

BOOK REVIEW

*Tony Ward*¹

John Carter Wood (2012) ‘*The Most Remarkable Woman in England*’: *Poison, Celebrity and the Trials of Beatrice Pace*. Manchester University Press, ISBN 978 0 7190 86182 (pbk) xvi+269pp.

I started reading this book on the evening when the TV crime drama *Broadchurch* reached its finale, and the parallels are readily apparent: a suspicious death in a small community brings family conflicts to the surface, rumours abound, an arrogant policeman from London comes to investigate, the national press scent a good story, and the family of the deceased find themselves briefly famous. In John Carter Wood’s study the dead body found in the hamlet of Fetter Hill, near Coleford in the Forest of Dean, in 1928 is that of Harry Pace, a quarryman who supplemented his meagre wages by keeping a flock of sheep on common land. As in *Broadchurch*, there is initial doubt whether the death is murder, accident or suicide; but the doubt which is quickly resolved in *Broadchurch* remains to this day in the case of Harry Pace. He died from arsenic poisoning, but his initial symptoms at least could have resulted from accidental ingestion of the arsenic in the sheep dip he used. The fatal dose was not so easily explained, but the evidence pointed either to suicide or murder.

Both Pace’s relatives and the Scotland Yard detective called in to investigate thought that Harry had been murdered, and that the culprit was his wife Beatrice. Their suspicions were aired at the inquest where the jury, under some pressure from the coroner, returned a verdict naming Beatrice as the murderer. Press coverage of the inquest was sympathetic to Beatrice and when she came to trial crowds of supporters gathered outside the court. Her trial ended, somewhat anticlimactically, at the close of the prosecution case when the judge ruled that she had no case to answer, a ruling that was hardly resisted by the prosecution.

The most interesting part of Wood’s account concerns what happened after the acquittal. Beatrice sold her story to the press, but the town of Coleford was soon awash with fresh rumours as her erstwhile friend (and suspected lover) Leslie Sayce,

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together with Harry's executor, tried to sell their own story of how Beatrice had, after all, murdered Harry with Sayce's connivance. Wood argues convincingly that this story was almost certainly false. A further police investigation led nowhere, and Beatrice was left to enjoy a brief celebrity as the notional author of presumably ghost-written memoirs and advice to women.

What made Beatrice Pace – a shadowy figure whose character and motives, as Wood admits, are not easily discerned – 'the most remarkable woman in England', at least according to the *Daily Express* which had paid handsomely for her story, was the 'wifely endurance' she had shown during 18 years of domestic violence at her husband's hands. Her advice to young women was to be careful whom they married, but then to stick to the man they chose, however badly he treated them: 'I loved Harry, and I would have stood by him whatever he did, and for another eighteen years, if he had lived' (146).

The Most Remarkable Woman in England is a scholarly book and Wood resists any temptation to 'solve' the case, though he argues that the suicide theory was plausible and Beatrice was rightly acquitted. He urges historians to take 'into account both those women who were demonised by the public and unfairly condemned and those who received public support and were – all things considered – treated fairly' (195). In this respect his work usefully complements studies of women convicted of murder, such as Anette Balinger's *Dead Woman Walking* (2000). But if one sees early twentieth century murder trials as a kind of morality play in which the moral invariably serves to reinforce the subordination of women, Beatrice Pace's trial fits the mould as well as any of those that sent women to the gallows.