

BOOK REVIEW

*David J. Cox*¹

***Women, Infanticide and the Press, 1822-1922: news narratives in England and Australia.* Nicola Goc. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. 203 pp. £55.00 hardback. ISBN 9781409406044**

This book is a welcome addition to the study of what is regarded as a peculiarly gendered offence; that of infanticide. Nicola Goc takes an unusual and innovative approach to the crime in her case-study-rich account of the ways in which such events were reported in both the English and Australian press. By utilising Foucauldian theory in her analysis of the discourse present in the newspaper reports of infanticide, Goc aims to show that 'Foucault's work on power/knowledge and discourse, when applied to a study of infanticide and the press, provides for a far more nuanced understanding of how press discourse made meaning of the infanticidal actions of desperate young women' (p.7).

In this aim Goc largely succeeds; by her use of Critical Discourse Analysis, in which newspaper text is subjected to contextual and linguistic dissection, she successfully applies Foucault's theories to the numerous reports of infanticide that she has garnered from both *The Times* and regional English and Australian newspapers in order to provide a new perspective on the role of the media in the reporting of, and responses to, the crime of infanticide.

However, there are a few problems with her approach. Her assertion that 'While the national English newspaper rarely provided prolonged or extensive coverage of individual infanticide cases, regional newspapers in England and Australia, with their focus on local news events, did provide comprehensive coverage of individual cases of infanticide' (p.17) is certainly open to a degree of criticism. Whilst acknowledging that metropolitan newspapers such as *The Times* often did not cover infanticide cases in such detail as regional publications, it can be argued that a) the extent to which *The Times* could be considered a national newspaper is highly debatable (especially in the pre-railway years of its publication) and that b) regional newspapers themselves rarely provided truly comprehensive coverage of such events.

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An example of this can be seen in one of the cases that Goc discusses in some detail, that of the trial of Sarah Elliott and Marie Joseph Beasse for the murder of their infant son in Guernsey in 1830. Although, as Goc records, both the regional newspapers and *The Times* devoted several column-inches to the case, none of the newspaper accounts provided 'comprehensive' coverage of the events surrounding to this particularly gruesome episode. By contrast, the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* vol. 35 no 107 (1831) published a very detailed account both of the fatal injuries suffered by the unfortunate infant at the hands of one or more of its parents and of the legal problems (due to differing judicial systems in the Channel Islands from the mainland) raised by the subsequent fate of both Elliott (who was banished from Guernsey for six months after being publicly shamed between the prison and the court house) and Beasse (who was executed after unsuccessfully applying for a Royal Pardon).

From personal experience, I am also aware of the limitations of one of the sources that Goc utilised for her study; that of *The Times* Digital Archive (TDA). Whilst undoubtedly a boon to researchers, the TDA does have several limitations with regard to its search engine; a digital search is simply not as comprehensive as an admittedly much more time-consuming manual search through paper originals.

Although infanticide was overwhelmingly perpetrated by women, there are also several documented cases of male-perpetrated offences during the period (the poisoning by vitriol of his infant stepson by Richard Overfield in Bridgnorth, Shropshire in 1823 springs to mind), with the above-mentioned case of Elliott and Beasse being another example – circumstantial evidence pointed to Beasse being the one who carried out the attack. It would therefore have been interesting to see a comparative analysis of newspaper accounts of such male-led crimes in this book in order to establish the extent to which the discourses that Goc identifies were as gender-specific as she claims.

Apart from these caveats, the book is generally well laid-out and structured, with Goc's account of *The Times*' long-running campaign to alter the Bastardy Clause of the 1834 New Poor Law being especially interesting (such examinations of the role of the newspaper editor perhaps signifying a new trend in research; David Moore's current investigation into *The Times*' handling of the debate surrounding the Parliamentary Act 1911 being another example). Similarly, in a gender-reversed echo of the 1862 'Garrotting Panic', Goc's account of the 1860s 'Maternal Panic', in which the spurious statistical claims of Dr Edwin Lankester are examined, is extremely cogent.

The comparative aspect of Goc's innovative study between the British mainland and one of its major colonies is also very ably developed. Her finding that 'when the focus of infanticide news discourse was an aboriginal woman her actions were reported in the racist imperial framework used by *The Times* [sic] in its reports of infanticide in India and China – that is the individual woman's actions were emblematic of a barbarous, heathen nation' (p.95) is perhaps unsurprising at a time when British expansionism and colonisation was seen as 'civilising' to those under its influence, but still shocking to a modern reader. Similarly, her account of the trial of Mary McLauchlan at Hobart in 1830 is a telling example of the dual standards applied to male and female protagonists in infanticide cases.

There are a few typographical errors such as the 'Frith of Clyde' in the text (p.102), along with some inconsistencies, most notably where *The Times* is also frequently and irritatingly referred to throughout either as 'The Times' or the 'London *Times*', but apart from these minor quibbles the book is a very readable and valuable contribution to the canon of work on infanticide.