

Scandal! The Christine Keeler-Jack Profumo affair



Malcolm Bishop QC looks back at the moral mores of 1960s Britain & questions the fairness of the trial of Stephen Ward

Many argue that the Christine Keeler/Jack Profumo affair is the greatest scandal of the last century. In a nutshell, the plot consists of a young woman being introduced to the secretary of state for war at a swimming party at the home of an aristocrat by a society osteopath. The woman, Christine Keeler and the minister, Jack Profumo had a secret three-month affair, and Keeler also slept with a Russian spy.

The minister lied to the House of Commons about his liaison, was caught out and had to resign both from the government and from parliament. There was an inquiry presided over by Lord Denning. His report, written in his judicial style, ('It was bluebell time in Kent') became a bestseller. Keeler was found guilty of perjury and given nine months inside while the osteopath was tried at the Old Bailey with living off immoral earnings and associated counts. He took a fatal overdose on the eve of the verdict, the jury acquitted him of most of the charges but convicted him of two counts of living off immoral earnings. The affair rocked the government of the day and shortly after the PM Harold Macmillan was taken ill and resigned. In the ensuing contest, the Earl of Hume emerged victorious. He, however, had to resign his peerage and fought and lost the ensuing general election to Harold Wilson, ushering in a Labour Government. In the overused phrase 'you couldn't make it up'!

The central role of Stephen Ward

This article wishes to consider not the whole scandal, I intend to take a look at the trial of Stephen Ward, the osteopath, and whether it constitutes a shocking miscarriage of justice by the establishment in full moralistic mode, or the bringing to justice of a high class and well-connected pimp.

But first, the scene. It was 1963, Britain

was at last recovering from the bleak days and dullness of post-war shortages. There was only one TV channel, black and white, of course—the BBC. It deserved the title, 'auntie'. It was only a few years since newsreaders wore evening dress, and each Sunday it put out a show in which the band blacked up to perform on the Black and White Minstrel Show.

But as Britain moved from the sleepy fifties into the next decade, life began to change, and not always for the better. There was Carnaby Street, of course, the Beatles, and England's victory in the world cup.

“It was a different age with different perceptions of how decent people ought to behave”

But there was a darker side to metropolitan life. Around the margins of Mayfair lived young women who would provide certain services for a fee. Polite society called them 'good time girls' but I rather doubt that this description fits the 'Windmill Girls' who worked in the Windmill club and whose sole role was to stand unclothed on the stage and not move a muscle: the thinking being that if nobody moved then the scene could be depicted as artistic creation; whereas with movement it became something altogether more risqué. And to be sure there was nothing untoward going on, the Lord Chamberlain, who scrutinised all dramatic performances, had an officer who would visit on a regular basis to be certain the law was strictly enforced.

His name, Mr Titman, is a classic example of nominative determinism.

Into this world came the 19-year-old Christine Keeler, brought up in a converted railway carriage.

Into the world of property speculators, high aristocracy and the slums of Notting Hill, with their terrible living conditions, overt racism and exploitation, entered Stephen Ward. His osteopathy practice attracted a string of extremely well-connected clients including Lord Astor. But there was another side to Ward's activities. He befriended a large number of young women, and the case he eventually had to face was that he lived off their immoral earnings. Two of these were Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies. Ward met Keeler in a club where her job was to appear topless, sit at customers' tables and encourage them to buy champagne while herself drinking fruit juice. Keeler lived with Ward but did not become his mistress. She went with him to parties, had casual liaisons and led a hedonistic life.

Ward was lent a cottage on Lord Astor's estate. He spent weekends there, frequently accompanied by a number of nubile ladies, including Keeler. It was on one of these weekends that she met The Rt Hon John Profumo MP, her Majesty's Secretary of State for War. She was swimming naked in Lord Astor's pool at the time. The minister gave her his number and so began a covert but fairly short-lived affair. The affair was not exclusive and Keeler also entertained Yevgeny Ivanov, an assistant naval attaché at the Soviet Embassy and possibly a spy.

The liaison between Profumo and Keeler and, probably, between Keeler and Ivanov was over by the time the press got wind of the story and set in motion the chain of events leading to Profumo's downfall. This caused an almighty explosion of indignation. *The Times* headed the charge with a furious leader, Parliament waxed lyrical about the depravity of modern society and there was a strong view in high places that something

must be done. The upshot was the Denning report, which excused Keeler ('let no one judge her too harshly, she was only twenty-one') but went for Ward with two barrels.

Ward's trial

The trial of Stephen Ward ran from 22–31 July 1963, presided over by Sir Archie Marshall.

The prosecutor was Mervyn Griffith-Jones, senior treasury counsel. His opening address was delivered with harsh cold fury. He insinuated to witnesses that they would be branded as sexually corrupt and deserving of social ostracism and professional ruin if they did not reply in the terms he wished. But, as in most criminal trials, the truth peeped out through the blanket of invective and witnesses gave answers which were the opposite of what he expected. This was partly since most of them had been coerced into making false statements, they could not remember what they were supposed to say. His final speech was a model of invective with not much regard for the evidence. His peroration is remarkable even by the standard of the time, after suggesting the defendant had 'plunged the very depths of lechery and depravity', he instructed the jury that it was their patriotic duty to convict, 'you may think that it is in the highest public interest to do

your duty and return a verdict of guilty'.

The judge's summing up in the opinion of the Bar at the time was of extreme hostility, peppered with such phrases as 'sink of iniquity' and 'filth'.

It is worth remembering the charge against Ward was living on immoral earnings, but the evidence showed that, far from exploiting them, he had subsidised both Keeler and Rice-Davies. It was plain to the defendant that the judge was gunning for a conviction. He took an overdose after the summing up concluded but before the jury retired, and died three days later. While Ward was in a deep coma, the judge refused to halt the trial and completed his address. He appeared keen for the jury to return verdicts while Ward was still alive. This they duly did. Ward was acquitted of two charges of pimping and accusations involving another girl but found guilty of living off the immoral earnings of Keeler and Rice-Davies. The judge suspended proceedings, expressing the hope that Ward would be fit enough to attend court the day after the bank holiday weekend. But he was cheated of his sentencing remarks because by then Ward was already dead.

Fairness?

It is obvious that, by the standards of today,

Ward did not receive a fair trial and the charges were preposterous. But it was a different age with different perceptions of how decent people ought to behave. I make no comment either way but perhaps the words of Lord Kennett in 1963 may be appropriate? He wrote: 'The Profumo affair... led to convulsion and the sacrifice of one life, of one career, and several reputations. What happened was horrible.' Whether the trial was horrible is not for me to say but it certainly had consequences far beyond the death of Ward. It sped the demise of the age of deference. Until 1963, newspapers protected politicians detected in adultery, but after the trial this gave way to Fleet Street's vociferous appetite for a sensational headline, among which perhaps may be cited, 'Prince Phillip and the Profumo Scandal—rumour utterly unfounded'.

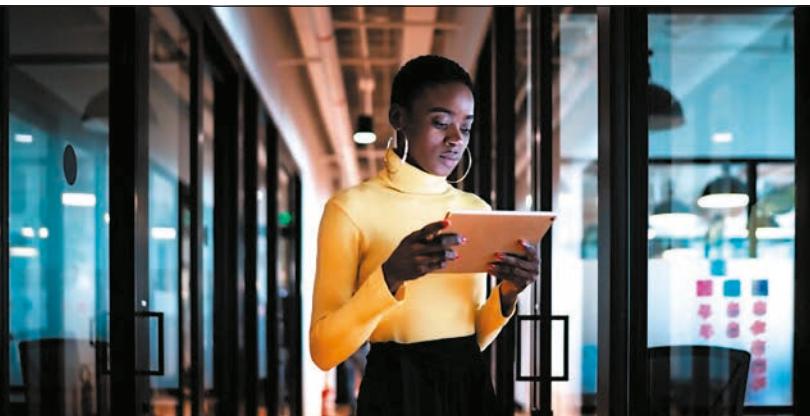
What did this lamentable affair teach future generations? Was it that gross immorality had infected the upper classes or was it that nothing unusual happened in those circles which has not been tolerated for decades if not centuries behind the veil of deference? You decide.

NLJ

Malcolm Bishop QC, 3 Hare Court, Temple (www.3harecourt.com).

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