

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Hector MacLeod and Malcolm McLeod, *Peter Manuel: Serial Killer* (Mainstream, Edinburgh and London, 2009) £9.99, 978-1-84596-397-2 (paperback) pp.368 + 12 images + 1 map**

The history of serial killing in the twentieth century has notably excluded Scotland; American studies dominate the field, and Britain's contribution is confined to such English cases as the Yorkshire Ripper. Studies of Scottish killers have tended to focus on the more bizarre or legendary episodes such as body snatching (Burke and Hare) or cannibalism (Sawney Bean), rather than analysing historically the crimes or traits of the criminals themselves. MacLeod and McLeod's work on Scotland's most notorious modern serial killer is thus a welcome addition to the growing collection of case-studies available to the historian of crime. Although others have addressed various aspects of the case,<sup>2</sup> this is the first work to document the life and crimes of the infamous Peter Manuel in their entirety.

The case of Peter Manuel (1927-58) is a long and complex one and the authors do well to make the narrative accessible despite its twists and turns. Prior to his 1958 trial Manuel had been jailed for housebreaking and sexual assault, his mental state was often under question and he was diagnosed by one prison doctor as psychopathic. He also attempted to make a name for himself in Glasgow's criminal underworld who apparently viewed him as an embarrassment to their profession due to his inability to maintain their code of silence.

The bulk of this book concerns itself with Manuel's sensational 16 day trial in May 1958 where he was tried for eight murders committed between 1956 and 1958. Six of his victims had been shot as they lay sleeping in their beds; two others were young women attacked as they walked home. It was hailed as the trial of the century as Manuel, an accomplished liar, lodged special defences of alibi and incrimination, placing the guilt upon William Watt – the husband and father of three of Manuel's victims – and several locally-known criminals. The

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<sup>2</sup> See also, John Bingham, *The Hunting Down of Peter Manuel: Glasgow Multiple Murderer*, (Macmillan, 1973) and John Wilson, *The Trial of Peter Manuel: The Man who Talked too Much*, (London, 1959).

condensed and annotated account of this lengthy and complex trial will appeal to readers unaccustomed to Scottish legal procedure and terminology. Given its implications for the case and contemporary policy debate it is a shame, however, that not more focus is placed upon the medical evidence relating to Manuel's mental state as a psychopath.

Manuel was found guilty of seven counts of murder and sentenced to hang, but the last few weeks of his life proved to be as eventful as his trial. Using the ominously-named Death Watch journal kept by his warders while awaiting execution, the authors reconstruct in fascinating detail Manuel's last few weeks as he attempted to escape his punishment by feigning madness. A speculative epilogue examines several additional crimes from which Manuel may have escaped justice; indeed, after his execution a coroner's jury found him guilty of the 1957 murder of a taxi driver.

The comprehensive narrative is the result of a great deal of research; the bibliography of primary material is wide-ranging and lists almost 30 archival sources from the National Archives of Scotland including Manuel's trial transcripts, and prison records from throughout his life. However, the work is marred by a lack of footnotes which will frustrate historians of crime seeking to explore aspects of the case further. Given the vast amount of recent literature on the nature of serial killers, the failure to put Manuel into the context of others of his kind is a notable omission. Explorations into his mental state and rationale for his actions remain speculative and would have benefitted from such works.<sup>3</sup> The book also suffers from the lack of an index and proper chapter headings which make it difficult to navigate.

By chronicling the life of this notorious criminal, the authors of *Peter Manuel: Serial Killer* have created a comprehensive, well-researched account of the life and crimes of this prolific Scottish murderer which will appeal to fans of True Crime and the casual reader. But due to the lack of evidence of consulting recent works on the nature of serial killers and the ever-frustrating absence of references to the extensive primary material, historians of crime may see this as a missed opportunity for something potentially significant.

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<sup>3</sup> For example David Canter, *Criminal Shadows: Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer*, (Irving, TX, 2000).