



Nicola Goc, *Women, Infanticide & the Press, 1822-1922. News Narratives in England and Australia*

Aldershot, Ashgate, 2013, 212 pp., ISBN 9 781409 406051

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Nicola Goc, *Women, Infanticide & the Press, 1822-1922. News Narratives in England and Australia*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2013, 212 pp., ISBN 9 781409 406051.

- 1 Nicola Goc, a young Australian historian, has examined “news narratives” of infanticide trials in England and America in the century between the institution of a new legal severity towards unwed mothers and the legal “modernization” of infanticide law. There has been a good deal of attention in recent years to the “woman’s crime” of infanticide,¹ but Goc’s subject is not the crime but the “news narratives” created by infanticide trials. She takes advantage of the advance of digitization to closely examine such narratives for what they can tell us about how Victorian society “made sense” of these shocking acts.
- 2 Goc focuses on discourse rather than behavior, or more properly, discourse as a fundamental part of behavior. She begins in 1822 “to enable an analysis of infanticide news coverage in the decade before the introduction of the 1834 New Poor Law, » which thrust the legal responsibility for supporting an illegitimate child solely upon the mother – a controversial move which, it was soon charged, probably correctly, led to a sustained increase in infanticide. She closes in 1922, with the nationally-followed trial that helped bring about an Infanticide Act that diminished the criminal penalty and began to recognize the psychiatric dimensions of the killing of new-borns.
- 3 The book has a somewhat awkward structure of a series of case studies, chiefly on England in the 1820s and 30s, the 1860s and 1922, but also on Tasmania in the 1830s and

1900s. However, this binational approach has the advantage of exhibiting reactions to the crime in two very different settings and exploring their similarities and differences.

- 4 Part One shows first how the woman (most often a domestic servant) who killed (or was thought to have killed) her newborn was stereotyped by a patriarchal society, next how her the likelihood of such infanticide was increased by the 1834 PL, which removed the financial obligation of the father of an illegitimate child, and then how a newspaper crusade led by *The Times* helped change public attitudes towards unwed mothers, eventually making possible, in 1871 and 1872, legislation that supervised nurses taking care of newborns and restored the father's obligations, beginning a decline in infanticide's incidence. Goc argues persuasively that while newspaper coverage for the most part stigmatized unwed mothers as duplicitous and dangerous to young men and to social order, it also provided an avenue for their voices, and for a discourse more sympathetic to them, to reach the general public.
- 5 Part Two moves to the convict colony of Van Dieman's Land (now Tasmania), and in two chapters explores local press treatment of several notable cases of the 1830s and the early twentieth century, highlighting in the latter the notion of "bush madness" that had by then developed to make sense of infanticide (although the author doesn't highlight it, related ideas of insanity had become almost standard by that time in explanations of infanticide in the UK). The final chapter of Part Two and of the book takes us back to England, now post-Great War, and the case that led to the 1922 law that radically revised the law on infanticide, seen, as always, through press coverage.
- 6 This book is valuable in several ways. First, it extends forward the scholarship (like Mark Jackson's) that has hitherto chiefly focused on the eighteenth century. In doing this, it provides the most sophisticated treatment yet of how the rapidly-expanding and increasingly-influential press, national and local, covered infanticide trials and in doing both reflected and shaped Victorian understandings of the offense. Goc's impressively "close reading" of newspaper texts – extending even to the choice of verbs and arrangements of sentences – offers insights which are sometimes speculative but always intriguing and usually quite plausible. This reader wearied of the continual referencing of Michel Foucault, and of the "oppression-resistance" political frame in which Goc places her work, yet came to value the guided tour provided through the shaping and interplay of discourses. This tour is saved from over-abstraction by close connection to specific texts. Even scholars not interested in infanticide per se will appreciate the author's demonstration of the riches lying in freshly available newspaper archives.
- 7 This tour should convince many readers of how central discourse – in this case about the nature of women and their sexuality – is to the subject of crime and criminal justice. A crucial stop on this tour is the punitive 1834 Poor Law Act, with its bastardy clause placing financial responsibility for illegitimate children solely upon the mother. As others before her have argued, one cannot study the subject of infanticide after 1834 without coming to terms with the influence of this Act. And as she shows, the Act itself was the product of discourses, about the role of government and about incentives, but even more about women and their sexuality. The book succeeds in demonstrating that to explore the incidence of a crime and its social and legal consequences one must understand the web of assumptions and values – sometimes in conflict with one another, as here – within which actions take place.

- 8 Although her subject is discourse rather than behavior, Goc sometimes deviates to show how much past newspapers can reveal about the experiences of women and of the poor generally. Indeed, this reader often wished that she would devote more space to exploring these experiences, and the societies, English and Australian, in which they took place. There is no effort here to reach any quantitative conclusions about incidence or even legal disposition of infanticide, other than to accept the apparent upsurge of the crime after the 1834 Act, and its diminution after 1872.
- 9 It would have been useful to compare Victorian infanticide trials with eighteenth-century ones, which, despite a nominally more severe legal regime established by the 1624 Act that set death as the penalty and placed the burden of proof that a child had not been killed on the mother, almost always ended in acquittal, and thus proved less harsh than the written law suggests. Looking before the rather arbitrary starting date of 1822 might have permitted some evaluation of just when, and why, discourses harmful to the interests of unwed mothers began to form and strengthen. This task remains for others to take up. One also wishes Goc had looked at the press treatment of infanticide by men, of which there were a not inconsiderable number. Still, she has accomplished a good deal in a brief compass, methodologically in showing how much close reading of newspapers can suggest or reveal, and substantially in documenting how exceptionally harsh the early Victorian generation was in its treatment of infanticidal mothers and how this harshness was gradually brought to an end, first by sympathetic juries and ultimately by legislation, while providing a deeper understanding of this harshness and its decline.

NOTES

1. The leading work is Lionel Rose, *The Massacre of the Innocents: Infanticide in Britain 1800-1939* (London, 1986), but since its appearance there has been a rush of additional work, usually, unlike Rose, from a specifically feminist standpoint. See, among others, Ann Higginbotham, "Sin Of The Age": Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London, *Victorian Studies*, 1989, 32, 3, 319-37; Mark Jackson, *New-Born Child Murder: Women, Illegitimacy and the Courts in Eighteenth-Century England*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996; Meg Arnot, Understanding Women Committing Newborn Child Murder in England, in D'Cruze S., *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950: Gender & Class*, Harlow and New York, Longman, 2000, pp. 55-69; Hilary Marland, 'Getting Away With Murder? Puerperal Insanity, Infanticide and the Defence Plea', in Jackson M., *Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child Murder and Concealment, 1550-2000*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 168-92 Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 35-44; 178-183; Aeron Hunt, Calculations and Concealments: Infanticide in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 2006, 34, pp. 71-94.

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