

## Book Reviews

**Mark Jackson** (ed.), *Infanticide: historical perspectives on child murder and concealment, 1550–2000*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, pp. xiii, 292, illus., £47.50 (hardback 0-7546-0318-0).

The killing of one's own child is seen as one of the most terrible of crimes. Luc Racaut, in this volume, argues that accusations of infanticide against Protestants on the eve of the French wars of religion reflected the prevailing view of infanticide as "a universal mark of infamy" (p. 34), and only recently infanticide was described as "the ultimate evil" (*Daily Telegraph*, 30 January 2003). However, this attitude stands at odds with the intense pity and sympathy also invoked by the act, which is usually either the desperate finale to a concealed pregnancy or the result of severe post-natal depression. The essays in this multi-authored volume derive from different academic genres and approach the subject in different ways, but together they reflect continuities and changes in the social and legal construction and treatment of infanticide over the last four and a half centuries.

One recurring theme in the book is the social and cultural context that forced single women into infanticide. Johanna Geyer-Kordesch uses legal and literary sources to argue that infanticide must be seen in relation to the "erotic plot" and the "marriage plot". Both Patricia van der Spuy, for South Africa, and Margaret Arnot, for England, use case-studies to reveal the particular vulnerability of nineteenth-century pregnant women who lacked the support of the father of the child, and Julie Wheelwright's analysis of recent cases brings home the fact that social instability and insecurity continue to play a large role in the pressures towards infanticide.

Another common subject is the evolving attitude towards the psychology of the mother. J R Dickinson and J A Sharpe argue that the eighteenth-century decline in both prosecutions and the severity of sentencing shown by the Court of Great Sessions at Chester reflected a growing understanding of the social circumstances surrounding infanticide. Dana Rabin argues that this leniency was the product of a culture of sensibility as demonstrated by a gradual increase in psychological defences for unmarried women

(previously the conserve of the married), and Hilary Marland goes on to suggest that puerperal insanity became a much more acceptable defence for infanticide in the nineteenth century, allowing women to be treated with compassion while holding them criminally culpable. This tension between the criminal responsibility of infanticidal women and a compassionate view that acknowledges both the special phenomenon of puerperal mania and the social forces shaping such desperate acts is apparent in many chapters, and Tony Ward addresses its implications in relation to British legal reforms of the early twentieth century. Women committing infanticide due to puerperal mania were expected to recover quickly after the post-partum period, and Cath Quinn uses photographs of the accused to draw out attitudes to the rehabilitation of such women. Jonathan Andrews illustrates that officials took a large range of factors, particularly those relating to the domestic situation of such women, into account when determining their dates of discharge from criminal lunatic asylums.

What attitudes to infanticidal women reflect about other cultural attitudes is also brought out in several chapters. Amy Masciola demonstrates what reactions to such women revealed about the fears of the eighteenth-century middle classes in relation to the growing ranks of servants, while Hilary Marland and Cath Quinn argue that the insanity defence implied that the potential for maternity was the potential for insanity.

The essays relate to different countries, derive from different academic standpoints and are heavily weighted towards the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While this can detract from comparability, the development of common themes and changes over time is emphasized by the chronological ordering and the introductory chapter by Mark Jackson. Overall, the volume is an important contribution to the understanding of infanticide in a historical perspective.

**Alice Reid**,  
St John's College, Cambridge

**Leslie Klenerman** (ed.), *The evolution of orthopaedic surgery*, London, Royal Society of