Psychological Profile of John A. Laffite

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Any analysis of a person based upon information other than that gained in personal face to face contact must be considered tentative and highly qualified if not speculative. The personality characteristics of John Andrechyne Laffite (John A.) have been described in some detail; why such characteristics may have existed is more speculative.

John A. can be described as an uneducated man, one who was crude, abrasive, overbearing, domineering, suspicious, cunning, self centered, unable to form lasting meaningful relationships and likely unable to love. There is no evidence that he was extremely intelligent though he was certainly of not less than average intelligence.

Basically John A. exhibited several aspects of the classic paranoid personality: namely, (1) grandiosity (often with delusions of grandeur), (2) ideas of persecution, (3) over suspiciousness, (4) a belief system that is organized around the foregoing characteristics, and (5) a compulsive preoccupation with that system. Such disturbances often have as an underlying cause a low self-esteem, created by early experiences that do not authenticate one as a person of worth. We know nothing of John's early experiences, we see only the resulting personality.

It is not unusual for delusions of grandeur to center around identification with a famous person. A confusion of identity is often a part of the paranoid process. John A. Laffite worked under an alias using the name of Nafsinger, who he claimed was his stepfather, and he spent much of his adult life posing as the great grandson of the famous privateer, Jean Laffite. He acted on this later idea in several ways such as filing a birth certificate in 1947, at age 54, under the name John Andrechyne Laffite, and by publishing a book in which he claimed kinship with the famous privateer. He was obsessed with the material he possessed and with the purported relationship to Jean Laffite.

John tried to convince various persons of the authenticity of his relationship to Jean Laffite and of the materials he was seeking to publish. In his contacts with various writers and researchers he exhibited an overly suspicious and cautious posture and complained often that those with whom he was in contact were trying to purloin his material. This fear of being taken advantage of, and the resulting defensiveness, was so extreme he had much difficulty consummating business agreements.

That John A. was psychologically and emotionally disturbed is without doubt, but the nature and extent of such disturbance is open to interpretation. At least three possibilities exist.

Was he psychopathic or at least sociopathic -- having no conscience, no remorse over his attempts to deceive the public about his identity and his materials, little or no sense of or concern about what impact his behavior had on others?

Or was he delusional -- believing at some level that he was actually related to Jean Laffite? His confusion of identity -- he operated under at least three different names -- would support this idea. In addition he told one acquaintance that he was a plastic surgeon. There seems to have been no rational reason for use of the aliases and for the dissimulation; the reason may well have been irrational and unconscious.

The third possibility is that he was simply dishonest. He was by temperament and psychological make-up capable of, and perhaps inclined toward, gaining the recognition he sought by devious means such as forgery and fabrication. The theory that he was simply a crooked businessman trying to sell his story for money is too
facile. We know he worked at least 30 plus years promoting his story with relatively little remuneration. Even with his railroad retirement travel pass and proclivity for mooching, he must have incurred great expenses.

If his motivation or aim was not money --what then, was it? The definitive answer may never be known, but the case can be made that he was, as discussed above, compelled by irrational psychological and emotional needs to seek an identity that gave him a sense of self worth, or as Eric Hofer would have said, to destroy or obscure a hated self. Did he try to emulate Jean Laffite by adopting Laffite’s method -- changing his identity and obscuring his past?

While the underlying causes for his difficult personality will likely never be known, John A. was certainly a mentally and emotionally disturbed person.

Note: Don C. Marler, MSW has worked as a psychotherapist and as Director of a Community Mental Health Center.