

COMMENTARY

Sometimes We Do Reinvent the Wheel: Commentary on MacDonald (1912)

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As a researcher of targeted violence, I found Arthur MacDonald's work "Assassins of Rulers" (MacDonald, 1912) very provocative. Although different norms for behavioral and criminological research early the past century may have limited the current applicability of MacDonald's findings, this work highlighted certain paradigmatic issues that have later emerged within the targeted violence literature.

Before addressing commonalities with recent research, discussion of methodological issues is warranted. First, one is impressed with how detailed MacDonald's presentation is across the range of cases of political assassination and regicide. One wonders how more descriptive MacDonald's work would have been if he had access to the Internet and its vast array of sources in a 24-hr news cycle within our current information saturated culture. On the research methodology side, the applicability of MacDonald's findings may have been limited by both methodological limitations within his work as well as the limited utilization of behavioral threat assessment concepts by law enforcement during the early 20th century. Further, current researchers and journal reviewers would question MacDonald's limited sourcing, especially given the descriptive and declarative nature of his research. This study does not contain a research methodology section including sampling strategies, but instead engages in rather descriptive exposition of some of the relevant conditions and behaviors of assassins sampled. Noteworthy, however, is that MacDonald even includes near miss cases, though he does not make note of this distinction.

More striking about MacDonald's work are several commonalities with current research highlighted within his analysis. Consistent with the threat assessment literature in general, MacDonald asserts that such political violence was not impulsive but deliberative by asserting: "The assassins of rulers do not usually proceed in a sudden and blind way, like the insane, but their assaults are generally logically conceived and premeditated" (p. 505).

Such an assertion put MacDonald at odds with many previous violence frameworks that were impulsivity or pathology driven. It was not until Calhoun's (1998) work investigating violence toward the judiciary and the Exception Case Study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999) that researchers spent more time detailing the behavioral precursors and deliberative nature of targeted violence.

Consistent with the recent literature, MacDonald also noted that no set profile of assassins emerged, consistent with American and European research assessing violence toward political leaders (e.g., Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; Meloy et al., 2004; James et al., 2008). In addition, those who engaged in such extreme violence also displayed a range of mental conditions and backgrounds (James et al., 2007, 2011; Meloy et al., 2004; Scalora et al., 2002a). MacDonald also detailed a range of attacker motives, though all of the motives cited justified the attack behavior (James et al., 2009; Scalora et al., 2002a). Further, many of the motives detailed were of personal value to the perpetrator (Scalora et al., 2002a, Scalora et al., 2002b; Calhoun & Weston, 2009). MacDonald's detailed description of various attacker motivations also relates to political violence and terrorism research as he noted political extremism as motivating some of the attacks (e.g., Borum, Fein, & Vossekuil, 2012).

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Within the current peer review environment, there is often pressure on researchers to detail the most recent and current literature to assure reviewers and editors that they are on top of the related research. Reviewing MacDonald's study highlighted for this author the need for researchers to be more humble in recognizing that we may be sometimes "reinventing the wheel."

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