

## Chapter 12

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**'PM's apology to codebreaker Alan Turing: we were inhumane'**. So read a 2009 headline in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper.<sup>1</sup> The article stated: 'Gordon Brown issued an unequivocal apology last night on behalf of the government to Alan Turing, the second world war codebreaker who took his own life 55 years ago after being sentenced to chemical castration for being gay'. In this long-awaited apology the British Prime Minister said: 'While Turing was dealt with under the law of the time, and we can't put the clock back, his treatment was of course utterly unfair, and I am pleased to have the chance to say how deeply sorry I and we all are for what happened to him.'<sup>2</sup> The Prime Minister continued: 'In 1952, he was convicted of "gross indecency"—in effect, tried for being gay. His sentence—and he was faced with the miserable choice of this or prison—was chemical castration by a series of injections of female hormones. He took his own life just two years later.'

So it was official. Turing, persecuted by the authorities, had killed himself. Nowadays nearly everyone has heard that Turing committed suicide by biting into an apple dipped in cyanide. Is any of this true, though? The story that a scientist working on an electronic brain had committed suicide by eating a cyanide-laced apple appeared in the newspapers shortly after Turing died.<sup>3</sup> It is true that an apple was found in his bedroom near his body, but the police never tested it for cyanide. The love of a good story filled in the rest. In fact, the presence of a half-eaten apple on Turing's bedside table offers no clue about how he died. It was his long-standing habit to eat a few bites of an apple last thing at night.<sup>4</sup>

Why was the Prime Minister confident that Turing took his own life? It is true that the verdict recorded at Turing's inquest was that he committed suicide by taking poison while the

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Davies writing in *The Guardian*, 10 September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The apology appeared on the official website of the British Prime Minister [www.number10.gov.uk](http://www.number10.gov.uk). Two sheets signed by Gordon Brown and headed 'Remarks of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, 10 September 2009' are now part of the Turing exhibition at Bletchley Park National Museum.

<sup>3</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 11 June 1954; *Alderley and Wilmslow Advertiser*, 18 June 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 117.

balance of his mind was disturbed.<sup>5</sup> However, the coroner who conducted the inquest appeared biased, and failed to carry out a thorough investigation. A reporter covering the inquest quoted the coroner, J. A. K. Ferns, as saying: 'I am forced to the conclusion that this was a deliberate act. In a man of his type, one never knows what his mental processes are going to do next'.<sup>6</sup>

Would a more probing inquest have returned the same verdict? Quite possibly not. An open verdict, indicating uncertainty, would have been more appropriate. Let's re-open the case and review the surviving evidence. The official records of the inquest were destroyed by the coroner's office—inquest papers are routinely destroyed after 15 years—but fortunately Turing's mother Sara retained a copy of the various statements made before the coroner, and also of the pathologist's report. These documents provide us with the following data.

Turing was found dead in his bed at Hollymeade late on the afternoon of Tuesday June 8, 1954. His housekeeper Eliza Clayton arrived at about 5 p.m. to prepare his dinner. She had been away for a few days over the Whitsun holiday. Mrs Clayton let herself in at the back door as usual but there was no sign of Turing. The light was on in his bedroom. She knocked on the bedroom door and when there was no reply she opened it. 'I saw Mr. Turing lying in bed', she said.<sup>7</sup> 'He was on his back and appeared to be dead. I touched his hand which was cold.'

Eliza Clayton rushed out of Hollymeade to a neighbour's house and telephoned the police.<sup>8</sup> She returned to Turing's bedroom with Police Sergeant Cottrell, who examined the body. Turing was dressed in his pyjamas and had put his wristwatch on his bedside table.<sup>9</sup> Also on the bedside table was half an apple from which several bites had been taken. There was white foamy liquid around his mouth and a telltale smell of bitter almonds. Turing was lying on the bed 'in practically a normal position', Cottrell said. The bedclothes were pulled

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<sup>5</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 117. The coroner's verdict was also reported in *The Times*, 12 June 1954.

<sup>6</sup> Ferns quoted in *The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, 11 June 1954.

<sup>7</sup> Statement of Eliza Clayton before the Coroner (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference K 6).

<sup>8</sup> Sara Turing 'Comments by friends on the manner of Alan Turing's death', typescript, no date (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference A 11).

<sup>9</sup> Statement of Police Sergeant Leonard Cottrell before the Coroner (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference K 6).

up to his neck.<sup>10</sup> Yet cyanide poisoning is not a peaceful death, and the symptoms usually include vomiting and convulsions.

There is also a puzzle about Turing's shoes. These had been placed outside the bedroom door. Putting footwear outside the bedroom door at night was a common enough practice among the privileged classes—if servants were present they would apply polish early in the morning. The only thing is, it wasn't something Turing did. Mrs Clayton found the shoes outside his bedroom door. 'This was unusual', she commented. Did someone tidy up after Turing died, putting his shoes outside the door, pulling the bedclothes up to his chin, perhaps even laying him on his bed?

Turing had eaten a meal of mutton chops in the evening and then died sometime on the Monday night, it seemed.<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that he died from cyanide poisoning; the police pathologist's report is clear.<sup>12</sup> The crucial question, though, is how cyanide got into his body. The situation is complicated by the fact that the police found a large quantity of cyanide in a small lab adjoining his bedroom.<sup>13</sup> Turing called the lab 'the nightmare room'.<sup>14</sup> In it the police saw a pan full of bubbling liquid. The pan contained electrodes that were wired, via a transformer, to the light fitting in the centre of the ceiling. Turing was fond of messing about with electrolysis, and was pleased by his success at gold-plating a spoon (another spoon, not yet plated, was found in the room).<sup>15</sup> Cyanide was part of the process. A one-pound glass jam-jar full of cyanide solution was found on a table near the electrolytic apparatus. A bottle of cyanide crystals was discovered in the top drawer of Turing's chest of drawers.

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<sup>10</sup> Statement of Eliza Clayton.

<sup>11</sup> Turing spoke to a neighbour while out strolling on the Monday, according to a note written by Sara Turing at the top of the post mortem examination report (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference K 6). The Tuesday paper was still in the letterbox at the front door but the Monday paper was found in the front room downstairs (Statement of Police Sergeant Leonard Cottrell).

<sup>12</sup> C. A. K. Bird 'Post Mortem Examination Report', 8 June 1954 (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference K 6).

<sup>13</sup> Statement of Police Sergeant Leonard Cottrell; Statement of C. A. K. Bird before the Coroner (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference K 6).

<sup>14</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 115.

Cyanide-assisted electrolysis may seem a curious hobby, not to mention a hazardous one, but Turing liked making things for himself. When his chess set was stolen at Bletchley Park he had carefully made new pieces out of clay, firing them in a tin over his open hearth.<sup>16</sup> A week before Turing's death Robin Gandy stayed at Hollymeade. They played Turing's 'desert island game' of trying to produce as wide a range of chemicals as possible by electrolysis, starting from common household substances.<sup>17</sup> Even as a child Turing had been fascinated by this idea, writing from Hazelhurst School about his chemistry experiments: 'I always seem to want to make things from the thing that is commonest in nature and with the least waste of energy', he said.<sup>18</sup> His 'desert island' electrolysis experiments were analogous to what is called the axiomatic method in mathematics, where as much mathematics as possible is made to flower from a minimal collection of self-evident truths, a brief list of mathematical commonplaces pared down as severely as possible.

So how did Turing die? The only three possibilities are suicide, accidental death, and murder by person or persons unknown. Let's review these possibilities in turn. The evidence for suicide is very slim. In the past Turing had talked about committing suicide to his close friend Nick Furbank, but then many people do.<sup>19</sup> It appears that no evidence whatsoever was presented at the inquest to indicate that he intended to take his own life. The modern guideline is that a verdict of suicide shall not be recorded unless there is clear evidence placing it beyond any reasonable doubt that the person did intend to take his or her own life.<sup>20</sup> Nor it seems was any evidence presented at the inquest to suggest that the balance of Turing's mind was disturbed. His mental state appears in fact to have been unremarkable. Turing and Gandy passed an enjoyable weekend—Mrs Clayton said that 'they seemed to have a really good time'.<sup>21</sup> 'When I stayed with him the week-end before Whitsun', Gandy said, 'he seemed,

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<sup>16</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Turing to his parents, 15 March 1925.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Furbank to Gandy, 13 June 1954 (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference A 5).

<sup>20</sup> *The Inquest Handbook* (London: INQUEST, 2011), Section 4.3.

<sup>21</sup> Sara Turing 'Comments by friends on the manner of Alan Turing's death'.

if anything, happier than usual'.<sup>22</sup> His neighbour Mrs Webb also found him perfectly cheerful. On Thursday June 3, just four days before his death, he threw an impromptu party for her and her little boy Rob, making them tea and toast. 'It was such a jolly party', she said.<sup>23</sup>

Peter Hilton surprised me one day. We had gone out to the supermarket to buy a jar of his favourite New Zealand plum chutney. In 1954 Peter had been working in Max Newman's mathematics department at Manchester. Standing in the supermarket with his back to the frozen vegetables, he suddenly told me apropos of nothing that Turing had left a note in his university office before going home that last time for the Whitsun weekend. The note contained Turing's instructions to himself about what he was going to do the following week. If he killed himself, it was certainly not premeditated. Nick Furbank, knowing Turing as he did, wrote in a letter to Gandy a few days after the death that he believed Turing would not have killed himself 'just on impulse'.<sup>24</sup>

Turing's friends were baffled by his death. He had endured his trial and the subsequent hormone 'therapy' with what Hilton described as amused fortitude. In any case, the doses of hormone had ended well over a year before. Turing's career was at one of its highest points and his research into growth was going very well, with the prospect of epoch-making results just around the corner. Don Bayley, Turing's good friend from the Delilah days, wrote to Gandy saying 'It's a complete mystery to me because he did enjoy life so much'.<sup>25</sup>

His mother Sara never believed he had killed himself. She wrote, 'He was at the apex of his mental powers, with growing fame ... By any ordinary standards he had everything to live for'.<sup>26</sup> Sara thought he must have taken the cyanide accidentally. Turing was a klutz in the laboratory. Through sheer carelessness he got high voltage shocks, and he sometimes attempted to identify chemicals by sticking his fingertips into them and tasting.<sup>27</sup> Tolerating a

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Gandy to Sara Turing, quoted in Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 118.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from N. Webb to Sara Turing, 13 June 1954 (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference A 17).

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Furbank to Gandy, 13 June 1954.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Bayley to Gandy, 14 June 1954 (in the Turing Papers, King's College Library, catalogue reference A 5).

<sup>26</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> Sara Turing 'Comments by friends on the manner of Alan Turing's death'.

jar of cyanide crystals rolling about in his chest of drawers was just more of the same. Picturing someone accidentally swallowing a lethal dose of cyanide, even someone of Turing's monumentally careless habits, might seem to stretch the imagination a little too far. However, Don Bayley said that Turing was quite capable of putting his apple down in a pool of cyanide without noticing.<sup>28</sup>

Sara suspected that Turing might have inhaled cyanide gas from the pan of bubbling liquid in his home lab.<sup>29</sup> This is indeed a possibility. Illicit drug 'cooks' working in small, confined drug laboratories can die from accidental exposure to cyanide gas emitted by their chemical stews.<sup>30</sup> Turing's 'nightmare room' was a small area left over when Hollymeade's upstairs bathroom was installed, so cramped as to be useless for domestic purposes.<sup>31</sup> Both Cottrell and the police pathologist noticed a 'strong smell' of cyanide in the nightmare room.<sup>32</sup> There is a roughly 50/50 chance that Turing was genetically unable to detect the odour of cyanide.<sup>33</sup> Following inhalation of a relatively low concentration of cyanide, the onset of symptoms is not usually immediate. Turing might possibly have got into bed normally, donning his pyjamas and taking off his watch before the onrush of nausea and breathlessness. The post mortem report appears to indicate that the concentration of cyanide in Turing's liver was not as high as in other organs, and this finding is certainly suggestive of poisoning by inhalation of cyanide gas rather than by ingestion of cyanide solution.<sup>34</sup>

The third possibility, that Turing was murdered, might seem far-fetched, yet stranger things have been done in the national interest. There was a Cold War on. Could there have been an 'operation ruthless' against Alan Turing himself, now that he had managed to get himself classified as one of Europe's security risks? In 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy had

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<sup>28</sup> Don Bayley in conversation with the author, 4 December 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Turing 'Comments by friends on the manner of Alan Turing's death'.

<sup>30</sup> Burgess, J. L., Chandler, D. 'Clandestine Drug Laboratories', in Greenberg, M. I. et al. (eds) *Occupational, Industrial, and Environmental Toxicology* (Philadelphia: Mosby, 2003, 2<sup>nd</sup> edit.), p. 759.

<sup>31</sup> Sara Turing, *Alan M. Turing*, p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> Statements of Police Sergeant Leonard Cottrell and C. A. K. Bird before the Coroner.

<sup>33</sup> United States Army Medical Research Institute of Chemical Defense *Medical Management of Chemical Casualties Handbook* (Aberdeen Proving Ground, 1999, 3<sup>rd</sup> edit.).

initiated America's hysterical 'McCarthy era', and by the end of 1953 McCarthyism was in full spate. McCarthy declared that homosexuals who were privy to national secrets threatened America's security.<sup>35</sup> In Britain, David Cornwell—better known as novelist John Le Carré—worked for both MI5 and MI6 during the 1950s and the 1960s. Cornwell told the *Sunday Telegraph* in 2010: 'We did a lot of direct action. Assassinations, at arm's length.'<sup>36</sup> 'We did some very bad things', he said. There is a bare possibility that Turing was murdered, but in terms of evidence the most that can be said for this hypothesis (apart from the curious business about the shoes) is that Turing was clearly on the security services' radar during the previous year's 'Kjell crisis', described in Chapter 10.

The exact circumstances of Turing's death may always remain unclear. It should not be stated that he committed suicide—because we simply do not know. Perhaps we should just shrug our shoulders, agree that the jury is out, and focus on Turing's life and extraordinary work.

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<sup>34</sup> Bird, 'Post Mortem Examination Report'; US Army *Medical Management of Chemical Casualties Handbook*.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, D. K. *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> 'British spies carried out assassinations during Cold War, claims former agent Le Carre', *Mail Online*, 29 August 2010.