

*Writing British Infanticide: Child-Murder, Gender, and Print, 1722–1859.* Ed. Jennifer Thorn. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003. 292pp. US\$52.50. ISBN 0-87413-819-1.

This is ultimately a good book, but it is not, for someone of my training, a satisfying one. I am an historian, sometimes a cultural historian, and historicism is not history. Let me begin with the simplest objection. The book is not solely about infanticide or child murder, but the murder of children of all ages, and sometimes their mothers, often by their fathers. And, although I am a proponent of a long eighteenth century, stretching it to 1859 defies too many historical markers of change for my understanding. For England, the most basic historical marker would be the Reform Act of 1832, which, with the New Poor Law of 1834 and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, signalled not only the further rise of an urban bourgeoisie, but also the arrangements under which the labouring poor would live. Much of Britain was becoming urban rapidly in the years covered by this collection. And if we are to consider the murders discussed in this volume in some sort of historical context, place does matter. Most eighteenth-century child murders legally prosecuted as capital crimes were rural. At the moment the law changed in England in 1803 (1809 in Scotland), making essentially that same crime a misdemeanour, the crime was, in patches, becoming urban. Change comes differently in different regions, and we should bear this in mind.

Let me also explain why the terms “infanticide” and “child murder” matter to an historian. Infanticide is a felony with a particular definition, the murder of a newborn by its mother, possibly abetted by others. This definition of the crime arose in Europe in the seventeenth century because it was virtually impossible to prove guilt under the existing laws, often common law, against murder. A mother alone with a newborn was the only witness to what occurred, and the state could not easily show that the child had been born alive, never mind murdered. In a world where stillbirth was hardly rare, a woman who wished to conceal her pregnancy and then claim the child was stillborn was in complete control of the child’s fate. I have assumed from my readings of hundreds of seventeenth- through nineteenth-century trial records and assorted court papers that, in the beginning, the laws were prompted by bodies of infants turning up with more frequency on the landscape. In other words, the laws came as a response to the crime, not as a means of punishing women for having sex.

When one stretches the term “infanticide” beyond the murder of newborns by their mothers—and pregnant women murdered by lovers—to include all children murdered by parents and women murdered by husbands, one muddies the social contexts in which the crimes were committed. A young village woman, pregnant and unable or unwilling to marry, and her lover are caught in a very different matrix of social and economic pressures from, for

example, a married father or mother of eight in Liverpool. The society that produced the first scenario is unlikely to be the same society that produced the second: place matters.

That said, the essays in this book have much to tell us about the difficulties of family formation and the instability of families in England between 1722 and 1859. Some are based on reports of violence that are meant as direct or legal records. One presents the debates surrounding the London foundling home, others discuss fiction, and some the difficult line between fiction and records of such a touchy matter as unmotherly and unfatherly behaviour in the pressure-cooker of rapidly transforming British society. I should add that my focus on crime is completely out of keeping with the editor's introduction, which argues that "*Writing British Infanticide* takes as its purview not child-murder *per se* but the ways that writing about it credentialed and differentiated writers in different (but often overlapping) genres and moments" (33). In response, I would add that it is difficult to read about murder without thinking about murder, and the first essay is very much about who did what to whom, with next to nothing about readers or writers.

Insofar as Dana Rabin's "Beyond 'Lewd Women' and 'Wanton Wenches'" sets the tone for the volume, it confronts readers with a solid set of eight legal records in which men murder their own children and women. While the author gives the seventeenth-century English jurist Matthew Hale his fifteen minutes, Hale was "credentialed" by so much in his life that what he had to say about lunacy and its application to child murder could not have meant much to him, or his contemporaries. But what the author brings to light about the role of men in destroying their offspring and the mothers of those children is a welcome addition to what we know about the stresses of family life in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The material is fascinating, but ultimately too various: George Gibson killed his two-year-old daughter and her mother; John Hodgson killed his lover with a poisonous abortifacient; William Carter apparently did away with his servant and lover, Ann Simpson. Court records are often a very rich source of evidence, but they are only the beginning of solid studies of ordinary lives. To identify the extended communities would allow us to explore the meaning of poverty, dependence, and anxious masculinity, and come to probable conclusions about just what was happening in those communities. Without that, we must fall back on the ways in which it was described, in all the descriptions and allusions that survive.

The second essay is no less informative, once one steps past the window-dressing, which includes such oddities as presenting Walter Scott's infanticide novel *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) as Victorian. Without reiterating my defence of infanticide as a woman's crime—and second to witchcraft in terms of the numbers of women hanged or otherwise capitally punished (see Deborah A. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997], 93–94)—I will go straight to the point. Melissa Valiska Gregory found eighty

articles in *The Times* between 1807 and 1905, and she drew on those published 1826–44 for her essay on murderous fathers. Pointing out that these articles “vilified the working class,” and underlined the poverty and desperation of poor married men and the “slackness of trade” (79), Gregory usefully quotes Catherine Hall on how “the period of the 1830s and the 1840s saw the confirmation of men as responsible political subjects” (78). Gregory is interested in what Hall had to say about the extension of this responsibility to a family wage, but Hall was, most importantly, referring to the vote, to the looming spectre of universal male suffrage. When the Reform Act of 1832 failed to deliver, Chartism was born. If articles about working-class male violence were popular with *The Times* in the years 1826–44, it was probably no accident, and Gregory fails to make this connection. Nonetheless, the essay confronts us with Regency and early Victorian awareness of familial violence, and forces us to question the motives of *The Times’s* editors.

The next essay, by Laura Henigman, raises the interesting question of just who was to blame when women concealed their pregnancies—the mothers or the women of the community? Henigman writes: “How is it that a community able to find an infant’s dead body to testify against its mother had not noticed her pregnancy beforehand? Who is at fault that midwives weren’t there to witness and assist at what may have been a problematic birth?” (94). I suspect that Henigman has been led to her questions and her conclusions by the source that she used, the sermons of the Boston minister Thomas Foxcroft, and others, published in 1735. The sermons magnify the shame and repentance of three young women who killed their own and other children. Consequently, Henigman finds herself well-armed with images of hapless women in need of help—and no doubt of Foxcroft’s help, as he saw it. In Scotland, this was the classic Whig imagery of the young innocent who erred out of fear and loneliness, who is a helpless child-mother needing care herself. It was also the classic imagery of the Scots man-midwife William Hunter, who is frequently mentioned in several of these essays. In Scotland, ministers were less likely to use such language, knowing their villages full well; but Whig defence lawyers used such language all the time, as did jurors.

Henigman is raising an important point, albeit without, I think, sufficiently questioning the motives and the possible editing exercised by Foxcroft and his brethren. At what point did communities cease to work for these women, leading to the women’s withdrawal, and lone struggle? I would suggest, as Henigman almost does, that this happened as communities were broken down by capitalism, population growth, urban employment, migration, and the Napoleonic Wars (95). This could loosely apply to colonial Boston in the 1730s, but the somewhat precocious sense of abandonment that Henigman finds is probably due to the identities of Foxcroft’s women. Rebekah Chamblit was a city girl; Katherine Garret and Patience Boston were Native Americans, and Boston was probably insane. These women were marginal before they were pregnant, and that tells us much about their isolation, and less about the state of the “communal ethos” of Boston (95).

Miriam Jones has contributed a dense, rich reading of a number of broadsides about infanticide from the period 1780 to 1850, a period, she says, when “public discourse about infanticide ... reached a crescendo” (112). She notes that the law governing the crime changed in 1803, but she does not make enough of this change or the history of prosecutions to fully show the connections between the outpouring of unsympathetic broadsides and the new law, which made convictions of accused women very difficult. To be blunt, with dead infants still a staple on the landscape, and few women being convicted of more than a misdemeanour charge, there was public outcry. Doctors, who were frequent witnesses in court, complained. It was useful for me to read Jones’s essay, but only because I already know this territory—other readers may not as easily see the full import of this valuable essay.

Finally, without doing justice to all the work that has gone into this volume, I would like to comment on Laura C. Berry’s “Confession and Possession: Adam Bede, Infanticide, and the New Coroner.” I am not sure about Berry’s contention that infanticide became a “modern secret” in 1858, when “everybody was talking about how no one was willing to talk about it” (196). The secret was more likely initiated in 1803, with the legal change declaring that a mother who acted in the ways that used to constitute child murder—concealment of pregnancy, hidden birth, no live child—was now guilty only of concealment of pregnancy, a misdemeanour. This, in Scotland at least, along with a decline in both prosecutions and a virtual end of convictions by 1798, triggered an outpouring of popular literature about infanticide, from ballads to Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian*. I am unsure just what makes *Adam Bede*, published in 1858, the beginning of this phenomenon of restless discourse about an unsolved social problem. And Berry must wonder about this too, because she sets the scene for the confession in *Adam Bede* by immediately reverting to the 1783 pamphlet of William Hunter. Hunter took it upon himself to speak for all mothers, on the grounds that they were all, by virtue of pregnancy, helpless and incompetent. This did a great deal for Hunter’s position as midwife to the Queen, and it probably saved a few women from hanging for infanticide. It could not save women from the knowledge of what they had done, however, if they had indeed killed their own children. And so women continued to confess (Symonds, 161–78). Berry has reiterated this, possibly without understanding the full implications of Hetty’s blurting out, “I won’t hide it any more” (210). Confessions like this one by Hetty in *Adam Bede* are central to understanding infanticide, and the truth of the horrible seventeenth-century statutes that paid women the compliment of assuming them to be dangerous and capable of acting to save themselves.

This question of guilt, innocence, and confession arises again in “Naturally Bad or Dangerously Good: Romantic-Era Narratives of Murderous Mothers.” Julie Kipp discusses Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian*, in which he completely rewrote the story of the very guilty Isobell Walker in creating his innocent character Effie Deans. Kipp notes the existence of Walker but adds that “Scott probably did not have access to these details when the novel was written in

1817–1818” (252). Isobell Walker went to trial in 1737, and Scott, a lawyer and court official by profession, had easy access to the records, which are extensive and damning, and would not have suited his purposes at all. He was an arch Tory, writing to clean up and defend the naturalness of agricultural and very late feudal order, and he wanted no evidence of its horrors and its transformation visible.

This brings me back to my original point: historicism is not history. All of these essays, including the ones I have not discussed, are good in their literary and cultural ways. Reading them has been valuable and challenging, and I have read each one to my profit. But none of them displays more than a cursory awareness, sometimes not quite accurate and often dated, of the historical literature of infanticide. And so I have to conclude that the authors of these essays, which I greatly enjoyed reading and scribbling on, borrow from history those fragments that fit their preconceptions but do not actively contribute to the discipline of history. That may not be their job.

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