

Substantial Disruption



Daft Jamie, Monarchies, and the World We Live In

By Mike Tully

Daft Jamie was a well-known presence on the streets of early 19th century Edinburgh. His given name was James Wilson, but he was “Daft Jamie” because he was intellectually disabled and limped about on deformed feet as he begged for a living in Grassmarket and other well-traveled parts of the city. He was a harmless young man with a Scottish taste for whiskey and devotion to his snuff box and its contents. None wished him harm, save William Hare.

In late autumn, 1828, Hare invited Daft Jamie into his dwelling to drink whiskey. They were joined by William Burke, who was summoned by Hare’s wife, Margaret. [Burke and Hare](#) were “resurrection men” who provided cadavers to Dr. Robert Knox for anatomical study. A shortage of cadavers had prompted a rash of grave-robbing, but increased security at cemeteries exacerbated the shortage. Burke and Hare had a solution: murder. Hare’s lodging house provided access to potential victims. The men lured travelers and street people with whiskey, got them drunk to the point of helplessness, then asphyxiated them and sold their bodies to Knox. No questions were asked, even though some cadavers were still warm. Knox paid up to ten pounds for bodies and showed little interest in how they came to be dead. When Burke and Hare delivered Wilson’s corpse, several medical students recognized the victim and word circulated that Daft Jamie had gone missing, so Knox hurriedly dissected the body. Daft Jamie was Burke and Hare’s 15th and penultimate victim.

Burke, Hare and their wives were charged with murder, but the women were not convicted and Hare saved his own life by testifying against Burke, who eventually confessed. Hare and the two women fled Edinburgh and were not heard of again. Burke was hanged and his skeleton remains on display at the Edinburgh Medical School. Not everybody regarded the defendants as evil. Sir Walter Scott, who closely followed the murder spree, said they “made a great discovery of Oeconomicks, namely, that a wretch who is not worth a farthing while alive, becomes a valuable article when knockd on the head & carried to an anatomist.” Scott wrote that Burke and Hare had “cleard the streets of some of those miserable offcasts of society, whom nobody missd because nobody wishd to see them again.” They were disposable, even harmless and amiable Daft Jamie.

Every society regards some members as disposable to an extent. To an absolute ruler, though, everyone is disposable, even in monarchies regarded as benevolent. Many Hawaiians [express nostalgia](#) for a land ruled by kings and queens before rogue elements of the United States military defied a presidential order and deposed Queen Lili‘uokalani, Hawaii’s last monarch. The queen was a beloved figure who left much of her estate to care for orphaned and destitute Island children. Nevertheless, her autobiography reveals a dark side.

In [Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen](#) she writes of her ancestor, King Kamehameha IV, that “the king in a fit of passion had shot and mortally wounded one of the party, his own secretary, Mr. H. A. Neilson.” “After the occurrence all that the tenderest of brothers could have done was proffered by the king to the wounded man,” she wrote, “but after lingering for some months, Mr. Neilson died.” The king was distressed by what he had done – he had to be talked out of abdicating -- but none dared question his actions. “No legal notice of the event was in any way taken,” wrote the Queen, adding, “no person would have been foolhardy enough to propose it.”

Lili‘uokalani was aware of her subjects’ disposability, although she regarded herself as loving and benevolent. She gives herself away in chapters 13 and 14. In the latter, entitled, “A Serious Accident,” she describes how her carriage overturned and tossed her into the countryside, where she landed on a patch of marshy ground between two rocks. She was shaken up, suffered bruising and back strain, but no fractures – not a critical injury. Yet, she devoted an entire chapter to her recovery. Contrast that with Chapter 13, dealing with her regency while her brother, King David Kalākaua, was away. In the first paragraph she described a smallpox outbreak in Honolulu and her efforts to quarantine the area and prevent further spread. She succeeded; the outbreak was confined, but still deadly. “(I)t was a serious thing to confine its ravages to the city of Honolulu,” she wrote, “in which there were some eight hundred cases and about three hundred deaths.” Let that sink in: she devoted an entire chapter to her sore back from a carriage accident, but limited her description of the smallpox outbreak to a *single paragraph*. What are three hundred lives compared to the discomfort of the absolute ruler? Three hundred Hawaiian smallpox victims were disposable, just like Daft Jamie. And Jamal Khashoggi.

Kamehameha IV killed Mr. Neilson in a fit of passion and regretted it. Saudi Arabia’s *de facto* ruler, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, only regrets being caught. It’s well settled that Khashoggi was killed by a team acting on bin Salman’s orders. Whether the killing was directly ordered by bin Salman, or inspired by a “[Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?](#)” wink and nod, is unclear. But the Prince has Khashoggi’s blood on his hands and the evolving cover story – that the journalist was accidentally killed in an [interrogation gone wrong](#) – is unfathomable, given that the “interrogation team” included an autopsy expert with a bone saw. From bin Salman’s viewpoint Khashoggi was disposable, so he acted without fear of repercussions from the United States, where President Trump denounces the media as “the enemy of the people.” In most societies, the phrase “enemy of the people” means “traitor” and traitors face the death penalty. Trump gave bin Salman a [green light to silence Khashoggi and get away with it](#), and he might, given Trump’s [reluctance to hold him accountable](#). Trump’s words allowed bin Salman to regard Khashoggi as disposable, relegating him to a pantheon of wretchedness including Daft Jamie and Neilson. Human disposability is a death sentence. The Saudis know that; our ignorant President does not.

If the human race has an original sin, it’s regarding some of its members as disposable. Enlightened societies work to absolve the sin through acknowledging human rights and the rule of law. America, prior to the Trump era, was one of them. But now, with the President’s “[enemy of the people](#)” and “[left-wing mob](#)” rhetoric, we’re making a U-turn. Nobody is safe when leaders regard the populace as disposable. We are all Jamal Khashoggi. We’re all Daft Jamie.