



William Desmond Taylor.

CARLOW FILM DIRECTOR MURDERED IN HOLLYWOOD 100 YEARS AGO

*Christopher Warner recalls a murder that shocked
America's film industry in February, 1922...*

THE DEATH
of William
Desmond

Taylor had all the makings of a classic whodunit: Mystery. Intrigue. Murder. Of all the scandals that have rocked Hollywood, the homicide case involving an Irish-born silent film actor/director is easily one of the most bizarre.

On the frosty morning of 2 February 1922, Taylor was found dead in his swanky two-story bungalow in the posh Westlake district of Los Angeles. He had been shot in the back during the previous night. The incident launched a highly sensationalised investigation that dominated headlines for months.

However, the biggest shock was the discovery of Taylor's true identity – one that involved a stranger-than-fiction past with roots firmly planted in Ireland. Yet, 100 years later, the case remains unsolved, a riddle that continues to bleed more questions than answers.

He was born William Cunningham Deane-Tanner on 26 April, 1872, in the town of Carlow. His father, Major Thomas Kearns Deane-Tanner served in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, 8th battalion (better known as the Carlow Rifles). William's mother, Jane O'Brien, a wealthy land heiress, originally hailed from Ballyporeen, County Tipperary, the same ancestral home of actor and

former U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

As the oldest boy among five children, William benefited from his family's affluence and minor Anglo-Irish gentry, property that included Dublin and County Wexford estates. He also became a skilled equestrian, talents that would serve him well in Tinseltown.

FROM 1885 to 1887, he attended Marlborough College in Wiltshire, England, before returning to Ireland, where family expectations of a military career failed to materialise. So instead, his strict disciplinarian father shipped him off to America as a 'remittance man' – a fairly common practice (or punishment) among the Irish and English upper classes of this era.

After spending a year on a dude ranch, the Carlovian set out to blaze his own trail, eventually crossing paths with the touring theatre company of acclaimed actress Fanny Davenport.

Relying on his good looks and athleticism, he performed under the stage name 'Cunningham Deane'.

Following Davenport's death in 1898, he continued treading the boards with other road companies, relentlessly travelling (sometimes via stagecoach) while adopting the rough and tumble life of an actor.

At the dawn of the 20th century, Taylor moved to New York City. He later married an attractive actress named Ethel May Hamilton, who gave birth to their daughter, Ethel Daisy.

Although accounts regarding his life in the Big Apple vary (both privately and professionally), one thing is certain: William Deane-Tanner vanished from the city on 26 October, 1908, without saying a word.

He gradually meandered his way to the Yukon Territory in hopes of striking it rich as a gold prospector. But when those efforts proved futile, he resumed his acting career as 'William Desmond Taylor', appearing with several troupes throughout the West. Finally, in December 1912, Taylor arrived in southern California seeking work in the burgeoning motion picture industry.

The land of dreams and eternal sunshine would suit the vagabond perfectly.

TAYLOR WASTED little time racking up screen credits, including the title role in the 1914 feature, *Captain Alvarez*. The action flick showcased his riding prowess, including a hair-raising stunt across a swaying rope bridge. *The Morning Telegraph* described it as “One of the most daring feats of horsemanship that has ever been attempted in motion pictures.”

That same year, the rising star parlayed his on-screen success into the director's chair. He would helm more than 50 films, working with A-listers such as “America's Sweetheart” Mary Pickford, and served three terms as president of the Motion Picture Directors Association.

His natural charm and aristocratic demeanour made him a popular figure among Hollywood royalty. Whether calling the shots on set, being chauffeured in his luxury McFarlan convertible, or socialising at the prestigious Los Angeles Athletic Club, Taylor's regal presence commanded respect. Not surprisingly, his name was often romantically linked to a bevy of leading ladies – some of whom later became murder suspects and the subject of endless tabloid fodder.

By the autumn of 1921, Famous Players-Lasky Corporation (forerunner of Paramount Pictures) had emerged as the largest and most powerful film company in the world. But a shocking scandal involving celebrated comedian, Fatty Arbuckle, threatened to destroy studio boss Adolph Zukor's mighty empire at a time when Hollywood at large was already under attack by civic reformers and religious groups for promoting celluloid sins.

Things soon got worse – much worse – with the inexplicable bloodshed of its esteemed director.

TAYLOR'S VALET, Harold Peavey, discovered the lifeless body face-up, positioned neatly on the living room floor. The frightened servant then ran into the courtyard screaming,

thus triggering a frantic chain of events and media circus. Alvarado Court Apartments buzzed with activity as residents, police, and looky-loos swarmed onto the crime scene. Adding to the scrum, the studio dispatched its ‘fixer’, Charles Eyton, to confiscate anything that might reflect poorly on the dead man's employer.



Local authorities quickly ruled out robbery as a possible motive after finding \$78 (\$1,300 today) in Taylor's pocket and a two-carat diamond ring on his finger.

The coroner later determined the 49-year-old victim died from a gunshot wound in his lower left torso at close range. An upward trajectory of the .38 caliber hollow point bullet suggested the assassin may have been short; others speculated the shooter fired from a crouched position.

Neighbours recalled hearing a loud noise the previous night but dismissed it as a backfiring automobile.

The press didn't take long to uncover Taylor's murky past and the wife and child he abandoned in New York. Oddly, the well-known luminary had managed to discreetly reconcile with his daughter the previous year, making her his sole heir. Meanwhile, back in L.A., rumours spread like wildfire. Newspapers spilled barrels of ink on speculation of wild parties. The extensive investigation spawned a long list of possible killers, ranging from spurned lovers to the IRA.

FOR THE sake of brevity, here's a scant peek of the ensemble cast

in this hopelessly convoluted, real-life drama:

■ **Mabel Normand:** The renowned actress was the last known person to have seen Taylor alive on the night of his death. Normand had been battling a severe addiction and sought his help to kick the habit.

■ **Mary Miles Minter (pictured):**

Despite the substantial age difference, the 19-year-old starlet was madly in love with Taylor. Gushing letters and a monogrammed handkerchief with the initials MMM were found at the director's apartment.

■ **Charlotte Shelby:** As Minter's overbearing stage mother, Shelby possessed, at the very least, a clear motive for bumping off Taylor: greed. She feared her daughter's relationship with him would tarnish the topliner's reputation – and, more importantly – jeopardise her massive earnings.

■ **Denis Deane-**

Tanner: Taylor's younger sibling had also emigrated to America. Later, he, too, deserted his wife and child and ended up on the West Coast, possibly working under an alias in his famous brother's films.

Taylor's remains were interred in a crypt under his birth name at Hollywood Memorial Cemetery. There, a stone's throw from the fabled arched gateway of Paramount Studios, ghosts of filmfodder's 'Golden Age' are said to roam freely. Both real and fake.

ON 19 FEBRUARY, 1922, a gang of Hearst-owned newspaper scribes, determined to out-scoop their rivals, abducted Peavey in hopes of frightening him into confessing. After driving the valet to the celebrity-filled graveyard at night, a two-bit thug covered in a white sheet suddenly appeared behind Taylor's tomb. Peavey scoffed. Only in La-La Land.

In the end, no arrests were ever made in the case. Accusations of widespread corruption and police incompetence ultimately fell on deaf ears. Then and now, Los Angeles is a town where the angels left a long time ago. ■

