

# Cry Boomerang

Jenny Scriven had achieved some popularity and success as a writer of both biographies and historical fiction, sometimes melding both genres in fictionalised biographies of real people. She had long been aware that biographers of living people need if possible to cultivate a relationship with said person and in particular to avoid giving unnecessary offence - or even the risk of being sued by their subject for libel or invasion of privacy! So far so good, however; she had had no need to use the services of her lawyer.

She anyway felt on safe ground for her latest literary project, a biography of the (fairly) eminent and (definitely) deceased scientist and inventor Joseph McFaddis (1865-1933). Safe ground indeed since dead people cannot complain about how biographers view them! Jenny herself had a broad interest in science and also a liking for science fiction, though the latter was not a literary genre in which she had ever made serious attempts to get herself published. McFaddis was an eccentric and, like Jenny, quite a polymath. He was best known for inventing the electric pencil, but was rather overshadowed by his illustrious contemporary Sir Oliver Lodge, a justly famous pioneer of research into radio communication with whom McFaddis had a close if somewhat fractious relationship. A further interest which united McFaddis, Lodge and Jenny herself was the possibility of life after death. Lodge's famous contribution to this topic was his documented experiments with Spiritualist mediums which, he claimed, proved that his own son Raymond, who had been killed in World War 1, was an active and communicating member of the spirit world. In contrast, McFaddis was more interested in the possibility that someone near death could be placed in suspended animation at very low temperatures and eventually revived; much later, from the 1960s onwards, this futuristic technology would become known as cryonics. McFaddis was in fact a hugely scoffing sceptic about Sir Oliver's ventures into the area of Spiritualism, though the two men were known to have had a little joke together about the innovative if rather trivial electric pencil being used for automatic writing! The nub of the joke was that so-called automatic writing was one of the ways in which, according to Lodge, the spirits of the dead were able to use mediums in order to communicate with the living.

Unfortunately, however, the two scientists in later life grew increasingly at odds with each other. McFaddis's best known invention, the electric pencil, was really just a powered pencil and sharpener contraption which also allowed the user to choose the pencil's hardness and colour, but ballpoint pens soon made it a bit of a curiosity, and as a result he seemed to have moved away from concrete invention to more speculative areas - like prolonging human life beyond the grave by scientific means. While Sir Oliver showed no interest in such a mechanical and soulless approach to the afterlife, his wife, Lady Mary, did apparently attempt to support McFaddis in his new sphere of scientific activity, and these two people appeared to have become closer to each other over time. McFaddis was an avowed and somewhat

prickly atheist and materialist who insisted that Lodge's views simply reflected the latter's desire for eternal life - in a rather suspiciously familiar Christian heaven. McFaddis insisted that science was the only way in which an individual human life might be extended beyond what we call death, and he became enthusiastic about the possibility of deep refrigeration at very low temperatures, known as cryogenic conditions, as a possible way of preserving the body with a view to later resuscitation. Jenny could find little, however, about what had become of his research. Cryogenic refrigeration was an established technology before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and had revolutionised long-distance food transport, but doing this to living, or indeed dead, human bodies in the hope of arresting bodily decay until some future date - might anything really have come from this research?

Jenny knew that Sir Oliver Lodge had already had his biographers, so instead, McFaddis (or "Fad" as she thought of him), seemed a good alternative subject for a biographical study of a man who seemed to have been forgotten since his death. Something about Fad appealed to her: it was partly his expressed dissatisfaction at seeming, when compared to Oliver Lodge, a failure as a scientific innovator. There were a couple of mysteries, too, surrounding him; these gave him an extra aura of interest and encouraged Jenny to speculate in print, an activity at which she had excelled in her previous books. Among these puzzles was Fad's relationship with Lady Lodge, and another was the exact circumstances of his death, as she was unable to find out much hard information about his funeral. And could he be regarded as an early pioneer of cryonics in the same way as his rival, Sir Oliver, is generally regarded as a forerunner of radio and television? Beyond this, the philosophical outlooks of these two men, so different yet having so many bonds in common, gave Jenny a feel for the ferment of scientific and mystical ideas during this period, which is known as the fin de siècle. As a methodical biographer of a dead person, Jenny made an effort to trace any descendants of Fad and discovered that his surviving grandson, Richard, was also a distinguished physicist. However, Richard appeared rather uncomfortable and embarrassed when asked about the significance of his grandfather's work in cryonic preservation (now known as cryopreservation), claiming that he knew little or nothing about it; he did however agree to email Jenny if he had any future information to pass on to her.

Jenny's book was cheekily entitled "Cool Boffin or Mere Fad? The Life and Mystery of Joseph McFaddis". Its tone was slightly sardonic, and it ended with an epilogue which pointed out that Fad was interesting today not for what he had definitely achieved but for various questions. One concerned his attempts to anticipate the technology of cryonics, another related to his relationship with the Lodges, and especially to Lady Lodge, and the last one was the fact that Jenny had not been able to identify when or where Fad was buried: the newspaper obituaries were somewhat sketchy about the exact date and place of his death. She posed these questions in her book, and answered the first one by saying that in her opinion, it was highly unlikely that Fad, despite his talent and determination, had made much progress in preserving and resuscitating any human body after death, although the mystery

about his own death must be reckoned to qualify her conclusions over his strange researches. She also concluded that Fad and Lady Lodge had likely been more than friends.

Jenny's book was duly published, but sales were slow despite the mysteries and hints of scandal which she had hoped would spice it up. She was now busy researching her next book, but one day she opened her emails and saw the following message from someone called Fad. It said:

"Ms Scriven. Your impertinent and ignorant book ended with three questions. The first was - was I a great scientist? My answer is Yes, and see my last answer for proof! The second was - did I have an illicit affair with my esteemed colleague's wife? The answer is NO, and how dare you accuse me of such a thing? The last one was - did I succeed with my cryonic experiments - the answer is YES. Expect to hear from my lawyers! Alternatively, allow me to help you update your book and make your second edition more successful than the first - I really think I have quite a lot to tell the world."

***Peter Ellway***