Soon after Roderick Maclean -- a shabbily dressed man who was obsessed with the number four and the color blue and who thought God had chosen him to be a poet, a prophet and a king -- pointed a revolver at the carriage carrying the Queen of England, fired and missed, Victoria acknowledged the strange exhilaration she felt after the latest attempt on her life. Noting the outpouring of public sympathy and respect, she wrote to her daughter that "it is worth being shot at to see how much one is loved."

In "Shooting Victoria: Madness, Mayhem and the Rebirth of the British Monarchy," Paul Thomas Murphy, who teaches writing at the University of Colorado, shows how eight decisions to "take a pop at the Queen" during her 64-year reign became "golden opportunities" to strengthen the British monarchy. A splendid storyteller who makes the most of a Dickensian cast of characters, Murphy steps back, as well, providing a fresh and often fascinating look at the royal family, iconic 19th-century British politicians (Peel, Palmerston, Disraeli and Gladstone), law and medicine.

Unlike assassins in France, who were avowedly political, Murphy notes, Victoria's assailants were tormented by inner demons. Convinced that demented would-be regicides in England might be deterred by punishments that would degrade rather than elevate them, government officials shelved the capital crime of "high treason" in favor of a misdemeanor that carried penalties of hard labor, public whipping and/or exile to Australia.

These developments, Murphy reveals, did not resolve the already "fiendishly difficult situation" for the defense. If the accused was found guilty, he lost. But if he were found not guilty by reason of insanity, the judgment carried an even worse outcome, what might, in effect, be a life sentence in an asylum. Nor was the passage of the Trial of Lunatics Act in 1883, which changed the permitted verdict to "guilty but insane," all that helpful. Although, coincidentally, Victoria was never shot at after that, Murphy indicates that for the next 81 years, "guilty but insane" (and the consequence attached to it) applied to "every poor insane soul who committed a felony."

After their 15 minutes of fame, Victoria's assassins faded into obscurity. Some of them lived on in harsh psychiatric and penal regimens. Others recovered. Relocated to Melbourne, Australia, where he adopted the "simple and telling alias of John Freeman," Edward Oxford became a painter, a writer, a pillar of the Anglican Church, and married a well-heeled widow. John Francis also
became a "well-adjusted, productive, fairly-well-off Melbournian." Murphy attributes their rehabilitation to Bethlem asylum and hard labor. But you have to question, don't you, what English citizens knew then -- and what we know now -- about the origins, implications and trajectory of the condition called "madness."

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SHOOTING VICTORIA

**By:** Paul Thomas Murphy.

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**Review:** "Shooting Victoria" demonstrates that the men who decided to "take a pop at the Queen" gave her eight golden opportunities to strengthen the monarchy. Murphy also examines the efforts of politicians, physicians and lawyers to design a punishment that would be just -- and would deter future assassins.

Queen Victoria, aged 25, 1844, painting by F. Winterhalter

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