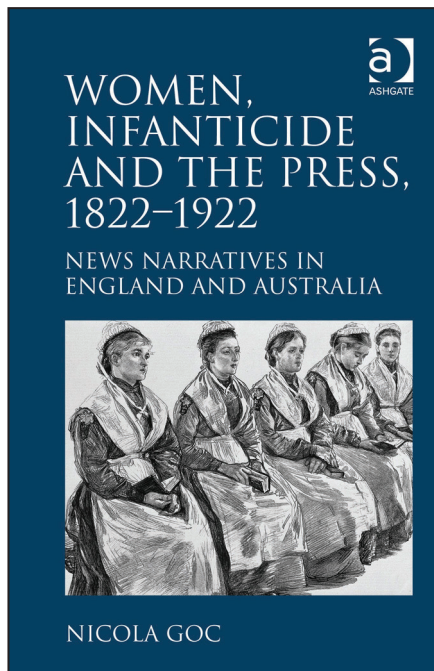


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Meticulous study of early colonial infanticide

Women, Infanticide and the Press, 1822-1922: News narratives in England and Australia, by Nicola Goc.
Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2013.
203pp, ISBN 9781409406044 (pbk)

EVERY ONCE in a while an academic researcher will privately concede they would like to have written the book they have reviewed. Count me in that category. Nicola Goc's examination of news narratives of infanticide from 1822-1922 in Britain and Australia reveals painstaking scholarship. It yields insights into the primacy of crime news, the ideology of infanticide news discourse, the privileging of medical and legal voices in courtroom reportage, and the personification of infanticide women as maternal deviants, mad women or as celebrity subjects of newspaper campaigning.



That said, this is not an easy book to read, but more of that later.

The author begins by asking: 'How do you make sense of such a brutal act?' (p. 1). She structures her book against personal narratives in news discourse, many taken from the national English newspaper *The Times*, of acts committed during 1822-1833 variously described as 'inhuman atrocity', 'child murder' and 'shocking infanticide'. She examines in some depth the impact of the 1834 *New Poor Law* with its pernicious bastardy clause and what she terms, with a passing nod to Stanley Cohen, the 1860s maternal panic.

The next section of Goc's book is, in my opinion, the most original section, examining infanticide in the Van Diemen's Land Press and what was known as 'bush madness'. The case of Mary McLauchlan, a convict publicly executed after an unjust judicial decision for the alleged strangulation of her male child, is a searing indictment of a patriarchal penal society.

While Mary had revealed the name of the child's father before she went to the gallows, she was dissuaded from publicly denouncing the immoral colonial 'seducer' or maybe rapist. He saved his reputation despite widespread elite knowledge of his identity that was aided and abetted by the press, while Mary lost her life.

Equally as compelling, through the textual analysis that Goc provides, is the story of Sarah Masters, not the least because the town of Masterton in New Zealand is named after her former husband, Joseph, who later left Tasmania for New Zealand where he became a respected pioneer. The case of Harriet Lovell, who may have killed her four children, is another graphic and powerful exploration through news texts of the harshness of mothering in the Australian outback.

Goc uses critical discourse analysis to elicit meaning from the historical news texts she has examined and relies on John E. Richardson's

methodology because it allows for an interpretation of the meanings of text rather than mere quantification of textual features and the derivation of meaning from this numbering. Nothing wrong with this.

The author states that critical discourse analysis follows on from Michel Foucault's ground-breaking discourse analysis work relating to knowledge and power. The author is very attracted to Foucault's notion of 'society of blood' (in fact 'society of blood' is mentioned at least seven times in the book) where power was rooted in 'blood relation' to examine infanticide women who threatened the domestic ideal of womanhood and who were seen as a direct threat to the family.

At one level, Foucault is a strange choice as an over-arching perspective. Goc herself states,

It may seem more than a little strange that this study looks to Foucault for an understanding of infanticide and infanticide press discourse when in Foucault's work on power, language and knowledge he not only largely ignores the female subject, but is also silent on news journalism and the power of the press discourse (apart from a brief mention of sensational 18th-century broadsides) (p. 7).

Given criticism of Foucault by feminists and his omission in journalism

studies on the basis of perceived difficulty, the author's choice of theoretical framework is brave.

However, it is not so much Foucault's theories that make this book difficult to read, but the over-egging of him in the pudding as the dominant (domineering?) theoretical framework. As an example of this over-egging, Goc describes the coverage of Harriet Lovell's trial verdict by reference to the 'bold and capitalised descending headlines' (p. 137):

MOUNTAIN RIVER TRAGEDY.
Mrs Lovell Charged with Murder.
Question of Insanity Raised.
Found Not Accountable for Her
Actions.
(*Mercury*, 24 July 1912, p. 2)

Readers get the nuances instantly as they read these descending headlines as cryptic, one-sentence, news stories. But in case we didn't, Goc labours the point with more Foucault:

The headlines provided readers with 'the crime, its punishment and its memory' (Foucault 2008b, p. 90) in four lines, assuring readers that the judicial system and medicine had 'dealt' with the maternal aberration that was Harriet Lovell' (p 137).

The constant and continuing reference to Foucault's canon of work, and other stylistic repetitions in the book (for example, did we need

seven examples of collocations, the coupling of proximate words) seriously alter the flow of the narrative for the reader at various points in the structure of the book. The power and potency of the selected portions of texts used by Goc have a meaning, a resonance, and an ideology in their own right. It often pays to trust the intelligence of the reader who is as complicit in their own interpretations, as is the author.

That quibble aside, this is a meticulous book of the infanticidal actions of young women in England and Australia in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It demonstrates their desperation, their resistance, and in some cases their deaths against the social, political and legislative history of the day as reported by the press. This book will have particular appeal for crime news researchers, for those interested in the lives and stories of women, and for fans of Foucault.