

**‘Mad Dogs and Englishmen’:  
Hydrophobia, Europhobia and National Tensions in *The Mad Death* (BBC Scotland,  
1983)**

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## Introduction

Scotland’s possession of a rich treasury of supernatural folklore and some of the most dramatic landscape scenery in northern Europe makes the neglect of the horror genre by its television studios a curious anomaly. While Scottish settings and/or locations have featured more recently in the comedy-horror mini-series *Stags* (BBC 2016) and a wave of low-budget genre films produced since the new millennium (Murray 2015: 143-74), they were spurned entirely during the heyday of British horror anthology series such as *Mystery and Imagination* (ITV 1966-70), *A Ghost Story for Christmas* (BBC 1971-76), *Beasts* (ITV 1976) and *Hammer House of Horror* (ITV 1980). Even when a series was set in Scotland – as was the case with *The Nightmare Man* (BBC 1981) and its fictitious Hebridean island of Inverdee – the actual filming was done in Cornwall. The significance of the three-part series *The Mad Death* (BBC Scotland 1983) should not therefore be underestimated. Although realist in both setting and tone, *The Mad Death* uses classic horror elements - such as animal attacks, imprisonment in a baronial manor and terrifying hallucinations – to depict a rabies outbreak on Scottish soil. Such imagery, however, is underpinned by a complex set of anxieties about national identity that remain acutely relevant as the 35th anniversary of the original broadcast approaches. While relations between Scotland, England and Europe are being reshaped under pressure from political challenges and popular referendums, this is a particularly opportune moment to provide a reassessment of *The Mad Death*. This essay provides a detailed examination of both the content and the production history of the series in order to illuminate wider points about the Scottish television industry and its ambivalent relationship to the surrounding landscape and culture. In particular, parallels are drawn with the history of BBC Scotland, such as the struggle to connect with the realities of contemporary Scottish society, confusion over the parameters of the Scottish and English authorities, and an uneven representation of social classes and dialects. The uncertainties about Scottish identity that permeate *The Mad Death* are presented as part of the wider debate about the ‘transnationalism’ of New Scottish Cinema.

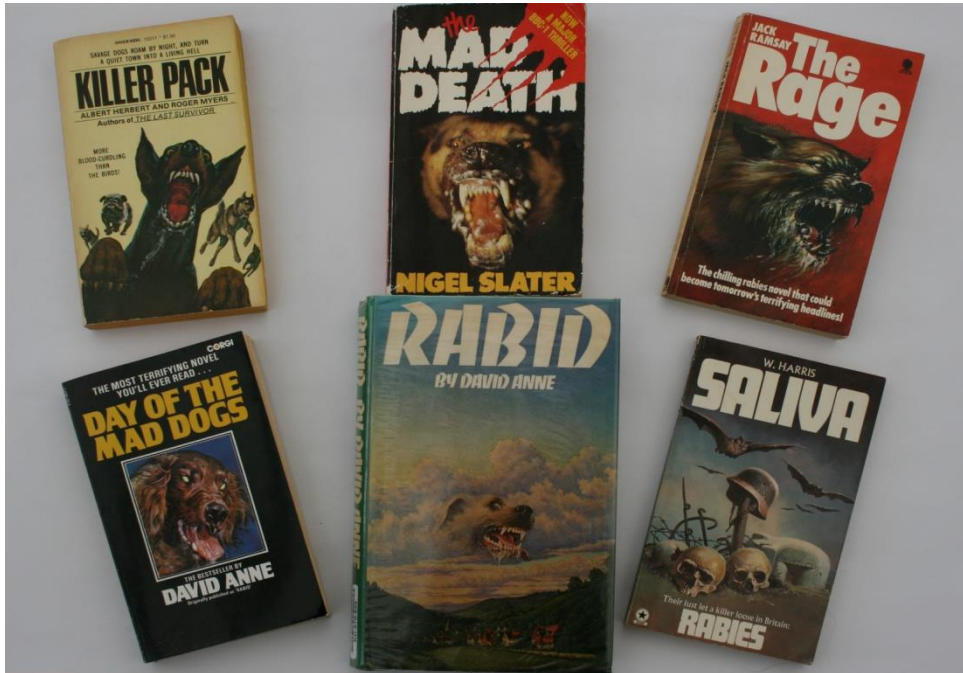
Such a reappraisal is especially deserving given that *The Mad Death* has received little in the way of critical attention or repeat screenings since being broadcast. There were two repeats – one on BBC1 (14-28 June 1985) and another on UK Gold (19-21 June 1995) – plus

a VHS release by Warner Home Video in 1987, but such limited exposure has resulted in the programme being largely forgotten. At the time of the original broadcast, however, this was primetime television, shown on three consecutive Saturday nights in the summer of 1983.<sup>1</sup> The first episode was watched by some 6.3 million viewers, making it the eighth most popular programme on BBC1 that week. By the time the series ended, according to *The Times* 'TV Top Ten' it had risen to third place with 7.65 million viewers (Anon 1983). As the late hour suggests, the material was considered to be of an adult nature, requiring broadcast after the 9 pm 'watershed.' This was especially pertinent for the first episode's graphic depiction of the effects of rabies.

The storyline was a simple one with a small number of characters. A Frenchwoman named Bibi dopes her pet Siamese cat and smuggles it into Scotland on a flight from Paris to Glasgow, unaware that 'Michou' had previously been infected by a rabid fox. After being met at the airport by her wealthy friend Fergus, she returns to his house and attends a party during which the cat escapes. Michou is struck by a car and then eaten by a fox, which becomes sick and is later picked up by American businessman Tom Siegler (Ed Bishop) who mistakes it for a tame fox due to its lethargy. Siegler unwittingly passes the virus on to his girlfriend Jane before falling ill and crashing his car. Once his symptoms have been identified as rabies, the government places vet Michael Hilliard (Richard Heffer) in charge of the operation to contain the virus, and the remaining episodes follow him as he works with his colleague Anne Maitland (Barbara Kellerman) to identify the source of the outbreak, enforce the strict containment policies – including compulsory vaccination, impounding and killing suspected animals – and deal with both public apathy and hostility towards his Draconian methods. Sub-plots include a love-triangle between Hilliard, Maitland and her caddish lover Johnny Dalry (Richard Morant), and the efforts of dangerously eccentric Miss Stonecroft (Brenda Bruce) to sabotage operations and protect her beloved animals.

Characters and events were loosely based on the unpublished typescript of Nigel Slater's novel *The Mad Death*, later published by Granada to tie-in with the series. Slater, born in 1944, studied at Cambridge and worked for the Foreign Office before being posted to the British Embassy in Rome during the 1960s. This inspired his espionage thriller *Falcon* (Granada 1979), the main character of which is a young diplomat in Rome. Later novels include *Crossfire: a novel of an African coup d'état* (London: Collins 1987) and *Sabra* (London: Fontana 1985), which returned to the theme of nature versus man as a professional hunter is tracked by an escaped tiger. Although *The Mad Death* needs to be discussed within the context of other literary manifestations of British fears about rabies, it cannot be separated from the wider phenomenon of popular fiction on the theme of 'nature biting back.' Inspired by

the success of works such as James Herbert's novel *The Rats* (1974) and the movie *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975), the fiction market of the late 1970s and early 1980s was saturated by scores of imitative works of varying quality in which different species of animals turned on mankind (Hendrix 2017). Almost every sort of creature received this treatment, from wolves and killer whales down to a range of small invertebrates which seemed particularly popular with British authors: Richard Lewis followed his novels *Spiders* (1978) and *Devil's Coach Horse* (1979) with *Night Killers* (1983) about cockroaches, while John Halkin's *Slither* (1980), *Slime* (1984) and *Squelch* (1985) plundered the murderous potential of worms, jellyfish and caterpillars respectively. The genre expanded with the likes of Nick Sharman's *The Cats* (1977), Cliff Twemlow's *The Pike* (1982) and Shaun Hutson's *Slugs* (1982), while Guy N. Smith's *The Night of the Crabs* (1976) opened a series of six novels about giant crabs, from the author who also produced *Locusts* (1979) and *Bats out of Hell* (1978). Unlike *The Mad Death*, which sought veterinary advice to ensure authenticity, the science behind these stories is often ludicrous, and the real interest of these books lies in the way in which animal attacks are grounded within very specific geo-political settings. It is significant that probably the most famous of all rabies novels, Stephen King's *Cujo* (1981), focuses solely on the monstrous potential of a sick dog; it is possible to read the transformation from family pet to killer beast as a metaphor for the disintegration of the American nuclear family (Wood 1985: 39-45; Magistrale 2003: 55-61), but although humans are fatally savaged, none are infected by rabies and the social metaphor of the virus remains unexplored within the American setting. Such distinctions were of less concern to publishers, and a selection of lurid cover art demonstrates how these books were perceived and packaged in the late 1970s as part of the wider market in horror fiction.



**Fig.1. As these covers demonstrate, the economic and political concerns of British rabies novels interested publishers less than their potential appeal to the horror fiction market. Author's collection.**

The horror of *The Mad Death* is, however, rooted in a specific historical and scientific context, and it is worth clarifying the situation regarding rabies before turning to the adaptation. A highly infectious viral disease of the central nervous system, rabies is usually transmitted to humans through the saliva of infected animals, either through a bite or through licking of an open wound. In humans the condition is known as ‘hydrophobia’ due to the unpleasant reactions experienced by victims trying to drink water: not only choking and the inability to swallow, but sometimes also anxiety at the mere sight of a glass of water. In Victorian Britain these horrific symptoms meant that hydrophobia was dreaded as ‘the worst of all deaths’, even though the total number of fatalities – 1,225 between 1837 and 1899 – indicate that the disease did not pose a major threat to the population (Pemberton & Warboys 2007: 1). The introduction of dog licenses, muzzling and quarantine laws led to the eradication of rabies, with the last death from indigenous infection occurring in 1902, over eighty years before the broadcast of *The Mad Death*. The series’ premise of rabies being introduced to Britain by smuggled animals was perfectly credible, given that localised outbreaks were recorded in 1918-22 and 1969-70, in both cases linked to army servicemen returning from the continent. It is therefore unsurprising that *The Mad Death*, along with other horror novels about rabies, depends upon a narrative thread that involves European travel - but a closer examination of these texts suggests that much wider concerns about relations with Europe were at play.

## ***The Mad Death*, rabies and European integration**

It was no coincidence that four novels about rabies entering Britain were written in the wake of the June 1975 referendum on Europe. Britain had joined the EEC under Edward Heath in 1973, but when the Conservative government fell the following year, it was replaced by a Labour administration under Harold Wilson that was deeply divided on the European issue. Anticipating David Cameron's move forty years later, Wilson attempted to renegotiate the terms of British membership on the basis of a nationwide referendum over whether or not to remain. The impression of a landslide victory conveyed by the 2:1 result in favour overlooks regional variation in attitudes: the narrower margin of 58:42 in Scotland indicated much greater scepticism, with some areas such as the Western Isles voting firmly to leave. Unlike the 2016 campaign, immigration played little part, with those opposed to EEC membership showing much more concern about topics such as food measures and agricultural policy (Saunders 2016). Distrust about Europe tended to fixate upon symbols such as the threat posed by metrication to the British pint, revealing strongly-held feelings about Europe that relied on traditional stereotypes.

This is particularly evident in how these four novels depict the arrival of rabies in Britain, and more specifically, how the importation of rabies is linked explicitly with French promiscuity or illicit sexual relations. In David Anne's *Day of the Mad Dogs* (1977), John and Paula Jennings smuggle a dog home from France, with Paula eventually bringing the animal ashore on her lover's private yacht – linking the importation of rabies with the act of adultery. In *Saliva* (1977) by Walter Harris – promoted with the tagline 'Their lust let a killer loose in Britain' - the cat 'Bibi' belongs to Jean-Pierre Boule, Chief Secretary to the French Minister of Commerce, whose lovers include Marigold, wife of British Prime Minister Sefton Clyde, and American ambassador's wife Pussy Schering. The infection is spread among European diplomats during conferences in Paris and Brighton. Jack Ramsay's *The Rage* makes the vector for infection the daughter of Lambert Diggery, a senior civil servant whose infatuation with a prostitute from Brussels – described as 'a centre for political tittle tattle and scandals' (Ramsay 1977: 25) - has got him smuggling heroin into Britain. In *The Mad Death* a rabid cat crosses the Channel on the yacht of a wealthy French merchant who 'liked to think himself as British as were his suppliers' but who feels unease at the sexualised clothing worn by his 'obviously braless' wife and son with his 'too-short shorts. They were so clearly, almost embarrassingly, French.' (Slater 1983: 10-12).

Insinuations about French sexuality are underpinned by equally pointed allusions to Nazi Germany. The rabies expert in *Day of the Mad Dogs* is a Cambridge-educated German named Erich Kessler who describes how rabies 'has marched steadily over Europe since the Second World War', beginning 'in Western Poland, on the border with Germany.' (Anne 1977: 154). *Saliva* proposes a much more forceful link with Nazism, locating the source in a badger colony that acquired a taste for human flesh after eating the corpses of German soldiers following the 1944 Battle of the Ardennes. The novel reaches its climax with British vet Robin Blake and his female companion – Caroline Clyde, the Prime Minister's daughter – confronting giant rabid badgers ('the size of a Himalayan bear') in the abandoned forts of the Maginot line, alongside human skeletons and SS helmets (Harris 1977: 145-50).

If the introduction of rabies into Britain is compared to a sexually-transmitted disease through its association with the promiscuity of the French, and a wartime invasion through the allusions to Nazi aggression, then the firm insistence that 'This is England. Not France or Germany' (Anne, *Day of the Mad Dogs* 1977: 135) must surely be based upon national characteristics worth defending. There are hints of imperial nostalgia when the health minister laments 'the passing of the old Lee-Enfield. The shouldered rifles had expressed a British bravura which the Belgian FN's couldn't possibly portray' (Slater, *The Mad Death* 1983: 34), as if the British military was somehow emasculated by being equipped with generic European weaponry. However, it is the idea of Britain being a nation of animal lovers that receives the greatest emphasis when it comes to distinguishing this country from 'The French, the brutal French, forever kicking out at defenceless animals' (Ramsay, *The Rage* 1977:14): the vet in *The Mad Death* defines the British as 'A people whose compassion for creatures ranks higher than our concerns about the mad manoeuvres of Common Market Policy' (Slater 1983: 150). The possibility that some individuals might rank compassion for animals higher than threats to human life would be explored at length in the television adaptation.

Numerous changes were required when adapting the novel for the small screen – not least due to the switch from southern England to the Scottish Highlands – but the preoccupation with European relations remained: the series begins and ends with conversations about Brussels, where Hilliard has obtained a post working for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). At the time of the rabies outbreak in Scotland, Hilliard is already working out his notice and has to be persuaded to delay his departure by agricultural minister William Stanton (Jimmy Logan). The only Scot in Slater's novel is Dr Hamish McCarthy, an unhealthy drunk whose fondness for whisky results in the death of a young girl and his dismissal from the team. In adapting the novel for a Scottish production, screenwriter Sean Hignett wisely dropped the stereotyped whisky-sodden Scot,

while the character of Bryant – an English salesman who picks up a rabid fox and transmits the infection through biting a woman's lip – was renamed Siegler and became an American businessman. In Slater's novel the woman is a Bournemouth prostitute, but Hignett's screenplay depicts Siegler as a glib womaniser, having simultaneous relationships with his wife Norma, his secretary and his unfortunate girlfriend Jane, who succumbs to rabies after he bites her during a passionate kiss. The source of the rabies epidemic is thus shifted away from a sleazy British seaside encounter to an unfortunate consequence of European partnership, in the unwitting involvement of the Germanically-named 'Siegler' with Bibi and her French cat.

### **The migration of *The Mad Death* to Scotland**



**Fig.2 The Men from the Ministry. Michael Hilliard (Richard Heffer) and William Stanton (Jimmy Logan) hunting dogs in Glen Lyon. Copyright of the BBC.**

Before discussing certain issues involved in adapting *The Mad Death* for a Scottish setting, it is necessary to explain a little about how this came about. According to Hignett, it was in fact largely accidental that the series was set in Scotland. Publishers had shown little interest in

Slater's manuscript while the BBC office in London turned down the option for television rights, but a newly appointed executive at BBC Scotland saw potential in the story and secured the rights for a production north of the border. Born and educated in Edinburgh, Roderick Graham produced the Emmy Award-winning mini-series *Elizabeth R* (1971) as well as the long-running series *Z Cars* (1974-77) at the BBC in London before moving to Glasgow as the first Head of Television Drama in 1977. These were heady times, with devolution back on the agenda and a new wave of Scottish writers and playwrights – such as John McGrath, Stewart Conn, Hector MacMillan, George Byatt, John Byrne, Tom McGrath, Roddy MacMillan and Bill Bryden, many of them associated with Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre - tackling social, cultural and political topics with unprecedented vigour. Graham's work reflected these changes, commissioning or writing series that explored Scottish history and institutions, beginning with what was intended to be a flagship production – *The Standard* (1978) – about an ailing Scottish newspaper. This ambitious series tried to tackle some controversial issues, but low ratings (likely due to its clashing with ITV's *Rising Damp*) led to the intended second series being dropped. The production budget was then used to finance a new series, *The Omega Factor* (1979) about a small government department in Edinburgh investigating supernatural activities. Two of the episodes were written by Sean Hignett, who had also scripted episodes of *The Standard* and was an influential committee member at the Traverse Theatre, where director Chris Parr (1975-81) had inaugurated a new policy of actively promoting contemporary Scottish writers. It was only natural that Graham approached Hignett to adapt *The Mad Death*, supported by script editor Maggie Allen who had worked with both men on several productions since the mid-1970s.

Before starting to write, Hignett undertook some research into rabies and the government's plans to deal with an outbreak, using his acquaintance with local Labour MP Gavin Strang to obtain information from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) at Whitehall. Strang, the son of a Perthshire farmer, had a Ph.D in agricultural science and had worked in research before entering parliament in 1970. He was closely involved in rabies research and, thanks to his endorsement, the MAFF provided Hignett with copies of the 1971 Waterhouse Report, relevant statutory instruments and full details of contingency plans and local authority guidelines, plus the offer of checking the draft script for 'factual accuracy.' While the series was not in any sense an official government 'docu-drama', such a level of co-operation does suggest that the MAFF valued its potential for educating the public. No doubt they hoped it would be at least as effective as the grim Public Information Films on rabies produced by the Central Office of Information such as *Rabies Outbreak* (1976), *Don't Smuggle Death* (1977) and *Rabies Means Death* (1983). Specific scenes in the series were based on descriptions in the 1977 government *Memorandum on Rabies* and Colin Kaplan's *Rabies: the*



*Facts* (London: HMSO, 1977), with additional advice from veterinary specialists who attended filming.

In contrast with the precise nature of the information on animal behaviour, medical symptoms, incubation periods and suchlike, the series is remarkably vague about where the action is taking place. Those familiar with Glasgow Airport might recognise this as the place where Bibi lands with her smuggled cat, but no signage is visible until the end of Episode Three, and none of the characters refer to the airport by name. The only real places mentioned in the first episode are Brussels and Paris, while events in Scotland happen at fictitious locations such as 'Inverinchin', 'Glen Arder' and 'St. Calder.' Siegler's home is identified in Episode Two as Dallick House, an actual property at the entrance to the Sma' Glen in Perthshire, indicating that Glen Arder – described in the series as being 'in the Scottish Highlands' – represents Glen Almond. One of the best-remembered scenes is the dramatic car chase through East Kilbride's old Plaza shopping centre, a sequence that follows closely passages in the novel (Slater 1983: 95-102) where the location is explicitly identified as 'Basingstoke's new shopping centre', the Malls, completed in 1981. Once again, actual English locations that are specified in the novel are made deliberately vague once the action shifts to Scotland. Television viewers are given no clue as to the location of the arcade, the scale of which clearly requires proximity to a large conurbation: how does this square with the apparent remoteness of Glen Arden? To further confuse matters, the map on the wall in Hilliard's office appears to show the Ayrshire coastline.

This reluctance to map out the setting with clarity and detail might have been less noticeable had it not been for the casting choices. Apart from Jimmy Logan and American actor Ed Bishop, the main characters – Hilliard, Maitland and press officer Bob Nichol (Paul Brooke) – are all played by English actors, as are Siegler's girlfriend and secretary, Maitland's lover and Miss Stonecroft. The combined effect of disconnecting the setting from actual Scottish topography and populating this generalized landscape with middle-class English accents produces an oddly disorientating effect that did not pass unnoticed, with Claire Colvin of *The Times* complaining about how the 'first episode had a certain irritating vagueness about place – I do not remember Scotland as being so blandly international.' (1983: 6).

### **Mad Dogs and English Accents: class and politics on the Scottish screen**

This 'bland internationalism' contrasted sharply with the new theatrical work being promoted under Hignett's guidance at the Traverse. It seemed to be only on stage during the 1970s that pressing questions about national identity, industrial history and the experience of

the urban working classes could be expressed in a distinctively Scottish voice (Craig & Stevenson 2001: x). Even regional television provided no serious engagement with these issues, as the control of both financial resources and cultural agendas was weighted firmly in London, where the BBC's centralised structure found its most censorious expression in a lingering and archaic insistence on Received Pronunciation. The disproportionate allocation of resources meant that Scottish productions – especially expensive drama series such as *The Mad Death* – were aimed at the wider network market as much as, if not more than, the home audience. Programmes were therefore more likely to be shaped by external perceptions of Scotland, such as demands for Highland scenery and familiar stock characters (Blain & Davison in Harvey & Robins 1993: 58; Cook 2008: 108). The casting choices in *The Mad Death* indicate a desire to appeal to viewers outside Scotland, where a crucial factor was 'the network audience's resistance to regional drama played in heavy accents.' (Hebert 1993: 178). Furthermore, by downplaying references to real Scottish place names and topographical distances, it was possible to hint that the rabies outbreak could be taking place anywhere in the country. An authentic sense of place, in other words, was sacrificed to allow the setting to stand in for the whole of Britain. In some ways this anticipated a feature of what has been identified as the growing 'transnationalism' of Scottish Cinema since the 1990s, that 'reduces Scotland to a mere location for a universal story' (Brown 2011: 6. See also Street 2009, and Marmysz 2014).

Accents, of course, are indicators of class as well as region or nationality, and the depiction of working-class Scots – or rather the lack of it – is a major weakness of the production. *The Omega Factor* was also guilty of giving the impression that Scotland was populated predominantly by the English middle-classes, conveying what Cramer terms a 'colonialist subtext' (2016: 67-8). There is indeed a definite tendency in *The Mad Death* to align the rural or working-class accents spoken by a handful of minor characters with inferior levels of competence. Gamekeeper Charlie (Bob Docherty) is the only such character to appear more than once, but Hilliard's anger at his use of gin traps and failure to muzzle his dog triggers an outburst that reveals his subordinate position: 'Damned irresponsible! His employer should be warned.' Hilliard later sits down in front of the shopping centre's CCTV screen and almost immediately spots a rabid dog on the cameras that the local policemen had failed to see, as well as a family of shoppers who have managed to evade the police cordon. This is the only portrayal of urban, working-class Scots in the entire series; speech is limited to a few terse admonitions from the father, and the little boy's inability to get out of the ladies' toilets is followed by his parents' helplessness in escaping from the dog without a series of instructions from Hilliard and the intervention of his accompanying police marksman. This family might not have been intended as fully representative of working-class Scotland but there

is no escaping the fact that *The Mad Death* projects a view of Scottish society that foregrounds wealth and ownership.

Such privileges were noticeably lacking for the Scottish working-classes when *The Mad Death* was made. Although filmed in the early summer of 1982, the series was broadcast just five weeks after Margaret Thatcher was re-elected at the General Election in June 1983. While both the main parties in Scotland lost votes due to the rise of the SNP and the newly formed SDP-Liberal Alliance, the dominance of the Labour over the Conservative parties (41 to 21 seats) here was in marked contrast to the results south of the border where the Tories won their most decisive victory since 1935. Thatcher's success in England owed much to the nationalistic surge that accompanied the Falklands War, and the unpopularity of Labour's strongly left-wing manifesto, which included leaving the EEC. In Scotland, however, she remained a figure of hate for many, as she was perceived to be personally responsible – along with her chancellor Geoffrey Howe – for devastating Scotland's manufacturing industry and causing a sharp rise in unemployment. This was particularly high in the Central Belt, which broadly corresponds to the locations featured in *The Mad Death*. Between 1979 and 1981 Scottish manufacturing lost 11% of its output and 20% of its jobs, with the steel industry hit the hardest; by May 1981 almost 290,000 Scots were out of work (Aitken 1997: 266; Johnston, Pattie & Allsopp 1988: 75). Thatcher and Howe's stated aim following the 1979 election had been to pursue the reduction of inflation even if this meant soaring unemployment, but it was her refusal to alter course in the face of widespread suffering that perhaps caused the most anger. The 'Lady's not for turning' speech in October 1980 and Howe's uncompromising budget the following year made it clear that Thatcher would continue with her economic strategy even if three million had no work – which was the case by January 1982. The Irish Republican hunger strike was faced with the same intransigent attitude as ten prisoners starved themselves to death between May and August 1981. Parts of the UK later benefitted from the Tories' policy, but the sense of a Scottish-English class divide was heightened by the contrast between Strathclyde's industrial (or by now, post-industrial) areas, and pockets of southeast England where unemployment had never risen over 10%. In Scottish popular culture, Thatcher's mannered voice conformed to negative stereotypes about English arrogance and snobbery, its impression of artifice undermining any attempt to express concern about working class welfare.

*While The Mad Death* avoids explicit mention of political parties, symbols of class and privilege cling to the portrayal of agricultural minister Stanton. A powerful, paternalistic figure of authority, he is first glimpsed out deerstalking and appears throughout the series in the trappings of a wealthy Scottish laird, wearing tweeds and Barbour, wielding haunches of

venison, drinking whisky from a silver hipflask and smoking cigars while blasting off his shotgun. Although clearly associated with the hunting and shooting parties of the traditional Scottish country estate, no information is given about where Stanton lives. The homes occupied by the other main characters, on the other hand, reveal much about the strata of Scottish society to which they belong: businessman Siegler and his wife live alone with their dogs in the vast splendour of Dallick House, arrogant laird Dalry's home is an 18th century Palladian mansion (filmed at Wright House, near Kippen) while the pet-loving Miss Stonecroft resides at Formakin House, a 20th century baronial mansion built in imitation of a 17th century tower house. These are properties that are turned away from the urban industrial present and look instead towards Scotland's rural past, when the pleasures of the land were enjoyed by a privileged few.

This narrow social focus in no ways implies a positive portrayal. Both Bibi and Jane are introduced (with some irony) wearing full length white furs, and when Fergus meets Bibi at the airport she is whisked off in his chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce, establishing a link between the introduction of rabies and the selfish actions of the wealthy. The screenplay specifies that both Bibi and Fergus are owners of large cars, with the latter described as a 'well-dressed, obviously well-heeled Scot.' Bibi's cat escapes during Fergus' drinks party – attended by guests (including Dalry and Maitland) in formal evening dress – and is run over by another guest who insensitively snarls at his companion, 'You don't have to report a cat.' Once inside the driver is shown devouring canapés, the shot juxtaposed with the sight of a fox devouring the rabid corpse of Bibi's cat outside. This suggestion of bestial gluttony takes place after Dalry has been discussing the sale of yachts and thoroughbred horses, aligning the wealth of the partygoers with animal instincts. Indeed Dalry soon emerges as the villain of the show, possessively jealous of Maitland – whom he wants to stop working and remain at home – to the extent that he threatens Hilliard with a gun and eventually fires at him during the hunt. Later, he arrogantly dismisses the police from his property, apparently believing that quarantine laws only apply to the lower classes; once again, a sense of entitlement threatens to further spread the rabies infection.

The two men's rivalry over Maitland highlights how Hilliard occupies a middle-ground between the landowning and working classes, his antipathy to both rooted in his professional role as an intermediary separating the establishment from the populace. Like *Doomwatch* (BBC 1971-72) and *The Omega Factor* (BBC 1979), *The Mad Death* focuses throughout on the activities of a small, close-knit government team, working autonomously from the Westminster authorities with whom they maintain an uneasy relationship. In all three programmes the team's unorthodox tactics draw the wrath of both the government and the

general public. In the *Doomwatch* episode 'The Inquest' (March 1971), for example, no one knows the source of the infection when a schoolgirl dies of rabies in a small Yorkshire town. Some aspects of *The Mad Death* are anticipated in 'The Inquest', such as the deep-set public resistance to killing pets – there is uproar when scientist Colin Bradley of the *Doomwatch* team recommends the destruction of every dog within a five-mile radius of the town – and the disruptive presence of an eccentric pet-loving spinster in the person of Miss Lincoln, who – like Miss Stonecroft – not only houses stray dogs but actively seeks them out, and in doing so proves a public liability. Where *Doomwatch* portrays Miss Lincoln's eccentricities with gentle humour, *The Mad Death* employs a range of tricks and techniques from the traditions of screen horror to develop Stonecroft into an independent threat as dangerous as rabies.



**Fig. 3. Barking at the Moon. Despite evoking wolves in Transylvania, this striking image was created using a fox puppet in woods near Fairmilehead. Copyright of the BBC.**

## 'Keep it all horror-comic'

Robert Young was chosen to direct *The Mad Death* because of his experience in making horror films, in the belief that his skill could make the programme genuinely frightening. His first feature film was one of Hammer's most unusual horrors, the erotic and bloody *Vampire Circus* (1972), about an itinerant band of vampiric gypsies; one could almost project back a fear of rabies onto the film's preoccupation with shape-shifting animals, blood, fangs and infected bites. Young also directed an episode of the *Hammer House of Horror* television series in 1980, the same year that Barbara Kellerman (Maitland) appeared in another episode. She had already gained experience in British horror/science-fiction productions through her roles in *Satan's Slave* (1976) the final four-episode mini-series of *Quatermass* (Thames TV 1979) and *The Monster Club* (1981) starring Vincent Price.

Young's flair for visual imagery is particularly evident in the disturbing montage of hallucinations experienced by Siegler in hospital, although much of this sequence was actually outlined in detail in the screenplay: a nurse's navel becomes the eye of a fox and fur transforms into a lover's hair, interspersed with disturbing images of drowning and submersion that capture the appalling meaning of 'hydrophobia'. The content was inspired by references in *Rabies: the Facts*, though Hignett's 'After Image' episode of *The Omega Factor* had already used the morphing of human faces. Under Young's direction the animal attacks were spiced up, most effectively in the first episode when the rabid fox turns on Siegler. This scene, in which he is trapped in his car with the fox foaming at the windows, anticipated similar scenes in *Cujo* (1983), the screen adaptation of Stephen King's novel about a rabid dog which was released in Britain four months after the broadcast of *The Mad Death*. Although the energetic pace of these scenes was lacking in the later episodes, these do contain some intriguingly-crafted sequences that merit discussion.

By the second episode Hilliard's insensitivity in enforcing policy has caused a backlash in public opinion, attracting hate mail and death threats. He finally goes too far by officiously confronting a group of pub drinkers who are playing with a ferret on their laps; pinned down by two men, he is taunted with the rodent by a woman who lets the animal bare its teeth and claws in his face. The incident was inspired by Hignett's encounter with a woman playing with a ferret on a table in Bannerman's, a traditional pub hidden in the vaulted cellars of an old Cowgate tenement. The location chosen for filming was, by contrast, the upmarket and celebrity friendly Granary Bar in the Dragonara Hotel, probably the last place in Edinburgh where one would find ferrets running about, and another instance of infidelity to the authentic

nature of the local setting. The sequence is highly effective nonetheless, using a POV shot to heighten viewers' discomfort, and made all the more disturbing by the fact that none of the protagonists speak. The ordeal takes place in silence, the three faces of Hilliard's tormentors looming up and away from the camera in a manner that echoes Siegler's hallucinatory vision of patients in adjacent beds rising up to choke him. The resonance between the two scenes extends the sensation of horror from fantasy into realism, underscoring the theme that in times of natural crisis there is often most to fear from one's fellow humans.

This idea reaches its apogee in Episode Three when Maitland finds herself imprisoned in a cat-filled chamber after visiting the fanatical animal-lover Miss Stonecroft, whose name was a play on the then-famous television dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse. This sequence employs a series of classic horror tropes, with the screenplay directing: 'Keep it all horror-comic. Kennel gates squeak loudly, footsteps echo, things are green with moss etc.' (Hignett 1983 Part II: 223). A low-angle shot shows Maitland looking up at the castellated ramparts before the door creaks open of its own accord; her passage through the darkened house is extended over several minutes as the camera roams through a clutter of stuffed animals, sculptures, ferns and candlesticks, all of it literally crawling with cats. Phil Sawyer's eerie synthesiser score is augmented by some non-diegetic chords as another cat wanders over the keyboard. Through the spinster's trickery Maitland finds herself immured in semi-darkness, surrounded by rabid cats casting giant shadows on the walls. *The Mad Death* has no need of the supernatural, but there is a hint of fey determinism in how this tragedy harks back to the opening scenes where Stonecroft, Hilliard and Maitland all appear to meet by chance on the beach at Rhu. Maitland eventually escapes, and after Dalry and Hilliard arrive Miss Stonecroft is attacked by her own dog, plunging to her death – in true horror tradition – from the gallery.

Her demise and the extermination of the rabid dogs she released signifies the successful containment of the dangers posed by the outbreak, allowing the series to end with most of the issues resolved and social equilibrium restored. Hilliard, the insubordinate and volatile upstart, has achieved his ordained purpose and leaves for Brussels, removing the threat he poses both to the authorities and to the relationship between Dalry and Maitland, who have now happily reunited. A few weeks after filming of *The Mad Death* had finished, Colin McArthur led the three-day *Scotch Reels* event at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, and in the published essays that followed he criticised a proportion of British films made in Scotland in the 'kailyard tradition' for being 'politically reactionary in that they restore and sanctify the quasi-feudal social structure of rural Scotland' (McArthur 1982: 49). It is an accusation that could be levelled at *The Mad Death*, which shows how an external threat is vanquished through the efforts of the Westminster-based authorities, a team drawn from the

English public schools and landowning gentry, supported by the combined forces of gun-wielding policeman and the military. Then there are the implications of the constant references throughout to the *Ministry* of Agriculture, which has responsibility for affairs in England, rather than the Department of Agriculture which is the name of the Edinburgh-based administration dealing with such matters in Scotland; an innocent error perhaps, but one that does lend some credence to Cramer's suggestion of a 'colonial subtext.'

Such an interpretation must be offset by the series' simmering undercurrent of hostility towards the wealthy Anglicized and international strata within Scottish society who are responsible for the outbreak. This can be read as a reflection of the deep distrust felt in Scotland towards Westminster after the 1979 devolution referendum, when a result in favour was overturned by a Labour MP's last-minute amendment changing the criteria from 40% of the vote to 40% of the total electorate. (Denver 2000: 16). The ensuing fall-out led to the collapse of the Callahan administration and the election of Margaret Thatcher, who immediately reneged on Douglas-Home's pledge to offer a better form of devolution. The collapse of Scottish heavy industry over the next three years was blamed, with some justification, on her monetarist policies. Her insistence that such measures had to be endured, no matter how painful, was typically argued with her mantra 'there is no alternative' - an attitude echoing Hilliard's uncompromising willingness to ride out bitter unpopularity. The consequent mass unemployment for steelworkers, shipbuilders and miners meant that by the time *The Mad Death* was produced, Scottish nationalism and working-class identity were closely aligned. Little wonder then that the series depicts a Scotland in which the urban working-classes are almost invisible, Scots themselves appear devoid of political agency and even talented women such as Maitland are marginalised. Her return to Dalry involves the risk that she will be forced to abandon her career and reduced to a domestic role in the feudal confines of his mansion. As is so often the case in horror stories, the real evil is found not in the monster but in the society that fostered its creation.

It should be noted, however, that nothing is conveyed about the nature of Scottish society prior to the outbreak. The series ends at Glasgow Airport where Hilliard spots Fergus's dog barking out of a parked car at some children; viewers have seen the collie getting scratched by Michou and the suggestion that rabies is still a threat is strengthened by a final freeze frame showing the dog's bared teeth. This is in line with modern horror films' inclination towards ambiguous endings that taunt viewers with the question, 'But is the killer *really* dead?' Writing about the *Hammer House of Horror* series, Wheatley (2006: 79-84) observes how British television horror typically sets up a contrast between cosy domestic settings and the sinister external forces that disrupt them. Nonetheless, the first and final glimpses of Scotland



in *The Mad Death* are scenes of dogs being aggressive towards children, indicating that the natural condition is one of antagonism between man and nature. Neither the outbreak nor its containment have altered this.

The note of foreboding and uncertainty on which the series ends will feel familiar to those living in the era of 'Brexit' and 'Indyref 2', during which questions of national identity, boundaries and autonomy have proved so contentious. How this will impact upon institutions such as the BBC remains unclear at the time of writing, but observant readers will have noted the parallels between the history of BBC Scotland and the production of *The Mad Death*. This history is a complex one that has not always been treated fairly (Hajkowski 2010: 135-67) and extreme views such as 'BBC Scotland is a fiction' (Hassan 2015: 164) are perhaps unjust - but given the opaque future of relations between Scotland, the United Kingdom and Europe, the study of past productions such as *The Mad Death* can help ensure that Scottish audiences are - in the words of the new BBC Charter - 'well served' in the years ahead.

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**Endnotes.**

<sup>1</sup> Screening times for the three episodes were: 16th July at 9.40 pm, 23rd July at 9.15 pm and 30th July at 9.45 pm.