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London, the 1790s. Europe is in turmoil, and mysterious forces seem to be edging England into a disastrous war with France. Not quite at the center of the political maelstrom is James Tilly Matthews, a Welsh tea merchant and antiwar advocate who holds covert meetings with the leaders of both countries. But Matthews also believes his mind is being controlled by a gang of revolutionary "terrorists" and their diabolical secret machine called the Air Loom. The only man aware of the Air Loom's existence, Matthews is promptly declared mad and exiled to Bedlam, where he is held against his will for the rest of his life — by order of England's home secretary, Lord Liverpool. At Bedlam his "delusions" are celebrated as the most complex and bizarre ever recorded, but the truth of his case is even stranger than his doctors realize: many of the incredible political episodes in which he claims to have been involved are entirely real.

The Air Loom Gang: The Strange and True Story of James Tilly Matthews and His Visionary Madness Details

Date : Published April 1st 2004 by Basic Books (first published April 1st 2003)

ISBN : 9781568582979

Author : Mike Jay

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Psychology, Biography, Politics, Science, Health, Mental Health

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From Reader Review *The Air Loom Gang: The Strange and True Story of James Tilly Matthews and His Visionary Madness* for online ebook

Tim says

Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're NOT out to get you! An amazing story, of an 18th c madman whose mad tales about his engagement at the highest levels of the french revolutionary govt and the british government, and his brokering of a (failed) secret peace treaty were absolutely true. Oh, and he also had his mind being controlled by secret govt agents sending pneumatic rays from a giant leyden-jar and wind powered machine hidden in a basement in london..(eh, not true.)

Great book, and after hearing an interview with the author Mike Jay on a podcast (<http://www.techgnosis.com/chunks.php?...> also want to read his book on the history of laughing gas (nitrous oxide).

Laura says

This is the story of James Tilly Matthews, a madman whose lunacy had roots in reality. The actual events of his life were often on par with his delusions, in fact, there are points at which they intersect in such a way as to become indistinguishable. Jay tries separate the threads of his life to determine when Tilly's descent into madness began, was it always there or was it precipitated by life events? At times Jay interjects a little too much opinion when the reader would have best been let to scrutinize the evidence without prejudice; however, his descriptions of Matthews' world were engaging and informative without being overbearing.

Matthews is a peacemaker who wants to prevent war between Britain and France as the terrors of the French Revolution escalate. While Jay makes a case that Matthews is quite sane at the onset his secret negotiations and that the madness is triggered by his very real persecution. I question that conclusion. His paranoia is well founded but I suspect most of the people he tried to negotiate with considered him mad from the beginning of his quest. What follows is his incarceration in France, eventual return to England, and subsequent interment in Bedlam where he lived out most of the rest of his life. Matthews' relatives repeatedly try to get him released but to no avail; however, Matthews does not just quietly retire into the background. Instead he becomes an architect and engraver, completing detailed, and beautiful, architectural renderings and plans.

A good portion of the book is given over to the history of Bedlam, how it is run, and the career of John Haslam, Bedlam's apothecary during Matthews' confinement. I found the history and evolution of the mad house to be the most interesting part of the book. Matthews himself drew up plans for a "modern" asylum that would be more patient friendly. He died before it became a reality, but his ideas, in an curious twist of fate, became integrated into the newer facilities.

Jo says

Are you paranoid if they're really out to get you? The strange tale of James Tilly Matthews, super spy or super nutjob. In the late 18th century he was admitted to Bedlam, the famous mental institution, claiming that a secret group were using mind control against most of the populace, especially leading politicians of the day. Matthews was the only one who knew what was really happening and that was why his life was in danger. What follows is a fantastical tale that may have some element of truth to it. This is the first 'famous' case in psychiatry which is still referred to today by those in the profession. The author presents a good case, seemingly unbiased as he simply reports the facts and leaves it up to the reader to decide what is true. Fascinating.

Elizabeth says

Some more late 18th C reading, so much was changing in society... sort of like the 60s, and even our more recent technologically advancing times, only at a more leisurely pace. In telling the story of James Tilley Matthews, Mike Jay investigates the climate of revolutionary era France and the attendant malaise in England. He also traces the changing attitudes towards society's care, or lack thereof, of those deemed mad. A compassionate telling of one man's life at a pivotal moment in history. Well worth reading.

jzthompson says

This book deals with the tragic history of James Tilly Matthews; a London businessman who apparently came to believe that his actions were controlled by a sinister gang of conspirators* via their "Air Loom" machine that was able to exert a mesmeric influence on it's victims. After accusing Lord Liverpool of treason from the public gallery of the Houses of Parliament Matthews was confined to Bedlam for (nearly all) the rest of his life. Matthews's delusions seem to have arisen from his horrific experiences in revolutionary France and many consider him to be one of the first documented instances of paranoid schizophrenia.

I must admit that this is probably not a book I would have brought myself. The history of insanity is one of my pet subjects (we all have them) but I've always been a bit suspicious of the amount of ink spilled on the lurid details of the individual delusions and a book that on the face of things seemed entirely concerned with the intimate details of one unfortunate man's madness didn't appear to have a great deal of merit to it.

I've also grown weary with the way that otherwise sensible historians seem to go a bit peculiar when covering subjects related to the French Revolution... the hints in the blurb that Matthews may really have been at the centre of some kind of plot didn't exactly dispel this impression - the cover quote from a Science Fiction author seemed to imply we were in Parahistory territory here. Not something I have a great deal of patience with.

So had I come across this in a bookshop I probably would have left it on the shelf. Thankfully then my brother has slightly more discernment in these matters than I have and got me this for a Christmas present.

All my expectations and concerns were utterly unfounded. Mike Jay's book is fascinating; one of the clearest and most sympathetic explanations of the history of different theories of madness and how to treat the mad I've ever read as well as being a solid primer on the French Revolution. The details of Matthews's involvement with high politics are unclear but we are not on Barbarian Illuminati and Lizard-People territory here. Far from picking over the details of Matthews's madness for his audiences prurient entertainment Jay

skillfully and humanely unravels the origins and ever-shifting details of the "Air Loom" delusion.

The story is told with the pace of a novel and the clarity of a well written article. Dealing with aspects of Matthews's life more thematically than strictly chronologically Jay illuminates the obscure details of Matthews's history clearly and humanely whilst providing a wealth of detail on the subjects that touched upon his life - most notably the battles between the Jacobins and Girodnists in revolutionary France, the growing tide of political reaction in Britain and the battle between the physicalist theory of madness, represented here by Matthew's Doctor at Bedlam John Haslam, and the religiously inclined Moral Therapists.

Of particular note here is Jay's objectivity - due in no small part to the succesful propaganda of the moral therapists many treatments of Bedlam force "Mad Doctors" such as Haslam into the role of barbaric sadists, putting their patients through perverted torments for no better reason than their own barbaric delight. It's also easy for modern people to see the Moral Therapists as painfully wet proto-Victorians whose answer to everything was a prayer meeting. Obviously, as Jay shows, it was all a little more complicated than that and both sides had their virtues. Ultimately rather than siding with either of these imperfect parties Jay shows why both thought as they did whilst his sympathies always lie with Matthews.

I can't help but feel that Matthews would have had a lot happier life had a time travelling Mike Jay ever taken responsibility for his care.

I will be recommending this book widely - in particular to those with an interest in the history of madness and the French revolution - and keeping a careful eye out for anything else by Mike Jay.

*Are there many gangs of conspirators that aren't sinister? If you are a member of a friendly, open-hearted gang of conspirators please feel free to get in touch.

Katherine says

After carrying this book around for weeks, never feeling compelled to read more than a few pages at a time, I am finally abandoning it. The issue? It seems as though the author is attempting to weave a cloak of mystery about Matthews that simply shouldn't exist. The case appears quite clear - Matthews was a meddler in political affairs at a time of crisis, always with the seeds of delusion in his mind. Jay repeatedly delays calling him mad - he isn't insane yet, his actions are entirely reasonable. Each defense becomes increasingly thin and unlikely. And then we come to Matthew's Cabbage Scheme. (I know, it sounds intriguing - resist the temptation to investigate!) As someone with a mental illness, I'm telling you, this is definitely nutty. And still Jay offers excuses.

I am out of patience with the author and increasingly distrustful of his ability to competently interpret historical events. I'm done.

Linda says

The primary concern I had with this book was that it was too much. The writing should really be tightened

up because the subject, and the controversy surrounding it, are fantastic.

James Tilly Matthews spent most of his life in Bedlam Hospital classified as an "incurable" lunatic. At a habeas corpus hearing that his family brought against the hospital, the witnesses for the family provided more than ample evidence that the man was totally sane and had been imprisoned for no just cause. The other side only had one witness that provided proof of insanity - Matthews believed that he and everyone else but especially the government were being controlled by the Air Loom, a huge machine that used effluvia to create electric waves that then influenced the thoughts of the people who were targeted.

So who was right? Or were both? Jay provides evidence both ways but not entirely clearly. Matthews was definitely persecuted. He had done a secret mission to the Girontin government in France just after the Revolution to try to keep England and France from declaring war. There is proof of this "mission" and reason to believe that the government was aware of it - it was not government sponsored - and wanted to keep Matthews quiet. But he did have his crazy moments. Several times after sending polite letters to various governmental actors and not getting a response, he would shoot out a second letter, ripping them a new one.

He could have been a paranoid schizophrenic. Alienists (the first psychologists) were starting to see increasing numbers of patients who expressed a belief that a machine was somehow influencing their minds. Could this be a manifestation of the increasing industrialization of the age?

Jay brings up very interesting ideas in the book, circling around Matthews and his Influencing Machine the entire time. But I was left hanging at the end, not because he didn't "solve" the "mystery" or give a good explanation but because he brought up so many interesting points about the changing culture and how it affected people and didn't investigate them thoroughly or entirely. They were often tossed out with a "could this possibly be a cause of something?" and then abandoned.

However, Matthews's story and his detailed description of the Air Loom are worth reading about.

Kim Zinkowski says

A-. A book about madness that I don't remember very well.

Diane S ? says

The early days of bedlam and the beginnings of psychiatry are explored, using the strange case of James Tilly Matthews. Found so much of this book fascinating, not only his case but all the early thoughts concerning those thought mad and the many different opinions on how it should be treated. The court trials on lunacy and how the staff had little or no training and yet they were often the sole caretakers of these poor unfortunates.

The doctor's own egos often got in the way of fairness, once they thought they knew better it was almost impossible for them to see another way, often using the patient as a way to make their mark in their profession. Since Matthew's case was so unusual, since much of what he alleged was true, although his delusion that an air loom was controlling people's thoughts was of course not true, his case was very different and difficult to quantify. The French Revolution played a key part in his illness and I enjoyed that part of the

book as well.

Altogether an interesting case study and a fascinating look at the many different opinions and treatments in his case and in history in general.

Amanda says

Read this based on a friend's recommendation, and it did not disappoint. This book relates the story of James Tilly Matthews, an inmate of the infamous Bethlem mental hospital in London. He was judged to be insane, and was locked up for the rest of his life. Trouble is, much of the story that landed him in the incurable lifer ward at Bedlam was actually kind of, well, true. Whoopse! If there was a genre for oddball, Fortean, or forgotten history, this book would be right at home there. Recommended.

Richard says

More than two centuries ago, James Tilly Matthews imagined this: a sinister device, the Air Loom Machine, built into a basement beneath London's streets and designed to manipulate world events by controlling, from a distance, the minds of politicians. Today this idea would be rejected by publishing houses as unoriginal; but this was the 1780s with the industrial revolution barely under way and the cutting-edge technology and science from which he wove his machine were things like textile looms and early steam engines, magnetism and the new chemistry of gases.

He described his Air Loom in meticulous detail - and if he *had* written all this as fiction, a century before Butler, Verne, Wells or Kafka, his creation would have become as much a classic as *Erewhon* or *The Trial* - and, like them, would today be seen as a prescient satire, a glimpse of the future and many of our modern obsessions: conspiracy theories, mind control, paranoia, technophobia. But Matthews wasn't a fiction writer, he believed his Air Loom Machine was *real* - and, as a result, spent the greater part of his life in Bedlam, the notorious lunatic asylum.

This, though, doesn't even begin to tell you about his remarkable life. He was considered by almost everyone who knew him - family, friends and even many of his keepers - as perfectly sane in all other respects. There were legal proceedings and campaigns to have him released which went on for years. He was likeable, knowledgeable, intelligent - and talented: before the Air Loom he was an architect and superb draughtsman. Imagine H G Wells as perfectly normal, educated, rational, still H G Wells in every respect...except believing he could travel through time. Or Kafka, still as the same Franz Kafka, with just the single eccentric belief that he had become a giant beetle. Moreover, some of Matthews' other grandiose claims were quite true: he really was a spy - a double agent - in Paris during the Revolution and subsequent Terror. He really was betrayed by both sides. He had the ear of top politicians of the day, had private meetings with Prime Minister Pitt - risked the guillotine and almost starved to death in a Parisian slum.

The suspicion, even at the time, is that he knew too much about too many people, was declared insane and shut up in Bedlam for the rest of his life as a way of keeping him quiet. If true, then his fantasies about a conspiracy were also true and in this respect he was also ahead of his time: a century and a half later the USSR, for example, took to declaring its dissidents 'insane' and sending them to lunatic asylums.

Matthews never was released - but did the Air Loom actually save his life? While reading Mike Jay's marvellous biography, a fairly mind-stopping idea came to *me*: if he'd been *completely* sane, they might have had to actually bump him off, but the Air Loom gave them enough of an excuse to shut him away - and, in so doing, automatically discredit as lunatic 'ravings' anything he might say about them. More, was it Matthews' *unconscious* mind which saved his life this way? He had already cheated the guillotine in Paris because the Jacobins simply thought him a mad Englishman and let him go; did his unconscious learn this lesson and, a few years later, create the Air Loom Machine so convincingly the trick worked for real this time?

Who knows? All I can say is that, if it did happen that way, it would still be the least extraordinary thing about this man's extraordinary life.

Mark says

In *The Air Loom Gang* (to be rereleased soon in a revised form as *The Influencing Machine*), Mike Jay tells the story of James Tilly Matthews, one of the best documented pre-20th century cases of schizophrenia, and the bizarre and serendipitous circumstances that preceded his madness. Matthews' story is presented here as a globe-hopping cloak-and-dagger affair. The cast of characters include megalomaniacal revolutionaries and treacherous parliamentarians. The settings range from Paris during the Reign of Terror to the most decrepit corners of Bedlam hospital. This is no dry non-fiction, but a historical adventure worthy of Dumas.

But these histrionics cloud the narrative, as when Jay introduces us to the eponymous Air Loom Gang. He wants to convince the reader that the Gang is fundamentally important to understanding Matthews' psychological condition. They are, after all, the shadowy figures hiding (looming?) behind every corner of his psyche, their machine and their machinations utterly dominating Matthews' mental state. But the drama is unconvincing. The Gang is a curious detour in the historical account of Matthews' madness, but they are not central to his story.

This is the flaw in Jay's approach: he has presented us a gripping narrative, but all too often we can see the set pieces for the styrofoam that they are. Where *The Air Loom Gang* is most compelling is not as a historical biography, but as a lesson in the uses and misuses of authorial sensationalism. Today's non-fiction bestseller lists are overpopulated by writers who have made a grotesque art out of wringing inauthentic narratives from mountains of primary documents. Jay's source material is strong, and he is a talented storyteller, but *The Air Loom Gang* would benefit from a bit more of the academic sobriety he seems eager to avoid.

Manderson says

This is a compelling and fascinating piece of history that goes far beyond the story of James Tilly Matthews to explore the world in which such a man could have existed. If history texts were like this, I think social studies would suddenly become the most beloved class. I feel like I gained insight into the era of the French Revolution in a way I never had before, in addition to the (more expected) insights on evolving treatment and understanding of "lunacy."

Jennifer W says

Oh man. This is my kind of book, craziness and history. The end of chapter 3 has this thing set up like a spy thriller novel, and yet it's true. A high ranking politician has just weighed in on an insanity/habeas corpus hearing saying that this man living in Bedlam institution is not to be released, but gives no reason why. Perhaps "they" really are out to get him. You can't make this stuff up.

The chapters on the French Revolution was a bit boring and also confusing. I think that was the point (the confusing part). Once we got back to the story of Matthews in Bedlam and those involved in his treatment/imprisonment there, the story picked back up. So glad I finally got around to reading this.

Simon Mclish says

Originally published on my blog here in March 2004.

The most famously insane person of the eighteenth century was of course George III, one of the most celebrated madmen of all time. Yet his case is not as interesting in itself (rather than for who the patient was) as that of a contemporary Englishman, James Tilly Matthews. The turn of the nineteenth century was a pivotal time in the history of the treatment of the insane, as asylas began to be built which were more like hospitals than the prison-like buildings which preceded them, and the way in which Matthews was incarcerated turned out to be important in the precipitation of this change. Matthews' life and delusions are fascinating in themselves, as well as being unusually well documented (this fact meaning that he is one of the first cases where psychologists have been able to attempt to make a modern diagnosis).

The Matthews case basically begins, as does Jay's book, with a disturbance at the Houses of Parliament. Matthews interrupted the closing stages of a debate in the early 1790s, the one which lead to the declaration of war with revolutionary France, by shouting out "Treason!" from the Visitors' Gallery. He was led away and committed to Bethlem Hospital, the place that is the origin of the term "Bedlam". He remained there for a couple of decades until just before his death. His delusions were principally that a secret organisation was using a device called an "Air Loom" to control people's thoughts and precipitate a war between France and Britain. The really odd thing is that Matthews had actually been involved in secret negotiations with the revolutionary government, so that his delusions had some basis in reality. That of course was not acknowledged by the British government of the time.

So many elements come together in the Matthews case that it is easy to see why Jay chose him as the subject of his book. He has responded to the story with a book which is exciting as well as fascinating. In places it even seems as though it is a historical thriller rather than a non-fictional narrative. (It reminded me of "steampunk" novels, like K.W. Jeter's *Infernal Devices*, for example; this is partly because of the science fiction resonances of the air loom device.) *The Air Loom Gang* is very highly recommended; wonderfully written, engrossing.
