

Justice, Lawyers and the Mob

A friend of mine was a key prosecution witness in the trial of Victorino Chua, the nurse of Filipino origin at Stepping Hill Hospital in Stockport who has just been found guilty on two counts of murder and twenty-one counts of poisoning and attempted poisoning. I attended the trial for a day (not one of the two days on which my friend gave evidence), during the cross-examination of Professor Frier, an expert for the defence.

Not everyone likes lawyers, and some people hate them, but I have a great deal of respect for them, at least for those in the higher reaches of the profession. Their ability, seemingly effortless, to master technical matters to which they may never have given a moment's attention before, as well as thousands of pages of documents, is admirable and even astonishing; and anyone who thinks that a court sitting of six hours a day is indicative of an easy life can never have sat through such a day.

Chua's trial took three months, so complex was the evidence. Anybody who saw the prosecutor, Mr Peter Wright QC, in action would have wanted him as his defence counsel in the event of need. The judge's mastery was evident.

Modern juries generally dismay me in the slovenliness of their appearance: not for them any outward signs of deference to the majesty of the law. But this particular jury looked highly attentive and intelligent, except for one member who seemed more interested (at least on the day I attended) in his finger nails than in the evidence. The jury did not rush to a verdict

despite what must have been, after three months, a temptation to do so. Their conduct seemed to me a vindication of the jury system.

As it happened, I had suggested to various publishers that I might write a book about the trial, which I knew would be an interesting and proposed to attend it for its duration, But no publisher accepted my kind offer, despite the fact that I had experience of murder trials and understood the complex pharmacological matters at issue. The main reason given for refusal was that the accused was a Filipino rather than a son of the soil and therefore there would be no market for such a book.

What did this mean? That the British public is interested only in native and not imported wickedness? That we expect Filipinos to behave in this fashion and therefore there is nothing surprising or interesting about Chua's behaviour? Or is it that murder trials are interesting only if there is the prospect of the rope at the end of them?

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