

## BOOK REVIEW

*Daniel J.R. Grey*<sup>1</sup>

***'A most diabolical deed': Infanticide and Irish society, 1850-1900.* Elaine Farrell. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. 288 pp. £65.00 hardback. ISBN 9780719088209**

In September 1900, Katie Connors was bemused to find a bundled sheet stuffed at the back of a cupboard while tidying the bedroom that she shared with her fellow servant Bridget Power at Ballymaclode, County Waterford. On inspecting the strange parcel more closely, however, Connors made the horrifying discovery that it contained the dead body of a baby girl and rushed to alert her mistress. Bridget Power later confessed that she had given birth in secret the night before, and then immediately smothered her daughter in the desperate hope of avoiding discovery by either her roommate or their employers (p.1). Such cases were by no means unusual in Ireland during the late nineteenth century, with newspapers reporting stories of suspected infanticide cases every single week (p.2).

Elaine Farrell's richly detailed and compelling analysis of these cases provides readers with a vivid insight into Irish society and culture in this period, paying particular attention to the nuances of gender and class as factors in shaping individual lives. Based on a sample of 4,645 cases of actual or attempted homicide and concealment of birth that are recorded in files held at the National Archives of Ireland, Farrell has carefully woven her interrogation of these stories together with the analysis of a diverse range of other published and unpublished primary sources. Coroners' records, newspapers, parliamentary papers, law reports, judicial statistics and articles in medical periodicals are all extensively drawn on here to flesh out both the details of individual crimes and the wider context in which they occurred. Alert to the ways in which the national context has both explicitly and implicitly influenced the judicial treatment and cultural representation of infanticide, Farrell has also drawn on an impressive and detailed array of secondary literature on gender, crime and culture which allows her to highlight the key similarities and differences between Ireland and other nations in their approach to the crime during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The book is structured around the exploration of six key themes: the 'typical' infanticide case in Ireland 1850-1900; the coroners' courts; criminal courts; the community; the press; and

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel J.R. Grey is Lecturer in World History at Plymouth University, [Daniel.Grey@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:Daniel.Grey@plymouth.ac.uk)

imprisonment. The subject of infanticide was a perennial problem for forensic pathologists, given the complexity and unreliability of the relevant tests to determine 'proof of life' and cause of death, and was also closely (though certainly not inevitably) associated with either temporary or chronic insanity. Despite the deeply distressing nature of the offence and its intrinsic links with sexual immorality and the contravention of 'respectable' behaviour, women accused of killing their infants could also receive a great deal of official and popular sympathy. Nor was such sympathy inevitably confined to those cases in which young, single women killed their illegitimate infants shortly after giving birth in secret. As Farrell notes, the term 'infanticide' was itself nebulous during this period. Both official and popular accounts of the crime frequently could and did define 'infanticide' as including the killing of older children as well as that of newborns in the late nineteenth century. With this in mind, Farrell's case studies include not only those homicides in which the victims died shortly after birth, but cases in which mothers killed children up to the age of three years (p.3). Importantly, this has enabled her to investigate the extent to which the high degree of sympathy usually bestowed on newborn murder defendants in this period was translatable to those women who killed older infants. One key finding of Farrell's project is that, in stark contrast to the English precedents for these matters,<sup>2</sup> such women who were convicted of murder were never executed and ultimately served relatively short terms of imprisonment after their sentence of death was commuted to 'penal servitude for life' before being released on license (p.231).

Farrell has produced a meticulous and well-written study that deserves a wide audience, and will undoubtedly be of immense benefit to all those interested in the histories of gender, crime and childhood. Accessible, nuanced and engaging, *'A most diabolical deed'* will prove an essential addition to reading lists for both undergraduate and postgraduate modules dealing with gender and criminal justice, as well as to broader surveys of nineteenth century Britain and Ireland.

---

<sup>2</sup> Margaret L. Arnot, 'The murder of Thomas Sandles: Meanings of a mid-nineteenth-century infanticide' in Mark Jackson (ed.) *Infanticide: historical perspectives on child murder and concealment, 1550-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) pp.149-167.