

The Bioletti Family of Liverpool: From the Maybrick Case to John Lennon and the Beatles

By Christopher T. George

What connects the Maybrick case of 1889 with the Beatles? It is a bit of a long and winding road, so read on.

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‘You Might Well Arsk,’ to quote the title of one of the short, humorous pieces that Beatle John Lennon published in his Edward Lear-like nonsense collection *In His Own Write*, for which the Liverpool pop musician won Foyle’s Literary Prize, 23 March 1964. At the Foyle’s Luncheon held in his honor, John’s entire acceptance speech was, ‘Thank you very much. You’ve got a lucky face,’ before he made a hasty exit.



Ah, the heady year of 1964, almost four decades ago—the year that the Beatles first made it big in the United States on the Ed Sullivan Show (in February) and came home to Liverpool to a tumultuous Beatlemania-style civic reception on 10 July at the city’s 18th Century Town Hall in Castle Street, the same day they attended the premier of their movie ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ at the city’s Odeon Cinema, London Road. Lennon’s *In His Own Write* contained a number of satirical and irreverent pieces about ‘Liddypool’ as Lennon described his native city, the site of this year’s Jack the Ripper convention [August 2003]. If the Lord Mayor had read them closely perhaps he wouldn’t have given the lad and his mates a civic reception.

‘There are places I remember...’

A Lennon and McCartney song that was to appear on the group’s ‘Rubber Soul’ album released the following year, on 3 December 1965, as originally conceived by John, contained a number of references to places he remembered from his childhood growing up in the southern suburbs of Liverpool. Among the locations mentioned were the tram sheds (streetcar warehouse to our American friends) in Smithdown Road and a certain barber’s shop to the east at the road junction with a bus shelter in a roundabout in the center of the junction known locally as ‘Penny Lane’ from a street that runs into the intersection. Both places were close to John’s first boyhood home of 9 Newcastle Road, located north of the bus shelter. If you know ‘In My Life’ you will be aware that those geographical references were all removed in the final version of the song which speaks in more general terms about the past and loves won and lost. The barber shop though, is famously part of the opening lyrics of the Beatles’ ‘Penny Lane’ released as a single 17 February 1967: ‘In Penny Lane there is a barber showing photographs / Of every head he’s had the pleasure to know. / And all the people that come and go / Stop and say “Hello.”’

During John Lennon’s boyhood, during the 1950’s, the barber was Mr. Bioletti, although the shop in more recent decades has changed hands and was sold by the family. And here is where

the connection with the Maybricks comes in—in August 1889, James A. Bioletti, stated to then have been a hairdresser and perfumer of Dale Street, testified at the trial of Florence Maybrick about the use of arsenic as a depilatory. The hairdresser's testimony was part of an attempt by Florie's counsel, Sir Charles Russell, to establish that Florie really did soak the flypapers to make an arsenic-based cosmetic, not to bump off husband James, as the prosecution alleged.

Bioletti was part of a parade of witnesses who appeared at the trial in St. George's Hall, Liverpool, before Justice Sir James Fitzjames Stephen.

The Trial of Mrs. Florence Maybrick

James Bioletti (examined by Sir Charles Russell): I am a hairdresser and perfumer, carrying on business on Dale Street, Liverpool. I have been in business for about thirty years. Arsenic is used a good deal in the hair for some purposes, and I have used it as a wash for the face on being asked for it by ladies. There is an impression among ladies that it is good for the complexion. I have used it on a few occasions, and only when I have been asked for it.

Sir Charles Russell: Was Mrs. Maybrick ever a customer of yours?

Mr. Bioletti: Not to my knowledge.

Mr. Addison (cross-examining): You say that you use it for the hair. Tell me how you use it?

Mr. Bioletti: Very largely for removing hair. It is used principally by ladies for removing hair from the arms. I mix it with lime—one-quarter of arsenic to three-quarters of lime, in powder. I generally use yellow arsenic, but I have used white arsenic. I put the lime and arsenic up together and label it 'Depilatory,' along with the directions.

Mr. Addison: There is nothing to show that there is arsenic in it?

Mr. Bioletti: No. I generally put it up in a two-ounce bottle. I produce one of my bottles. The label is as follows:--'Depilatory, to remove superfluous hair; mix with a quantity of water to the consistency of a thick cream, and then spread one-eighth of an inch on skin, and all over it, to remain three minutes; if the skin is sensitive, five minutes. Then remove it with a paper knife. Wash with cold water, and apply a little cold cream. Do not touch a sore or it will be painful.' I have never tasted it, and I cannot say whether the lime would make the yellow arsenic very nasty to the taste.

Mr. Addison: Do you know whether it is used as a cosmetic?

Mr. Bioletti: Not as a rule. I have been asked for it a very few times in my life. I have been spoken to on the subject by ladies, asking as to its value as a cosmetic. It is supposed to be a good thing for improving the complexion. I only prepared it just for the occasion, and only in small quantity. I only remember distinctly one occasion.

Sir Charles Russell (re-examining): The depilatory is in common use.

Sir Charles Russell: Although you do not have it for sale, are you sometimes asked for it for the purpose of cosmetics?

Mr. Bioletti: Yes.

Sir Charles Russell: In that case you would prepared it in that form, I suppose, in solution?

Mr. Bioletti: I would just put a little into milk of almonds. I have seen it in the country papers recommended for making the hair grow.

Was Bioletti a Fighter with Garibaldi?

John Lennon and his boyhood friends thought that the old barber they knew in the 1950's (John was born in 1940) was an immigrant from Italy, though my research shows otherwise. The Biolettis had actually been in Britain since the early decades of the 19th century, and were descendents of Alberto Bioletti, born about 1778 in Turin, Italy, who married an Englishwoman, Mary Feltham. Possibly Alberto Bioletti was a emigré who had left Italy because of the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars.

According to a story on an Irish website written by Lennon's friend David Ashton, the old barber that the schoolfriends knew in the 1950's had military memorabilia in his shop and gave the impression he could have fought with the Italian freedom fighter, Garibaldi. A stretch, though! The then barber would have had to have been over a century old if he fought with Garibaldi in 1860—as Ripper suspect Roslyn D'Onston is known to have done—to enable him to be still alive when Lennon and his mates frequented the shop!

Ashton remembered:

It was rumoured that old man Bioletti had been involved with Guiseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) in Italy's battle for independence and statehood. The Bioletti family had old guns, bullets, grenades and pictures of happy Italians waving their flags high, on the walls around the barber shop.

They were certainly a loving, kind, happy family with brother, sister and old man Bioletti cutting your hair. Unless you knew him, and I guess he would have been nearly ninety when I was 9 or 10 years old, old man Bioletti in 'Penny Lane Barber Shop' would frighten the life out of you with his shakey hands thinking that any moment he would nip your neck or cut your ear off. When you knew him he really was a kind, loving, gentle ex-revolutionary who actually loved us lads and he often with his shaky hands deviated from the regulation army-pudding-bowl, short back-and-sides hair cut that our parents demanded—sometimes to good effect, sometimes to bad effect.

Ashton related a hilarious episode that centered on Mr. Bioletti's 'shaky hands' and that once more illustrates John Lennon's famous offbeat if not bizarre sense of humor:

Old man Bioletti also had a rule that boys could only get their hair cut when there were no men

waiting. I had met John going into Bioletti's in Penny Lane on his way back from Quarry Bank School and me from the Bluecoat School. It was after 4 in the afternoon and not long before the men would start arriving on their way home from work with their gasmask knapsacks they used to wear round their necks to carry their packed lunches - their 'bait' - and newspapers. John and I sat down on Bioletti's comfortable bus bench seats that the family had for the boys to sit on and read comics. We were behind two other boys in the queue when some men came in. Exasperated, John said to the two lads in front of us 'Do you know, last week old man Bioletti's cut off somebody's scalp completely, with his shakey hands. You could actually see the brains wobbling around like a dark grey blancmange inside the head. But he was alright 'cos he stuck the scalp back on with sticking plaster'. The two boys left - without a haircut and we got ours done before the rest of the men came in. It was this taste for devilment and bizarre imagery and creative thinking that made John an attractive friend to have on your side.

The Dorset Connection

As Ripperphiles will know, there are a number of connections of the Jack the Ripper case with Dorset—specifically that leading Ripper suspect Montague John Drutt was a Dorset man as was the man in charge of the case, Chief Inspector Frederick George Abberline of Scotland Yard, and the last canonical victim, Mary Jane Kelly, was killed in a court off Dorset Street, Spitalfields.

Well, not that the Biolettis have, to my knowledge, any direct connection to the Whitechapel murders, except peripherally through Mrs. Maybrick's trial, if we grant that James Maybrick has been thrust into the limelight as a possible Ripper suspect through the famous or infamous Diary, but it transpires that the family has a Dorset connection too. James Bioletti who testified at for the defense at Florie's was born in Shaftesbury, Dorset, according to the 1891 census.

Alberto Bioletti, grandfather of James, the man who was born in Turin around 1785, married Mary Feltham, born in Crediton, Devon, who gave birth James Feltham 'Jacques' Bioletti (1808-1882) in Crediton. Jacques married Maria Roberts, born about 1806 in Shaftesbury, and they gave birth to James Albert Bioletti (ca. 1836-ca 1921) who testified in the Maybrick case. It must have been 'Jacques' Bioletti who placed in the 9 September 1865 edition of the Liverpool newspaper *The Star* a small front page advertisement reading, 'Now Open. Bioletti's New Hair-Dressing Rooms. The Largest Appointed in Liverpool. 31 Bold Street.' Evidently the Biolettis moved later to Dale Street, or else possibly for a time father and son carried on business separately and simultaneously in those two prosperous Liverpool city streets. This should be the subject of further research.

By the time of the 1881 census, James F. 'Jacques' Bioletti was listed in that year before his death as a retired hairdresser, living with his wife Maria in the household of their son-in-law, Frederick T. Smith, at 62 Arundel Street, Toxteth Park, Liverpool. The hairdresser and perfumer who appeared at Florie's trial, James Bioletti, was then aged 45, and he and his Shaftesbury-born wife Elizabeth Smith Bioletti, age 37, lived next door at 64 Arundel Street. Interestingly, in the 1881 census it is beside Elizabeth's name not James's, as might be expected, that under 'occupation' it states 'haircutter employing 3 men.' The couple had six children, ranging from 15-year-old Eliza to two-year-old Cora. All of the children, except the infant Cora, including three boys, Theodore, Leslie, and Kesari, are listed as 'scholars.'

By the time of the 1891 census, the family of James and Elizabeth Bioletti were living at 144 Granby Street, Toxteth Park. The couple's first son was listed as a dentist, the younger brother Kesari was an upholsterer, and the second son, Leslie Bioletti, was shown as a hairdresser born circa 1871 presumably assisting his father whose occupation was given as a hairdresser, now age 55, with his wife Elizabeth aged 47. Thus, it may have been Leslie, then aged 20, who was the elderly barber with the 'shaky hands' and the alleged 'Garibaldi revolutionary' that Lennon and his friends knew if he was still alive when they were boys following the Second World War. My cousin, Kenneth W. Matchett, who lived in Penny Lane in the decade prior to the war in St. Barnabas cottage with his father, Liverpool music hall comedian Billy Matchett (my Grandad's brother), recalls buying a car from young Harry Bioletti, presumably James Bioletti's grandson, for £5.0.0! Ah, the good old days! The car, Ken reports, was a 1929 Gordon England fabric covered Austin Seven two-door saloon with sunshine roof, 6 inches square!

Roger Bioletti Adds to the Mersey Beat

Interestingly, following in the Beatles' footsteps, one of the Biolettis was involved in the pop music business in the mid-1960's, adding to the Mersey Beat that produced some 300 pop groups following the national and international success of Liverpool groups such as the Beatles, Gerry and the Pacemakers, and the



Searchers. Specifically, in 1965, Roger Bioletti, nephew of the barber and son of a head librarian at the Picton Road, Wavertree, branch of the Liverpool City Libraries, became the drummer for the second line up of the Georgians rhythm and blues band. Roger was a Quarry Bank High School schoolboy as were some of the other bandmates, and John Lennon before them (the Beatles were originally known as the Quarrymen). That's Roger in the Lennoesque Greek fisherman's hat seated looking rather lost in the group photograph taken in Woolton Woods that year.

Unfortunately, Roger Bioletti is now deceased, or else some of the missing information on the Biolettis' recent history could have been filled in. He died about ten years ago, and attempts to reach his sister and his former wife have proved fruitless. Tim Dugdill, a fellow bandmember in the Georgians, has sent me some hilarious reminiscences about practicing at Roger's parents' house in the Liverpool suburb of Aigburth. Tim relates that Roger's mother was an antiques dealer and the house was absolutely crammed with antiques—Mrs. Bioletti, he says, used her home as a warehouse. The musicians had to pass their instruments through the windows to get them into the house for band practice!

As mentioned earlier, some years ago, the Bioletti barber shop in Penny Lane, or more precisely 11 Smithdown Place, Liverpool 15, was sold to another hairdresser, Tony Slavin, offering 'unisex' hairdos. The look of the original Bioletti barber shop was re-created for the video of the song 'Free As a Bird' on the Beatles Anthology released in 1995. In recent decades, the bus shelter in the roundabout that the Beatles sang about in their 1967 hit 'Penny Lane'—'there beneath the blue suburban skies'—has been converted into a café called 'Dr. Pepper's.'



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