rumored to be the love-child of a duke; Constance's resemblance to Queen Victoria was noted. When Constance was acquitted for lack of evidence, the investigation concluded as the inquest had, that Savill had been "murdered by persons unknown."

During these grueling proceedings Constance's entire life had been dredged up, picked over and analyzed, so she was sent into France, where she could complete her education in relative anonymity. The picturesque medieval town of Dinan, up the Rance estuary from St. Malo, was home to an expatriate English community. Under the thin alias of Emilie Kent she was received into the Convent de la Sagesse as a paying pupil.

It was 1861. The Convent was an institution of integrity and elegance whose handsome stone buildings house a hospital today. Chateaubriand's sister, herself a writer, had lived there most of her life, dying only the year before at the age of 100. The Filles de la Sagesse kept a school for poor children, an orphanage and an infirmary. Constance seems to have been strengthened in her professional ambitions by the nuns' example, for when she returned to England in 1863, it was to enter St. Mary's Convent in Brighton as probationer and nurse trainee.

St. Mary's was the special project of the Rev. Arthur D. Wagner, an important member of the Oxford Movement. This movement aimed to bring Anglican practices closer to Rome. Wagner knew who Emilie Kent really was and promised to keep her identity secret. However, the confessional was one of Wagner's enthusiasms. No one knows exactly what transpired between them, but in April 1865 she traveled to London in his company to hand in a written confession to the Road Murder at the office of Sir George Grey, Home Secretary.

Her statement, which was phrased in an austere and legalistic manner, was met with frank disbelief, but she persisted and was taken into custody. Determined to plead guilty and decline counsel, she relented when informed that this would probably lead to a jury trial. When the possibility of using the insanity defense, a relatively new tactic, was presented to her, she refused absolutely, and when examined by Charles Bucknill, the leading alienist of the day, was deemed sane. Public disbelief continued; she responded with a detailed description of how she had conceived and carried out her crime. A tissue of fictions, contradicting forensic evidence and important testimony, it throws into still deeper shadow what happened that June night.

She was remanded to the Assizes in Salisbury. When the judge asked her how she pled, she could at first not answer, and when he pronounced the sentence of death upon her, he, and everyone else in the court, wept.

She was taken to Millbank Prison in London. She received news there that the Queen had commuted her sentence to penal servitude for life.

Over the next twenty years she inhabited four more prisons: Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight, Brixton, Woking and Fulham. She worked as laundress, cleaner, needlewoman, cook, and nurse in the prison hospitals. She also executed some church mosaics as a penance. Of these, the finest still to be seen (and entirely her own work) is the sanctuary floor of St. Swithin's Parish Church in East Grinstead. She made a smaller mosaic closely resembling the St. Swithin's design for the Bishop's Palace in Chichester, but the floor it embellished was built over and carpeted long ago; no one knows if the mosaic still lies underneath. The mosaics at St. Peter's in the Grove, Portland are less complex but more extensive. They cover not only the sanctuary floor but the hallways leading into the nave. The last mosaic she worked on was the crypt floor of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Since this was a group endeavor it is impossible to know which sections are hers. The entire floor from Nelson's tomb eastwards was made by female convicts from Woking.

After many petitions, she was released in 1885. Her brother William fetched her to Australia under a new name, Ruth Emilie Kaye. William and his wife were living in Tasmania, and she stayed with them. She moved with them to Melbourne, and later to Queensland. But when, during the typhoid epidemic of 1890, the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne issued a call for help, she volunteered. Afterwards she entered the hospital's new nursing school. At the age of 46, she began to study under women who had been trained by Florence Nightingale herself.

Emilie Kaye, as she was now known, must have demonstrated both ability and experience, for her first job, on the other side of the continent, at Perth, was as matron in a private hospital. A year later she traveled to Sydney to become a Sister at the Coast Hospital (now Prince Henry Hospital). She was later promoted to matron in charge of the Lazaret, the annex devoted to the treatment of lepers. It was around this time that she became interested in Henry George and his socialist vision. When the Free Trade and Land Values League was founded in 1904, she was the largest contributor, to the tune of five pounds.

In 1898, Miss Kaye became matron of the Paramatta Industrial School for Girls, an institution for troubled adolescents, where she stayed eleven years. She left to spend a year working at a tuberculosis sanatorium in Mittagong. And then in 1910, at the age of 66, she opened her own business. She bought a house in Maitland and opened an old age home for nurses. It served a genuine need. Nurses were badly paid, and few had any real savings. This enterprise did not keep her from working in military hospitals during the First World War.

In 1928 John Rhode published *The Case of Constance Kent*. Miss Kaye, who never needed glasses and was remembered as a constant reader, evidently came across a copy. A long anonymous letter, postmarked from Sydney, arrived at the office of Rhode's publishers. The author took issue with some of Rhode's interpretations and described the goings-on in the Kent home and Constance's state of mind. Rhode himself believed that the Sydney Document had been written by Constance, but the opportunity of comparing handwriting never materialized, as the letter was destroyed in the blitz. Fortunately a typed copy was found in Rhode's safe after his death.

Her hundredth birthday was a great event. She received messages from the king and queen and the Governor-General, Lord Gowrie. The Archbishop of Sydney called and brought flowers. Gifts and floral tributes arrived from politicians and institutions. Constance's niece brought her little son to the party. Everyone drank champagne, including herself.

Four months later she died.

The book that I eventually wrote about the case, *BLUE FIRE*, is not fiction\*. It took thirteen years: the first four were spent writing the novel I had originally envisioned. But a day came when I realized I was using the figure of Constance to explore myself, and that seemed unacceptable. I became convinced that fictionalizing this material was unethical. After all, Constance had already fictionalized it. I spent a year reading in an effort to understand the difference between fiction and history, a distinction not easily located in practice. My primary goal clarified: to understand why a person would do what she did, and how a society could accept it. Since she left no explanation, I decided to try to capture her logic in the grammar of silence. I have attempted to catch Constance in the spaces between speech, her own and others'.

Because so much historical fiction plays irresponsibly with the past, and because so much history and biography leaves its sources unacknowledged, I wish to be as transparent as possible about my method in *BLUE FIRE*. In the course of my research I traveled to England and France to visit the houses where Constance had lived, including Road Hill House, and the places where she had been imprisoned and the churches where her work was to be seen. As I studied the mosaics Constance Kent had made, a mosaic method of composition came to seem apposite. The specific way of combining texts that could be described as mosaic was inspired by my reading of Paul Metcalf, who created texts in poetic non-fiction by a careful splicing of significant passages drawn from other writers. So I set the issue of genre aside and began to collect such shining passages. Many lay in primary sources, but I also mined the literature of the moment and books Constance Kent had read, according to the Sydney Document. If I did not know how I wanted to order this welter, I knew very well how I did not want to order it. To set out what I already understood and believed about the case was too tedious to face. I had to find a way to write out of my knowledge so that I would discover as I proceeded. Only in this way could the task of writing excuse itself.

I began by returning to the text I had most fiercely resisted in the course of my reading, Joseph Stapleton's *The Great Crime of 1860*. I had started it again and again, but his rhetoric, marked by the easy confidence of

an educated man confirmed in his bias, so repelled me that I found it impossible to read in the ordinary way. So, to "trick" myself into finishing it, I decided to adapt a method I had encountered in my earlier work with cut-ups\*\*. I had become convinced that every text contains its own critique, like the statue hidden in a block of marble. To find the text's critique, one only had to liberate it. I borrowed John Cage's "mesostic" method by selecting one word from each line of Stapleton's book, proceeding line by line but never choosing two words that followed consecutively. In the epigraph and first paragraph of Stapleton's introduction, I have italicized the words I selected:

*"Deeds* are done on earth  
Which have their punishment *ere* the earth closes  
Upon the *perpetrators*. Be it the working  
Of the remorse-stained fancy, or the *vision*,  
Distinct and real, of unearthly *being*,  
All ages witness that beside *the* couch  
Of the fell homicide oft stalks the *ghost*  
Of him he slew, and shows his shadowy *wound*.

"This book records the history of *one* of the most appalling *domestic* tragedies enacted in modern times. On the night following the 29th *June*, 1860, a murder was committed in a secluded country *village*, which has excited universal interest and horror by its unparalleled atrocity; and which *by* its mystery stands out in bold and startling *prominence* from the ranks of *common* crime."

So that the beginning of my derived text looks like this:

Deeds ere perpetrators  
vision being the ghost wound

One domestic June village  
by prominence common

In this way I finally worked through and read Stapleton's book. The next step was to strip my derived text of lines and passages that didn't work. This involved deleting derived passages that were either repetitious (because the base text was itself repetitious) or so clotted with meaning that the reader, apprehending the story chronologically, could not be expected to grasp it so early on. In removing such passages I made the decision to subordinate obedience to a formal procedure to the aesthetic satisfaction of the reader. The following passage is a derived text before excisions. I have italicized the lines that I would later excise.

perpetration of presence into records  
*that only such impertinence influences*  
*their content growing to breach those responsible*  
strides of blood among questions  
those consequences of narrative  
no skill this temple renovation  
science in dancing language

So that the derived text finally reads:

strides of blood among questions  
 those consequences of narrative  
 no skill this temple renovation  
 science in dancing language

While working on the derived text I was also selecting and recording passages from my reading, which consisted of documents from and about the case, books Constance was known to have read, and relevant contemporary literature. When I typed up these passages, the number of lines each contained became "permanent." I had determined that this number would constitute a variable in the book's over-all prosody. I settled that facing pages would answer each other; the text derived from Stapleton would be read down the left-hand page, the excerpted passages would float on the right, juxtaposed to the sections of derived text that they commented on. After testing a few numerically based relationships between one side and the other, I arrived at the following workable algorithm: the number of words in a section on the left hand side would be paralleled by a passage with the same number of lines on the right. So a section derived from Stapleton that was fifteen words long would appear opposite a prose excerpt of fifteen lines. The prose passage would be selected for its illumination of the derived section. After that I could entrust to the form what content would emerge; the number of value judgments I had to make became acceptable. Here is a derived text passage with its facing page excerpt.

<p>come hurried traces                  guide darkness out</p>	<p>In some of my former novels, the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances upon character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made, here, is to trace the influence of character upon circumstances. The conduct pursued, under a sudden emergency, by a young girl, supplies the foundation upon which I have built this book.</p> <p>--Wilkie Collins, Preface to the first edition of <i>The Moonstone</i>, 1868</p>
<p>English shakes with emphasis                  sudden Lord</p>	<p>I went &amp; sate in the cave of the Eumenides alone, &amp; thought how they pursued me-- &amp; how would it end? A wretched (sic) that I am. Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? What does it signify to me now whether I see this or do that or not? I never can be sure of seeing it. I may see nothing but my own self practicing an attitude.</p> <p>--Florence Nightingale, Diary, June 4-9, 1850</p>

<p>London details crime for a lady's usual horror</p>	<p>C. did not take her punishments very seriously, she generally managed to get some amusement out of them. Once after being particularly provocative &amp; passionate, the governess put her down in a dark wine cellar, she fell on a heap of straw &amp; fancied herself in the dungeon of a great castle, a prisoner taken in battle fighting for Bonnie Prince Charlie &amp; to be taken to the block next morning, when the governess unlocked the door and told her to come up she was looking rather pleased over her fancies.</p> <p>-- "The Sydney Document" (attributed to Constance Kent/ Ruth Emilie Kaye), 1928</p>
<p>story villages satisfy repeated subject</p>	<p>I like to think how Eumenides' laws work out all things for good &amp; I would not be such a fool as to pray that one little (sic) of hell should be remitted, one consequence altered either of others mistakes or of our own.</p> <p>--Florence Nightingale, Letters, May 31, 1850</p>
<p>discuss moral mystery is it in beyond or fail every failure new</p>	<p>The governess asked what she was smiling about Oh she said only the funny rats. What rats said the governess, she did not know there were any there. They do not hurt said C; only dance &amp; play about after that to her disappointment she was shut in a beer cellar a light room but with a window too high to look out of, but she managed to pull the spigot out of a cask of beer, after that she was locked up in one of 2 spare rooms at the end of a vestibule &amp; shut off by double doors, she liked the big room for it had a large 4 poster bed she could climb about, but the little room was dreary, the rooms had a legend attached to them, were said to be haunted &amp; on a certain date a blue fire burned in the fire place</p> <p>--"The Sydney Document"</p>

In this way I composed a text that could be read both down and across the sequences and juxtapositions, leaving space for the reader to create her own meaning. The reader would confront the pieces as "evidence" and interpret it herself.

April 21, 2009 Brooklyn, New York

\* Published by Proteotypes, Brooklyn, 2009.

\*\* Published in *Conjunctions*, *Fantastic Metropolis*, *English Studies Forum* and *The Gertrude Stein Awards for Innovative Poetry 1994-5*.