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'A most diabolical deed': Infanticide and Irish society, 1850-1900

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In the late 19th century, the issue of infanticide captured the attention of a significant number of journalists, psychiatric and medical writers and social commentators. The act of intentionally killing an infant within 24 hours of its birth was by no means new to this period. Yet changing socio-cultural and economic circumstances, combined with shifting perceptions of murder and deviant female behaviour, ensured that infanticide gradually evolved into a publicly prominent concern. While the history of infanticide has been assessed in various national contexts, analyses of this form of murder in Ireland have surfaced only sporadically; Cliona Rattigan's recent study of early 20th-century Ireland being an exception.⁽¹⁾ Elaine Farrell's *A Most Diabolical Deed?: Infanticide and Irish Society, 1850-1900* offers the first comprehensive account of how infanticide was performed, perceived, responded to and legally managed in late 19th-century Ireland. Farrell draws upon an impressive range of case studies (4,645 in total) and a wide variety of sources including newspaper reports, medical literature, police, court and prison records, parliamentary papers and contemporary literature. The result is a meticulously researched, emotively written and comprehensive exploration of the murder of new-born infants in post-Famine Ireland.

One aim of *A Most Diabolical Deed?* is to dispense with a belief commonly held by many contemporaries

that infanticide occurred rarely in Ireland. Farrell argues that infant murder was sometimes cast as an English problem; as a symptom of the loose moral culture of industrialised England that could be idyllically compared to moral, chaste and virtuous rural Ireland. This claim formed part of a broader strategy, typically adopted by nationalists, of firmly distinguishing between national moral standards. In reality, this proposition was fallacious. As Farrell's thorough statistical analysis in her first chapter establishes, infant murder and concealment of birth took place on a weekly basis in post-Famine Ireland; the typical perpetrator being an unmarried woman in her 20s, Roman Catholic and poor. Infanticide was a nationwide problem that afflicted industrialised regions in the north of the country as well as the chronically poor rural west. While motivations for infant murder are notoriously difficult to fully recapture, Farrell posits that the propensity of the Catholic Church to condemn abortion may have played some part in encouraging young pregnant women to wait until birth to deal with an unwanted child. As in many other countries, mothers suffocated, strangled, drowned, poisoned and burnt their new-born, abandoned them (alive or dead) in hidden locations and, sometimes, deposited them with the local church.

Inquests took place at the coroner's court. In her second chapter, Farrell explores the activities of the medical witnesses summoned to establish the cause of death but who often struggled to reach firm conclusions. Infant bodies rapidly decomposed; blows to the head could have been delivered prior to or after death; whether an infant had breathed or not (an indicator of whether it had been born dead or alive) was difficult to establish; strange marks on the neck could point to strangulation either by the mother or by the umbilical cord. In this period, forensic science was in its infancy. Clenched hands or the discovery of food in the corpse's stomach sometimes provided some indication that an infant had died after its birth. Yet, as Farrell argues, even when it appeared reasonably certain on the surface that a murder had taken place, proof was not always forthcoming.

Given the seemingly horrific nature of killing the vulnerable newborn in ways such as these, it might be expected that such bloodthirsty acts would be subject to immense public censure. Yet this was a period when sympathetic public attitudes to poverty and its related problems were not uncommon. Whereas previous centuries had often been marked by a more retributive approach to crimes such as murder, the 19th century saw the emergence of relatively compassionate responses to acts seemingly associated with hardship such as suicide, illegitimacy and infant murder. Contemporaneously, new psychiatric models evolved that sought to rationally comprehend deviant behaviour including infanticide instead of condemning it. Infanticide was now an act that could be understood and made sense of; one that could be rationalised as an outcome of the mental effects of pregnancy, childbirth and poverty rather than exclusively understood as an expression of immorality. Farrell's third chapter maintains that Irish juries tended to treat murderous mothers relatively leniently, partly in light of the emergence of the psychiatrist in the coroner's court, the development of the insanity plea and increasingly lenient public attitudes to poverty. Exceptions certainly occurred. Nonetheless, Farrell concludes that infanticide tended to be set apart as a certain type of murder that was no longer subject to the same degree of stigma and penal retribution as other forms of killing.

The fourth chapter of *A Most Diabolical Deed* examines how infanticide was responded to in the community. Farrell establishes significant diversity. Neighbours and families sometimes helped mothers conceal a dead infant while others proved eager to report a suspected infanticide. Farrell uses the case studies of four Irish women with contrasting circumstances to demonstrate the variety of situations that surrounded infant murder. Sarah Cuthbert and Sally Hagan lived with their families, Elizabeth Evans was recently married and lived with her husband while Maggie O'Connor was a country girl who lived with her employer. Despite these differences in household environments, Farrell maintains that these four women sought to conceal evidence that they had engaged in sexual intercourse prior to marriage. All four were daughters of small farmers and tradesmen who strove to uphold their reputations in a society that placed great emphasis on sexual morality. Communal attitudes to pre-marital sex were complex. Sometimes sexual affairs were tolerated until evidence emerged of a dead baby or concealed birth. Farrell's case studies also suggest that it was the female who found herself subject to public castigation whereas the identity of the father was rarely recorded in the legal and journalistic evidence. Men were also able to easily deny their complicity in both the pregnancy and infant murder. The policeman emerges at this point as a key figure in

detecting suspected infant murders; an individual who offered generous rewards for information, although this sometimes led to innocent women being subject to untrue accusations of pregnancy, childbirth and infanticide.

19th-century Irish journalists on both a local and national level routinely communicated suspected incidences of infanticide and the court proceedings that ensued. This, in itself, helped to sensationalise a moral panic about infant murder that was particularly palpable in the 1850s and early 1860s. Reporters tended to be present at assize and quarter session trials and sometimes at the murder scene itself. As Farrell argues, their accounts often embellished the facts and emphasised certain aspects of infanticide over others to construct a particular view of events. Farrell convincingly maintains that the nature of the headline itself did much to inform and shape public opinion on the severity of the death, the moral standing of the accused mother and the extent of condemnation or sympathy that should be awarded to particular instances of infant murder. Whether or not a murderous mother was evil or desperate was negotiated through highly gendered journalistic representations. Interestingly, women believed to have been suffering from some form of mental instability tended to be awarded higher levels of sympathy in post-Famine Ireland in comparison to those easily deemed evil or immoral. Journalists were also pivotal in perpetuating a myth that cases of infanticide were worse in England in comparison to Ireland as part of an attempt to differentiate between the two countries in a period of mounting opposition to Union and Ireland's incorporation into the United Kingdom.

Farrell's final chapter investigates experiences of imprisonment. Relatively few mothers who murdered their infant were imprisoned in Ireland in this period. Only 29 women were found guilty of the murder of their offspring between 1850 and 1900. All of these were sentenced to be hanged to death although their punishments were commuted to transportation or imprisonment. Farrell's research demonstrates that petitions for clemency tended to be submitted by families, friends and neighbours to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Nonetheless, those imprisoned, such as Catherine Hennessey, could remain in prison for decades until their death. Individual cases were reviewed if petitions for their release were received; if a medical officer considered the prisoner's life to be in danger; or if prison directors at Dublin Castle scheduled a case for review. Women convicted of infant murder could petition the Lord Lieutenant if they wished, although a positive response was not guaranteed. They might be discharged if they displayed genuine remorse or regret, if they had a respectable character prior to the act of murdering their infants, if they suffered from poor physical health, if a close family member fell ill, or if a similar prisoner had been recently discharged. Many of these women played upon their gendered roles and emphasised the importance of being returned to their role in the family. In 1886, Lord Lieutenant Lord Aberdeen, known for his support of philanthropic activity, authorised the release of all female inmates undergoing sentences of imprisonment for infant murder once they had served between five and seven years; an action that reflected shifting attitudes towards child murder and its perpetrators despite no change in the law having been initiated. Farrell comments that such a change did not occur in countries such as England.

In summary, Elaine Farrell's *A Most Diabolical Deed?: Infanticide and Irish Society, 1850-1900* is a meticulously researched, well-written and thoughtfully crafted account of infanticide in late 19th-century Ireland. One of the most impressive aspects of *A Most Diabolical Deed?* is the manner by which Farrell leads the reader through the circumstances of infanticide, commencing in her early chapters with the act of infant murder itself before gradually introducing the role of other actors throughout her monograph including coroners and juries, the community and the local press before uniquely concluding with an exploration of the prison experiences of those convicted of infanticide. Farrell's study is an important contribution to modern Irish social history that speaks to a range of growing research areas in Irish history including the history of gender, death and medicine while also adding to an international body of research on the history of these themes. It adds insight into the 19th-century development of psychiatric theories on deviant female behaviour, the shifting role of figures such as the coroner in Ireland, familial life in post-Famine Ireland, shifting attitudes towards both crime and shock deaths in a country subject to considerable social, economic and political change and the complex role of women in a society that maintained strict social norms about the types of sexual and social behaviour which they were allowed to display.

Notes

1. Cliona Rattigan, *What Else Could I Do? Single Mothers and infanticide in Ireland, 1900?1950* (Dublin, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review.

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