

BOOK REVIEW

*Holly Williams*¹

Elizabeth Yardley and David Wilson, *Female Serial Killers in Social Context: Criminological Institutionalism and the Case of Mary Ann Cotton*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 2015. ISBN: 9781447326458. 96 pp. £45.00 hb.

In *Female Serial Killers in Social Context*, criminologists Elizabeth Yardley and David Wilson analyze a Victorian serial killer, Mary Ann Cotton, through a modern academic framework. Mary Ann Cotton is credited as being England's first female serial killer, based on the authors' definition of a serial killer as 'someone who has killed three or more victims in a period of greater than 30 days.'² She used arsenic poisoning to murder an estimated 21 victims between 1865 and 1873. Her victims mainly consisted of members of her family, including 11 of her 13 children. Cotton was able to support herself financially by working as a nursemaid and she mildly profited from some of her victims' deaths by collecting small life insurance policies. She was ultimately found guilty of murdering her step-son, Charles Edward Cotton, and was hanged on 24 March 1873.

The purpose of Yardley and David's research is to evaluate the effectiveness and accuracy of the existing criminological theories by using contemporary models of female serial killers to understand a historical case study. In particular, they aim to develop insights into why Mary Ann Cotton was able to get away with murder for such an extended period of time. *Female Serial Killers in Social Context* begins by identifying the issues with current theories applied to Cotton's case. Yardley and Wilson then introduce the major theories and literature which contribute relevant considerations to their work, develop a specific methodology to study the case, and present the findings of their analysis. They conclude the work by reflecting on the usefulness of their approach in understanding Cotton in ways that existing frameworks for female serial killers do not.

The authors eventually decide that the scholarly literature available on female serial killers is imbalanced because macro-level surveys do not consider micro-level implications. However,

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² Yardley and Wilson, *Female Serial Killers in Social Context*, p.6.

individual case studies are preoccupied with details at the micro-level at the expense of the larger, macro-level context. In response, they develop a new approach to studying female serial murderers which they title 'institutional mediation.'³ This new methodology is a hybrid of the existing concepts of sociological institutionalism and positivist epistemology. Sociological institutionalism argues individuals develop a course of action based on social norms and values. Positivist epistemology argues that observable evidence is the only form of valid scientific findings and is commonly used in studies of homicide.

In applying their new approach to the case of Mary Ann Cotton, the authors reason that she was able to continue her murderous activities because her sociodemographic and physical characteristics did not correspond with the structural models of criminal women in the nineteenth century. In addition, social identities that were incompatible with the standard, accepted gender roles of wives and mothers, such as the murderer, went unseen. While her crimes went unnoticed during her lifetime, her story continues to be ignored by scholars and the media today. Yardley and David justify the insufficient coverage on the case based on the lack of attention it received at its height. They argue that Victorian journalists struggled to make sense of Cotton's case because they were unable to apply traditional gender roles to her defense. This lack of understanding caused the case to be largely ignored in the media, which accounts for its obscurity in modern scholarship.

Overall, *Female Serial Killers in Social Context* is a fascinating book, which brings notice to the case of a lesser known historical murderess. It attempts to bridge a large gap between criminology and history in the existing scholarship of female serial killers. While criminological sources tend to centre on general trends, historical sources often concentrate on the proceedings of specific case studies. Yardley and Wilson's research connects the two fields by using criminological theories to explain a historical case study. *Female Serial Killers in Social Context* is backed by well supported and thorough research. The authors reference a multitude of sources, including reliable criminological studies and primary sources about Mary Ann Cotton, such as Victorian newspaper reports, documents from the National Archives, and the collected papers of Dr. Thomas Scattergood, which are held at the University of Leeds. In addition, Professor David Wilson's qualification as a leading expert on serial murder strengthens the credibility of the work.

³ Ibid, p. 69.

While the criminology portion of the book can be dry, Yardley and Wilson manage to explain complex theories in detail and with ease. In addition, the authors counter any dullness through the dynamic and engaging style of the historical information. The consideration of the social context of the Cotton case is very interesting, and the criminological features of the case are valuable for scholars in multiple fields. The authors' detailed account of their research development and their case study of Mary Ann Cotton are essential resources for scholars developing future case studies of female serial killers.