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Sir,

I am not able to comment on the general accuracy of Paddy McGarvey's article about Suzanne Breen, but he is wrong about John George Haigh. Scotland Yard did not prosecute and gaoil the editor of the "Daily Mirror" - since when did the police ever have this power? And Sylvester Bolam was not prosecuted for identifying Haigh as the acid bath murderer before he could be arraigned.

After Haigh was charged with the murder of the wealthy widow Mrs Olive Durand-Deacon, the "Daily Mirror" of March 4, 1949 reported not that he was charged with other murders but that he had committed other murders. The names of victims and descriptions of these alleged murders were given.

Haigh, who claimed to be a vampire, hoped to escape the hangman's noose by a plea of insanity, and it remains to be seen how many of the other murders he actually committed; three of his other alleged victims were not named (and may not have existed). At that time, when an accused was charged with more than one murder, the Crown would not prosecute both or all simultaneously but would proceed with one. It was not the police but Haigh himself who had Bolam gaoled. From his cell in Lewes Prison, he brought two motions for writs of attachment for contempt of court. The case was heard by the Lord Chief Justice himself, Lord Goddard, sitting with Mr Justice Humphreys and Mr Justice Birkett. The court had stern words for the editor and the paper's owners: "The publication of a statement which may prejudice in any way the fair conduct of a case, whether civil or criminal, is a plain abuse of the right to report news freely." The "Mirror's" contempt was said to have violated every principle of justice and fair play which it has been the pride of this country to extend to the worst of criminals. It was, it was said, a gross contempt. The court echoed the words of Lord Hardwicke from 1742, that this was "a case of prejudicing mankind against persons before their case is heard."

There is at least one alleged serial killer who was grateful for this law; in 1957, Dr Bodkin Adams stood trial for the murder of one of his patients. Although he was charged with only two murders there was much lurid speculation that he was a precursor of Harold Shipman, but at trial the case fell apart. As the pathologist Keith Simpson pointed out caustically, stroke victim Mrs Morrell who had been given a year at most to live, survived for two and a half years under the doctor who had supposedly murdered her.

Yours Sincerely,
A Baron