

**A 'Determined Suicide' at Slad  
by Richard Bond**

The village of Slad in Gloucestershire is best known as the childhood home, and final resting place, of the poet and author Laurie Lee (1914-1997). His early years were captured, famously, in *Cider with Rosie*, a series of evocative tales of village life and a coming of age set against the backdrop of a fading rural idyll. But *Cider with Rosie* also contains dark tales of superstition and death with Slad itself portrayed as a 'poor, self-sufficient and still mainly feudal' village in 'a half-pagan landscape in which violence and madness were all part of one pastoral mess-pot.'<sup>1</sup>

Lee illustrates Slad's darker aspects in the story of the 'private' murder of a man who left the village as a young pauper, packed off to New Zealand, returning to taunt his contemporaries with his new-found wealth, only to be beaten up and left to freeze to death by them, the perpetrators protected by a life-long wall of silence around the tight-knit community. And then there is the 'public' suicide of the fey, 'flock haired pre-Raphaelite stunner', Miss Flynn, whose naked body is found in Jones' pond, the victim of consumption and gossip.<sup>2</sup>

But some twenty years before the events that Lee would immortalise in *Cider with Rosie*, another death took place in Slad, that of my great great grandfather, John Robert Bond. Although it was not an episode that Lee refers to, it may well have contributed to his vision of the 'violence and madness' of the Slad valley that he is at pains to record. What's more, it took place in the very building where Lee himself spent a large part of his life, the Woolpack Inn.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Stroud was a major centre of the woollen industry, then still a prime driver of the national economy. The area was perfect for the industry with the easy availability of Cotswold wool, the constant supply of water from the River Frome and its numerous tributaries running down steep valleys, and the suitability of the natural salts in the spring water for cleaning and dyeing. It was a boom time around the Stroud valleys, with one of the most rapidly growing populations in Europe. Many people were drawn to the area, and off the land, to work in the mills and associated industries<sup>4</sup>. The occupations of those listed in the mid-19th century censuses for the area are a litany of jobs in the woollen industry: cloth workers, flock workers, mule spinners, wool pickers, wool twiners and winders, hand loom weavers, millwrights, burlers, cloth dyers and dye workers. In Slad alone around two thirds of those whose occupations are recorded in the 1851 census were involved in the woollen industry.<sup>5</sup>

With the growth of the mills and the influx of workers came the infrastructure necessary to support them. Along the narrow Slad valley from Stroud four inns appeared, only one of which, the Woolpack itself, still remains, its very name testifying to the importance of wool to the lives of the villagers. According to the 1851 census for Stroudend Tything (including Slad), John Robert Bond, then 13, was living with his parents Richard and Elizabeth Bond, and already working as a cloth worker.<sup>6</sup> Richard, a migrant from Devon, is described as a farmer and 'beer seller', although the first record of his incumbency of the Woolpack Inn is not until 1856.<sup>7</sup> In 1861 he is described as both a cloth worker and a 'publican', but by 1871 he appears only as a 'licenced vituallar' (the evolving terminology itself an indication of the growing importance of the local pub).

Richard remained the landlord of the Woolpack until his death in 1877, when his second wife, another Elizabeth, took over the role in partnership with his eldest surviving son, John Robert. Along with his wife, Emma, and their six young children, John ran the pub with his stepmother while also working at the Strap Works in Stroud.<sup>8</sup>

According to the evidence of his daughter Eliza to the later inquest, on 11 February 1898, the 58 year old landlord slipped on a piece of wood as he was entering the back kitchen of the pub and fell, 'the back of his head coming into contact with the ground'.<sup>9</sup> As a result, 'he suffered great pain in his head and had been very strange in his manner'. Despite receiving medical attention (there

being no visible wound, he was prescribed a 'tonic' for his pain by Doctor Fergusson of Painswick), he returned to work. But his family recalled that he had seemed 'very depressed and scarcely spoke to anyone' in the weeks after his accident. Eliza reported that 'he looked wild at times and concluded that people were always talking about him and remarking that he ought to be kept under restraint'. He had even declared to his daughter that 'if my head does not get better I shall go mad'.

On the morning of 19 March, a few days after Doctor Fergusson had visited John Robert and concluded that he 'would probably require no further medical attendance', Eliza discovered her father in an outbuilding at the back of the Woolpack, 'lying in a pool of blood'. According to the evidence of the local constable, PC Spicer, 'his throat was badly cut, he had a razor clenched firmly in his right hand. The instrument was covered in congealed blood'. Doctor Fergusson was called to examine the body. He found that the jugular vein was completely severed, concluding that 'death would have been instantaneous'. After being advised by the doctor that such an action could reasonably be considered commensurate with the after effects of a severe blow on the head, and on the recommendation of the coroner, the inquest jury passed a verdict of 'suicide whilst temporarily insane'. His death certificate records the cause of death as 'cut throat whilst of unsound mind'.

The Woolpack Inn continued to be run by Elizabeth Bond until her death in 1900 when it was taken over by the Stroud Brewery, just a few years before Laurie Lee's mother, Annie, abandoned by her husband, moved to Slad to raise her young family. By this time the Bond family had left the village, a reflection, perhaps, of the declining cloth industry in the Stroud valleys, out-competed by foreign imports and superseded by heavier industries. My great grandfather, William, took his cloth working skills to Bristol to establish a tailor's business in Victoria Street, the story of his father's unfortunate end being quickly forgotten (only resurfacing as the result of recent family history research).

Lee's poetic evocation of a village consumed by ancient lore, which he likens to 'a cave whose shadows were cluttered by spirits and by laws still vaguely ancestral', suggests that suicide was not uncommon, nor especially shameful. Those poor souls like tragic Miss Flynn were, according to Lee, 'never censured, but were spoken about in a special voice as though their actions raised them above the living and defeated the misery of the world'. Whether this is true of John Robert, we cannot say, but Lee's account of the suicidal tendencies of the locals provides a grimly wry commentary on the subject:

The wet winter days seemed at times unending, and quite often they led to self-slaughter. Girls jumped down wells, young men cut their veins, spinsters locked themselves up and starved.. ...such outbursts were often contagious and could lead to waves of throat-cutting; indeed, during one particularly gloomy season even the coroner did himself in.<sup>10</sup>

1 Cover notes for the original edition of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* (Hogarth Press, 1959).

2 See *ibid.*, chapter 6, 'Public Death, Private Murder'.

3 According to Geoff Sandles (see n. 6 below), in his later years Lee would sit in the Woolpack garden in the summer and use his mobile phone to order another pint of his favourite ale. The landlord had to let the phone ring twice and not pick it up. He would then take Lee's beer out to him.

4 For a more detailed account of the history of the woollen industry in Gloucestershire see, for example, *The Woollen Industry in the Cotswolds* at [www.grahamthomas.com/history](http://www.grahamthomas.com/history) and Jennifer Tann, *Gloucestershire Woollen Mills* (David and Charles, 1967)

5 Stroudend Tything 1851 Census (Painswick Parish), Gloucestershire, enumerator Edward Hewlett

6 *Ibid.*, number 17.

7 Geoff Sandles, *Gloucestershire Pubs* at [www.gloucestershirepubs.co.uk](http://www.gloucestershirepubs.co.uk)

8 I am indebted to a distant cousin, Raymond Bond, for much of the family information, some of which appeared in his short piece on 'Bond Family History' in the *Gloucestershire Family History Society Journal*, vol. 51

(December 1991).

9 A report of the Coroner's inquest appeared in *the Stroud News* on 1st April 1898 under the title 'Determined Suicide at Slad'.

10 *Cider with Rosie*, Chapter 6, 'Public death, private murder'.