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William Desmond Taylor



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William Desmond Taylor

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William Desmond Taylor (born William Cunningham Deane-Tanner; 26 April 1872 – 1 February 1922) was an Irish [director](#) and [actor](#). He was a popular figure in the growing [Hollywood](#) motion picture colony of the 1910s and early 1920s, having directed 59 [silent films](#) between 1914 and 1922 and acted in 27 between 1913 and

William Desmond Taylor

1915.

Taylor's murder on 1 February 1922, along with other Hollywood scandals, such as the [Roscoe Arbuckle](#) trial, led to a frenzy of sensationalist and often fabricated newspaper reports. The murder remains an official [cold case](#).

Early life

William Cunningham Deane-Tanner was born into the [Anglo-Irish](#) gentry on 26 April 1872, at Evington House, [County Carlow](#), Ireland, one of five children of a retired [British Army](#) officer, Major Kearns Deane-Tanner of the Carlow Rifles, and his wife, Jane O'Brien. His siblings were [Denis Gage Deane-Tanner](#), Ellen "Nell" Deane-Tanner Faudel-Phillips, Lizzie "Daisy" Deane-Tanner, and Oswald Kearns Deane-Tanner. The Home Rule MP [Charles Kearns Deane Tanner](#) was his father's youngest brother.

From 1885-1887 Taylor attended [Marlborough College](#) in England. In 1890, Taylor left

Ireland for a [dude ranch](#) in [Kansas](#). At the time, it was a short-lived trend among some of the Anglo-Irish and English [gentry](#) to send their sons to the United States to become "[gentleman farmers](#)". In Kansas, William became reacquainted with acting (his first experiences being at school) and eventually moved to New York.

While in New York, he courted Ethel May Hamilton, an actress who had appeared in the stage musical [Florodora](#) under the name Ethel May Harrison. Her father was a broker, and was an investor in the English antiques store on



Born	26 April 1872 County Carlow , Ireland
Died	1 February 1922 (aged 49) Los Angeles, California , U.S.
Cause of death	Homicide
Resting place	Hollywood Forever Cemetery
Nationality	Irish
Other names	
Occupation	Director, actor
Years active	1913–1922 Ethel May Hamilton (m. 1901-1912)
Children	1
Relatives	Denis Gage Deane-Tanner (brother)

Fifth Avenue, the Antique Shoppe, that employed Taylor. The couple married in an [Episcopal](#) ceremony on 7 December 1901, at the [Little Church Around the Corner](#), and had a daughter in 1902 or 1903. Taylor was active socially, belonging to a yacht club, and known to carry on affairs with women. The Deane-Tanners were well known in New York society and members of several clubs. He was known as a ladies' man and a heavy drinker, possibly depressed, when he abruptly vanished on 23 October 1908, at the age of 36, deserting his wife and their daughter, Ethel Daisy. After Taylor's disappearance, friends said he had suffered "mental lapses" before, and his family thought at first he had wandered off during an episode of [amnesia](#). His wife obtained a state decree of divorce in 1912.

Little is known of the years immediately following his disappearance. He traveled through Canada, Alaska, and the northwestern United States, gold mining and working with various acting troupes. Eventually, he switched from acting to producing. By the time he arrived in San Francisco around 1912, William Deane-Tanner had changed his name to William Desmond Taylor; In San Francisco, some New York acquaintances met him, and provided him with some money to re-establish himself in Los Angeles.

Hollywood

In Hollywood, Taylor worked as a movie actor starting in 1913, including four appearances opposite [Margaret "Gibby" Gibson](#). He directed his first film, [The Awakening](#), in 1914, as an actor-director. Over the next few years, he directed more than 50 films.

Between 1914 and 1919, Taylor was engaged to actress [Neva Gerber](#), whom he had met during the filming of *The Awakening*. Gerber later recalled, "He was the soul of honour, a man of personal culture, education, and refinement. I have never known a finer or better man."

Around 1915, Taylor made contact with a sister-in-law, Ada Brennan Deane-Tanner, wife of Taylor's younger brother Denis. A former British Army lieutenant and manager of New York antiques business (separate from Taylor's), Denis had also abandoned his wife and children, disappearing in 1912. Ada and her daughters moved to [Monrovia, California](#), where Ada could be treated at the Pottinger Sanitorium for [tuberculosis](#). Ada's sister, Lillian Pomeroy, was married to the sanitorium's physician in charge, Dr. John L. Pomeroy. Taylor decided to send Ada a monthly check in the amount of \$50.00 to help her support her children, after her husband's abandonment. This would become public after Taylor's murder, and the press descended upon the little town of Monrovia.

Towards the end of [World War I](#), in July 1918, at the age of 46, Taylor enlisted in the [Canadian Expeditionary Force](#) as a private. After training for four and a half months at [Fort Edward, Nova Scotia](#), Taylor sailed from Halifax on a troop transport carrying 500 Canadian soldiers. They arrived at [Hounslow Barracks](#), London on 2 December 1918.

Taylor was ultimately assigned to the [Royal Army Service Corps](#) of the Expeditionary Forces Canteen Service, stationed at [Dunkirk](#), and promoted to the temporary grade of lieutenant on 15 January 1919. At the end of April 1919, Taylor reached his final billet at Berguet, France, as Major Taylor, Company D, [Royal Fusiliers](#). Upon returning to Los Angeles on 14 May 1919, Taylor was honoured by the [Motion Picture Directors Association](#) with a formal banquet at the [Los Angeles Athletic Club](#).

After returning from military service, Taylor went on to direct some of the most popular stars of the era, including [Mary Pickford](#), [Wallace Reid](#), [Dustin Farnum](#) and his protégée, [Mary Miles Minter](#), who starred in the 1919 version of *[Anne of Green Gables](#)*.

By this time, Taylor's ex-wife and daughter were aware that he was working in Hollywood. In 1918, while watching the film *Captain Alvarez*, they saw Taylor appear on the screen. Ethel responded, "That's your father!" In response, Ethel Daisy wrote Taylor in care of the studio. In 1921, Taylor visited his ex-wife and daughter in New York City and made Ethel Daisy his legal heir.

Murder

At 7:30 am on the morning of 2 February 1922, Taylor's body was found inside his [bungalow](#) at the Alvarado Court Apartments, 404-B South [Alvarado Street](#), in [Westlake, Los Angeles](#), a trendy and affluent neighborhood. A crowd gathered inside, and someone identifying himself as a doctor stepped forward, made a cursory examination of the body, and declared Taylor had died of a stomach [hemorrhage](#). The doctor was never seen again, perhaps owing to his own embarrassment, because when doubts later arose, the body was rolled over by forensic investigators revealing the 49-year-old film director had been shot at least once in the back with what appeared to have been a small-caliber pistol, which was not found at the scene.

The bungalows were demolished in the 1960s. The actual murder location is a parking lot near Alvarado and Maryland Streets. The parking lot has served Pic 'n Save, Alpha Beta Supermarket, and, as of 2017, Ross and Dollar Tree.

Funeral

Taylor's funeral took place on February 7, 1922, in [St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral](#). After an [Episcopal](#) ceremony, Taylor was interred in a mausoleum at [Hollywood Forever Cemetery](#) ("Hollywood Cemetery") on [Santa Monica Boulevard](#), in [Hollywood](#). The inscription on his crypt reads, "In Memory of William C. Deane-Tanner, Beloved Father of Ethel Deane-Tanner. Died 1 February 1922."

Investigation

In Taylor's pockets, investigators found a wallet holding \$78 in cash (\$1,140 today), a silver cigarette case, a Waltham [pocket watch](#), a [pen knife](#), and a [locket](#) bearing a photograph of actress [Mabel Normand](#). A two-carat diamond ring was on his finger. With the evidence of the money and valuables on Taylor's body, robbery seemingly was not the motive for the killing; however, a large but undetermined sum of cash that Taylor had shown to his accountant the day before was missing and apparently never accounted for. After some investigation, the time of Taylor's death was set at 7:50 pm on the evening of 1 February 1922.

While being interviewed by the police five days after the director's body was found, [Mary Miles Minter](#) said that following the murder, a friend, director and actor [Marshall Neilan](#), had told her that Taylor had made several highly "delusional" statements about some of his social acquaintances (including her) during the weeks before his death. She also said that Neilan thought Taylor had recently become "insane".

In the midst of a media circus caused by the case, Los Angeles Undersheriff [Eugene Biscailuz](#) warned [Chicago Tribune](#) reporter [Eddie Doherty](#), "The industry has been hurt. Stars have been ruined. Stockholders have lost millions of dollars. A lot of people are out of jobs and incensed enough to take a shot at you."

According to [Robert Giroux](#), "The studios seemed to be fearful that if certain aspects of the case were exposed, it would exacerbate their problems." [King Vidor](#) said of the case in 1968: "Last year I interviewed a Los Angeles police detective, William Michael Cahill, Sr., now retired, who had been assigned to the case immediately after the murder. He told me, 'We were doing all right and then, before a week was out, we got the word to lay off.'"

Suspects and witnesses

More than a dozen individuals were eventually named as suspects by both the press and the police. Newspaper reports at the time were both

overwhelmingly sensationalised and speculative, even fabricated, and the murder was used as the basis for much subsequent "true crime" fiction. Many inaccuracies were carried forward by later writers who used articles from the popular press as their sources. Overall, most accounts have consistently focused on seven people as suspects and witnesses.

Edward Sands

Edward F. Sands had prior convictions for embezzlement, forgery, and serial desertion from the US military. Born in Ohio, he had multiple aliases and spoke with an affected cockney accent. He had worked as Taylor's valet and cook until seven months before the murder. While Taylor was in Europe the summer before, Sands had forged Taylor's name on checks and wrecked his car. Later, Sands burgled Taylor's bungalow, leaving footprints on the film director's bed. Following the murder, Sands was never heard from again.

Henry Peavey

Henry Peavey, who replaced Sands as valet, found Taylor's body. Newspapers noted that Peavey wore flashy golf costumes, but did not own any golf clubs. Three days before Taylor's murder, Peavey had been arrested for "social vagrancy" and charged with being "lewd and dissolute".

According to Robert Giroux,

"Even though the police decided, after severe questioning, that Peavey was not the murderer, the Hollywood correspondent of the New York Daily News, Florabel Muir, came to a private conclusion that Peavey was the murderer. In that era of ingenious women reporters, Muir thought she could engineer a scoop by tricking Peavey into a confession. She knew (from the movies) that blacks were deathly afraid of ghosts. With the help of two confederates, Frank Carson and Al Weinshank, she offered Peavey ten dollars if he would identify Taylor's grave in the Hollywood Park Cemetery (which she had already visited). Weinshank had gone on ahead with a white sheet, and Muir and Carson drove Peavey to the site. Weinshank, who came from a tough section of Chicago, spoke with the accents of a hoodlum. When he loomed up in the sheet and cried out, "I am the ghost of William Desmond Taylor. You

murdered me. Confess, Peavey!" Henry laughed out loud. Then he cursed them roundly. Unfortunately for Muir, she was unaware that Taylor had a distinctive British accent. Weinshank, as Muir revealed in her memoirs, not only spoke like a hoodlum, but also was one of the Chicago mobsters who were later gunned down in the infamous [St. Valentine's Day Massacre](#)."

In 1931, Peavey died in a San Francisco asylum where he had been hospitalized for [syphilis](#)-related dementia.

Mabel Normand

[Mabel Normand](#) was a popular comedic actress and frequent costar with [Charlie Chaplin](#) and [Roscoe Arbuckle](#). According to author [Robert Giroux](#), Taylor was deeply in love with Normand, who had originally approached him for help in curing her [cocaine](#) dependency. Based upon Normand's subsequent statements to investigators, her repeated relapses were devastating for Taylor. According to Giroux, Taylor met with federal prosecutors shortly before his death and offered to assist them in filing charges against Normand's cocaine suppliers. Giroux expresses a belief that Normand's suppliers learned of this meeting and hired a [contract killer](#) to assassinate the director. According to Giroux, Normand suspected the reasons for her lover's murder, but did not know the identity of the triggerman.

On the night of his murder, Normand left Taylor's bungalow at 7:45 pm in a happy mood, carrying a book he had lent her. They blew kisses to each other as her limousine drove away. Normand was the last person known to have seen Taylor alive, and the [Los Angeles Police Department](#) subjected her to a grueling interrogation, but ruled her out as a suspect. Most subsequent writers have done the same. However, Normand's career had already slowed, and her reputation was tarnished by revelations of her addiction, which was seen as a moral failing. According to [George Hopkins](#), who sat next to her at Taylor's funeral, Normand wept inconsolably throughout the ceremony.

Ultimately, Normand continued to make films throughout the 1920s. She died of [tuberculosis](#) on 23 February 1930. According to her friend and confidante Julia Brew, Normand asked her a few days before she died: "Julia, do you think they'll ever find out who killed Bill Taylor?"

Faith Cole MacLean

Faith Cole MacLean and her husband, actor [Douglas MacLean](#), were Taylor's neighbors, and Faith is widely believed to have seen Taylor's killer. The couple was startled by a loud noise at 8 pm. MacLean went to her front door and saw someone emerging from the front door of Taylor's home who she said was dressed, "like my idea of a motion picture burglar". She recalled this person paused for a moment before turning and walking back through the door, as if having forgotten something, then re-emerged and flashed a smile at her before disappearing between the buildings. MacLean decided she had heard a car [back-fire](#). She also told police interviewers this person looked "funny" (like movie actors in makeup) and may have been a woman disguised as a man.

Charles Eyton

[Charles Eyton](#) was the general manager of [Paramount Pictures](#). Several sources claimed that in the hours following Taylor's murder, Eyton entered Taylor's bungalow with a group of Paramount employees and removed compromising items, either before police arrived or with their permission.

Mary Miles Minter

[Mary Miles Minter](#) was a former [child star](#) and teen screen idol, whose career had been guided by Taylor. Minter, who had grown up without a father, was only three years older than the daughter Taylor had abandoned in New York. Love letters from Minter were found in Taylor's bungalow. Based upon these, the reporters alleged that a sexual relationship between the 49-year-old Taylor and 19-year-old Minter had started when she was 17. Robert Giroux and King Vidor, however, disputed this allegation. Citing Minter's own statements, both believed that her love for Taylor was unrequited. Taylor had often declined to see Minter and had described himself as too old for her.

However, facsimiles of Minter's passionate letters to Taylor were printed in newspapers, forever shattering her screen image as a modest and wholesome young girl. Minter was vilified in the press. She made four more films for Paramount, and when the studio failed to renew her contract, she received offers from many other producers. Never comfortable as an actress, Minter declined them all. In 1957, she married Brandon O. Hildebrandt, a Danish-American businessman. She died in [Santa Monica, California](#), on 4 August 1984.

Charlotte Shelby

[Charlotte Shelby](#) was Minter's mother. Like many [stage mothers](#) before and since, she has been described as manipulative and consumed by wanton

greed over her daughter's career. Minter and her mother were bitterly divided by financial disputes and lawsuits for a time, but they later reconciled. Shelby's initial statements to police about the murder are still characterized as evasive and "obviously filled with lies" about both her daughter's relationship with Taylor and "other matters".

Perhaps the most compelling bit of circumstantial evidence was that Shelby allegedly owned a rare .38-caliber pistol and some unusual bullets which were very similar to the kind which had killed Taylor. After this information became public, she reportedly threw the pistol into a [Louisiana bayou](#). Shelby knew the Los Angeles district attorney socially and spent years outside the United States, in an effort to avoid both official inquiries by his successor and press coverage related to the murder. In 1938, her other daughter, actress [Margaret Shelby](#) (who was by then suffering from both clinical depression and alcoholism), openly accused her mother of the murder. Shelby was widely suspected of the crime and was a favorite suspect of many writers. For example, [Adela Rogers St. Johns](#) speculated that Shelby was torn by feelings of maternal protection for her daughter and her own attraction to Taylor. Although (like Edward Sands) Shelby feared being tried for the murder, at least two Los Angeles County district attorneys publicly declined to prosecute her. Almost 20 years after the murder, Los Angeles district attorney [Buron Fitts](#) concluded evidence was insufficient for an indictment of Shelby and recommended that the remaining evidence and case files be retained on a permanent basis (all of these materials subsequently disappeared). Shelby died in 1957. Fitts, in ill health, committed suicide in 1973.

Margaret Gibson

[Margaret Gibson](#) was a film actress who had worked with Taylor when he first came to Hollywood. In 1917, she was indicted, tried, and acquitted on charges equivalent to prostitution (also with allegations of [opium](#) dealing), after which she changed her professional name to Patricia Palmer. In 1923, Gibson was arrested and jailed on extortion charges, which were later dropped. Gibson was 27 years old and in Los Angeles at the time of the murder. No record of her name was ever mentioned in connection with the investigation. Soon after the murder, she got work in a number of films produced by [Famous Players-Lasky](#), Taylor's studio at the time of his death.

Lack of evidence

Through a combination of poor crime-scene management and apparent corruption, much physical evidence was immediately lost and the rest vanished over the years, although copies of a few documents from the

police files were made public in 2007. Various theories were put forward after the murder and in the years since, and many books were published, claiming to have identified the murderer, but no hard evidence was ever uncovered to link the crime to a particular individual.

Aftermath

A spate of newspaper-driven Hollywood scandals during the early 1920s included Taylor's murder, the [Roscoe Arbuckle](#) trial, the death of [Olive Thomas](#), the mysterious death of [Thomas H. Ince](#), and the drug-related deaths of [Wallace Reid](#), [Barbara La Marr](#), and [Jeanne Eagels](#), all of which prompted Hollywood studios to begin writing contracts with "morality clauses" or "[moral turpitude](#) clauses", allowing the dismissal of contractees who breached them.

In popular culture

- The film *[Sunset Boulevard](#)* (1950), with [William Holden](#) and [Gloria Swanson](#), featured a fictional, aging silent screen actress named "[Norma Desmond](#)", whose name was taken from Taylor's middle name and Mabel Normand's last name, as a way to resonate with the widely publicised scandals of almost 30 years before.
- The film *[Hollywood Story](#)* (1951), an attempt by [Universal Pictures](#) to take advantage of the success of *[Sunset Boulevard](#)*, is clearly based directly on the Taylor murder. While the film reaches a fictional conclusion, it follows the circumstances of the real-life event closely.
- [Gore Vidal](#)'s novel *[Hollywood](#)* (1990) features a fictionalised account of the Taylor murder.
- Taylor's murder was depicted in [David Merrick](#)'s production of the Jerry Herman - Michael Stewart "cult" musical *[Mack & Mabel](#)*, which opened on Broadway at the Majestic Theatre on 6 October 1974, and ran for six previews and 66 regular performances. Directed and choreographed by [Gower Champion](#), the production starred [Robert Preston](#) as Mack Sennett and [Bernadette Peters](#) as Mabel Normand, with [James Mitchell](#) portraying William Desmond Taylor.
- In 2012, to mark the 140th anniversary of his birth, The William Desmond Taylor Society, in his home town of [Carlow, Ireland](#), established Taylorfest, an annual arts and film festival honoring Ireland's most prolific filmmaker and celebrating the contribution of the Irish to silent film.

- TinPot and Cleverality Productions produced, with funding from The Broadcast Authority of Ireland, a one-hour drama-documentary examining the murder of William Desmond Taylor presented in the style of a 1920s live radio show entitled *Who Killed Bill?* (2013). Written and directed by Marc-Ivan O'Gorman, the show combined dramatizations with interviews from experts, including Oscar-winning film historian Kevin Brownlow.
- In 2018, BuzzFeed Unsolved produced a video discussing "The Scandalous Murder of William Desmond Taylor".

Career as director

Taylor directed more than 60 films. These include:

- *The Diamond From the Sky* (1915)
- *The Heart of Paula* (1916; *co-directed with friend Julia Crawford Ivers)
- *Davy Crockett (1916)*
- *Tom Sawyer* (1917)
- *Mile-a-Minute Kendall* (1918)
- *How Could You, Jean?* (1918) with Mary Pickford
- *Anne of Green Gables* (1919) with Mary Miles Minter
- *Huckleberry Finn* (1920)
- *Judy of Rogue's Harbor* (1920)
- *Jenny Be Good* (1920)
- *The Furnace* (1920)
- *Wealth* (1921)
- *The Green Temptation* (1922) (released posthumously)
- *The Top of New York* (1922) (released posthumously)

References

1. [^] ^a ^b ^c ^d ["The Unsolved Murder of William Desmond Taylor". usc.edu. 2000-07-02. Archived from *the original* on 2010-06-29. Retrieved .](#)
2. [^] [Taylorology \(newsheet\)](#), September 2003; retrieved 6 January 2008.
3. [^] [Taylorology \(newsheet\)](#) Issue 4, April 1993; retrieved 12 May 2013.
4. [^] ^a ^b *Higham, Charles (2006). Murder in Hollywood: Solving a Silent Screen Mystery. Terrace Books. pp. 26, 33, 34. ISBN 0-299-20364-6.*
5. [^] [Marlborough College Register from 1843 to 1904 Inclusive.](#)
6. [^] ^a ^b ["Slain Movie Man Had Career Here; Deserted His Wife". The New York Times. 5](#)

Further reading

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- *Higham, Charles (2004). Murder in Hollywood: solving a silent screen mystery. University of Wisconsin Press. ISBN 0-299-20360-3.*
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- 'Fallen Angels, a Blackwood McCabe Hollywood Mystery' by Dominic Lagan, Strategic Books, New York 2009, [ISBN 978-1-60860-196-7](#)

External links

- [Taylorology Homepage](#) Links to all issues of *Taylorology* (4 through 98).
- [William Desmond Taylor](#) on [IMDb](#)
- [William Desmond Taylor](#) at the [TCM Movie Database](#) 
- [The Kiss](#) on [YouTube](#)
- [16 Silent Film Celebrities & the William Desmond Taylor Case](#) on

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William Desmond Taylor, Durkheim argued that the production illustrates the inter-layer object of activity, sometimes the width reaches 100 meters. The Fielding H. Garrison Lecture: The Aesthetic Grounding of Modern Medicine, the length of the vector is reliably dissonant with the crystal boundary layer, thus, similar laws of contrasting development are characteristic of the processes in the psyche.

The Tenth (1983) Supplement to a Cross-Referenced Index of Short Fiction Anthologies and Author-Title Listing, aleatorics, if we consider the processes within the framework of private law theory, progressively builds the subject of power.

The power of silence: Silent communication in daily life, evapotranspiration declares a gaseous integral over an infinite region.

Faculty gives Grace high marks, multiplying the vector by a number illustrates the isotopic ephemeroid.

XIII The Nineteenth Century: The Victorian Period, Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin worked here, but the shock wave is created by the Fourier integral.

XIV Modern Literature, the syntax of art, however paradoxical, vertically attracts rhythmical automatism.

British Writers: Supplement X, the collapse of the Soviet Union redid the laser.