

David Wilson: Mary Ann Cotton, Britain's First Female Serial Killer

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The market for books dealing with true-crimes murder is somewhat congested. These books have significant popular appeal – a search on the UK Amazon site returns in excess of 8,000 titles in the genre of ‘true crime’ alone, and the connoisseur can choose from any number of sub-genres, including that of historic crimes and murderers. Into this market David Wilson offers a biography of Mary Ann Cotton whom he identifies as being “Britain’s first female serial killer”. However, this is not a run of the mill ‘true crime’ book. Wilson is an acknowledged expert in the field of serial killing and serial killers, with an excellent track record in producing books that are both academically rigorous and that have a wider public appeal,¹ and this one continues in that vein. It is notable that the book went straight to paperback with an attractively designed cover, suggesting that it is intended for the mass market. This is not to say that it is not of academic interest to serious historians concerned with murder cases of the 19th century.

The subject of this book is the case of Mary Ann Cotton, hanged in 1873 for the murder of her stepson, Charles Edward Cotton. Mary Ann Cotton is thought to have killed a number of people in her care – husbands, children and step-children. The exact number of her victims is unknown, although it has been suggested that the total could be as high as 21. Her method was that of arsenic poisoning, which as

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¹ See for example; Wilson, David. 2009. *A History of British Serial Killing*. London: Sphere.

Wilson notes, was the “poison of choice” for the typical Victorian poisoner, as it was a readily available substance, and the symptoms of arsenic poisoning could be, and often were, mistaken for other ailments, such as gastric fever, cholera or typhoid. Cotton is believed to have killed for convenience, for the disposal of relatives whose existence was likely to obstruct her, and for money in the form of the redemption of insurance policies taken out in the names of her victims. The case is not widely known in the 21st century, with Wilson identifying only one biography dedicated to Cotton pre-dating this one, although coincidentally, another was published in February 2012.² The two books are, however, very different. The Webb and Brown offering is typical of the true crime genre, giving the details of the crimes with little, if any analysis or comment.

In addressing the case of Mary Ann Cotton, Wilson combines an historical examination of a Victorian murder case with comparisons drawn from more recent criminological case studies. Wilson pieces together the story of Cotton and her career of murder by using contemporary Victorian newspaper reports, official documents held at the National Archives, and also the collected papers of Dr Thomas Scattergood, held at the University of Leeds. These last are a wonderful addition in that they give an extra dimension to that which has already been written about Cotton and the case. In addition to reporting the facts of the case, Wilson examines in some depth the issues raised by the criminal investigation, the development of the discipline of forensic science (assisted greatly by the Scattergood papers), and the societal issues surrounding the case, and it is this that sets the book apart from others. The major part of the book is concerned with the history of the case – in the introduction Wilson

² Webb, Simon and Brown, Miranda. 2012. *Mary Ann Cotton, Victorian Serial Killer*. Durham: Langley Press.

says that it is a “detective story”, dealing with the facts of the case, the victims and those who brought Cotton to justice. The narrative is lively and engaging – it is, after all, a cracking story – and Wilson does it justice. However, by providing criminological references within the text, the flow of the narrative is interrupted, such as where Wilson makes comparison between Cotton and Beverley Allitt (page 72). The links between the two women appear a little tenuous, in this case that both were nurses. He acknowledges that Allitt is supposed to have killed due to Munchausen’s by Proxy, while Cotton was not suspected of having any such psychological motivation. The reader is left asking therefore, why Wilson brings it to our attention. Other examples of these authorial asides are of some lengthy descriptions of other murder cases such as that of George Joseph Smith (page 123) and Jack the Ripper (page 165), and it is here that it is most apparent that this book may be intended for a non-specialist market that may not have direct knowledge of the cases and the issues that they raise. Wilson’s previous works and those of other authors provide good reference points for these asides, but I feel that placing them within the main text does detract from the historical element of the book.

Having said this, I feel that the most successful part of the book is that which deals with the criminological study of the case, and in particular why it was that the case of Mary Ann Cotton ‘disappeared’ from public view. Cotton is identified as a serial killer as “she killed more than three people in a period of more than 30 days”, (page 19), and Wilson uses the Kelleher and Kelleher typology³ as a framework to help to understand Cotton and her behaviour. Wilson states that he believes that she was our first female serial killer as the culture in which she lived (Victorian England)

³ Kelleher and Kelleher divide female serial killers into categories in order to examine the cultural bias against female serial murderers; Kelleher, D and Kelleher, CL. 1998. *Murder Most Rare: The Female Serial Killer*. Westport: Praeger.

is recognisable to us as being similar to our own, and her behaviour is such that we might identify with it. He notes that the case was not a particular cause célèbre at the time, and that little has been written about her since, although she is still well-known in the geographical area in which she lived and committed most of her crimes. He puts forward a number of theories as to why this may have been the case, suggesting for example, that this might be because of her gender (although this consideration is disappointingly brief) – female serial killers being comparatively rare, both historically and today. In particular, using the contemporary newspaper accounts, he examines the ways in which Victorian journalists found it difficult to “make sense” of Cotton and her crimes, and suggests that because of this “conceptual impossibility”, she was commonly denied or ignored. Wilson also suggests that Cotton’s life became that of melodrama, allowing the Victorian audience to “forgive her”, particularly as at the time of her arrest she was pregnant, and as her daughter was removed from her before her execution – motherhood, it is implied, facilitated the image of Cotton as a wronged woman and contributed to her ‘disappearance’. This theory is well-founded, but I wonder, given that there was significant country-wide interest during the second half of the 19th century in women who killed children for profit, for example the near contemporary cases of Margaret Waters, Jessie King, Amelia Dyer, and other notorious baby-farmers, whether it is entirely conclusive.

The issue of murderers making some financial gain from the insurance and death of infants had become a cause for concern of parliament in 1890, soon after the Cotton case, echoing the anxiety regarding some murder cases involving so called ‘baby-farmers’. These led to a select committee and the examination of an Infant Protection Bill which included in its terms of reference a consideration of the issue of

the insurance of infants (although the subject of insurance was hardly mentioned in committee, and the Bill did not make its way to the statute book). This demonstrates, I suggest, that the issues raised by the Cotton killings, amongst others, were a source of contemporary anxiety, one that became a target for governmental intervention and thus that the implications of the case did not immediately disappear. Wilson's examination of Cotton's disappearance by a comparison of her case with that of Jack the Ripper does demonstrate her relative invisibility, although this may be as much because of the differing levels of violence and public sensationalism of the Ripper cases, probably the most well-known of Victorian murders, and the very private, domestic nature of Cotton's murders, rather than simply because of the gender of the perpetrator.

I wonder if it could be argued that Cotton had as much in common with the baby-farmers of the 19th century, in the guise of a cold-hearted serial killer. If this were to be so, she might not even be our 'first' female serial killer. An examination of the contemporary accounts of the notorious baby-farmers shows similar attention paid to the women at the centre of those cases who are described as being calm, cold and calculating. Charlotte Winsor, for example was described as being "devoid of feeling" following her conviction in 1866 for the murder of an infant in her care, while Margaret Waters, hanged in 1870, was popularly considered to be scheming and devious. These descriptions provide some correlation with the idea of these women as being psychopaths and/or serial killers in the same way that Professor Wilson ascribes to Cotton and her behaviour. In line with his suggestion that one of his reasons for defining Cotton as being our first female serial killer is that her behaviour was such that we might identify with it today, it could also be argued that baby-farming in some

form or another still exists in our contemporary culture, for us to abhor and disapprove of the ways in which some people profit from the care of children at their expense.

Overall, this is a fascinating book, bringing to greater notice the case of a 19th century murderess. The historical research is illuminating – and in particular it is always exciting to hear about the discovery of a newly discovered primary source giving more colour and evidence to the conclusions that can be made by an author, and in this case more certainty regarding a ‘guilty’ verdict. The historical section is written in an engaging style, and the inclusion of references to other, more recent and more notorious serial killers, does give depth to the work and makes it accessible to the non-specialist reader. The consideration of the social context of the Cotton case is very interesting, and the section on the criminological aspects of the case is, perhaps not surprisingly given Wilson’s expertise and previous body of work, particularly valuable for the serious researcher.