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"What Else Could I Do?": Single Mothers and Infanticide, 1900-1950 [Book Review]

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In her book ‘What Else Could I Do?’: Single Mothers and Infanticide, 1900–1950, Cliona Rattigan excavates a narrow, yet deep cache of cases about one of the world’s oldest and saddest phenomena: mothers who kill their children. Rattigan’s painstaking investigation of 300 such cases from Ireland, drawn from a half century during which the country knew great political turmoil, casts light on a more intimate, yet equally profound turmoil that took place among unmarried pregnant women during that same period in time. As the title suggests, in this history Rattigan dispels the notion that infanticide is a random crime committed by deranged women. Instead, she shows it to be embedded in, and responsive to, cultural norms. Her case-by-case analysis of 50 years of legal archives brings to life the voices of those who saw themselves as complicit in the deaths of these children, of those whom we, today, might view as complicit and of those who struggled to do justice in response to these crimes.

Rattigan’s history grows out of her dissertation research, and she endeavours to parse her data by organizing it into neat chapters and drawing conclusions about differences between the genesis of, and response to, infanticide in Ireland before and after independence. In the end, though, her chapters and the stories they contain blend together, and we learn little about the differences between Protestant and Catholic Ireland, or about any distinctions in the nature of this crime over the course of the relevant 50-year time-frame. Instead, the dominant message her book conveys is that maternal infanticide was accompanied by an underlying drumbeat of poverty and desperation. Rattigan’s contribution to the literature on infanticide lies not in the conclusions she draws from her research, but rather in the manner in which her exposé permits the evidence to speak for itself. For one new to this tragic subject, the book’s particularized stories leave little doubt that infanticide is a crime unlike other forms of homicide in the extent to which it challenges a society’s ability to cast moral, if not legal blame. And for those who are already familiar with maternal filicide in other contexts, Rattigan’s use of original sources provides a clear lens through which to deepen our understanding of the forces underlying this crime.

Rattigan’s history begins with a consideration of the life circumstances of the women at the time of their pregnancies. To my mind, her most salient finding is that the overwhelming majority of those studied worked as domestic servants (pp. 57–70). Their status as household employees reveals many important factors relevant to their crime and to the detection of it.

As domestic servants, almost all were unmarried, during an era in which unwed motherhood was both socially and legally unacceptable. The birth of a child would have caused them to lose their jobs – jobs that were not well-paid, but which permitted them the money they relied upon to support themselves. Because of the stigma surrounding illegitimacy, most of their families would have felt humiliated by their daughters’ out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and would not necessarily have welcomed them home with their newborns. Until mid-century, Ireland lacked formalized adoption mechanisms. Some of
the mothers in Rattigan’s study hired foster mothers to care for their children. These fostering situations were private arrangements for which the mothers paid dearly. A number of Rattigan’s cases described young mothers’ unsuccessful endeavours to cover these costs out of their meagre wages. Hence the poignant plea from which Rattigan takes her title: ‘What else could I do?’

The fact of employment as a domestic servant also emerges as relevant both to the women’s becoming pregnant and also to the greater likelihood of her crime being detected. For these women, working in another’s home as a live-in aide implied both less familial supervision and less privacy. As young, single women living away from their families, domestic servants enjoyed broader latitude in terms of social life than did their peers who lived with their parents. That said, because their homes were also their workplaces, their actions were constantly subjected to the scrutiny of others. Indeed, in her chapter on the detection of infanticide (pp. 171–190), Rattigan describes the power of rumours and neighbourly ‘concern’ in circumscribing these women’s lives. The picture she draws is one in which the police often had a woman under surveillance as ‘suspicious’ long before her crime, simply because of suspected sexual activity or owing to a neighbour’s report that the woman looked pregnant. The Ireland of this era, as described by Rattigan, was one in which one would not directly approach the young woman to enquire about pregnancy, let alone to offer help. Instead, one harboured suspicions that she might dispose of her newborn, and neighbours and police alike waited to see if their suspicions proved to be accurate.

Following her descriptions of the women who committed infanticide, Rattigan moves on to engage the related topics of their families of origin, their partners and their experiences with the Irish legal system. The stories she uncovers invite conversation about the extent to which familial and societal circumstances shape maternal filicide across time and place. They trigger curiosity about the extent to which Irish society struggled to understand the genesis of infanticide, and even more, about the extent to which the Irish viewed these infants’ deaths as somehow distinct from other forms of homicide.

Rattigan ducks these enquiries, though, and her chapters consist largely of collections of stories followed by endeavours to use them to form generalizations about broader societal themes. For instance, in Chapter 3, she uses the data on the women’s sexual relations to draw conclusions about sexual activity among all single women in this era. It is tempting, when faced with such rich data, to fill in what seems to be an interesting denominator and to use the resulting figure to suggest any number of findings. In succumbing to this temptation, Rattigan misses the mark, as her data cannot support her conclusions. Instead, she would have been better advised to note the significance that lies in the stories themselves. There is nothing wrong with offering up ‘numerators’ alone, so long as one acknowledges the limits inherent in reasoning beyond them to make generalizations about populations outside the group studied.

For example, Rattigan’s research shows that in Ireland, as was the case in Great Britain and many other nations, jurors and judges alike resisted convicting and sentencing these women for murder. Although Rattigan devotes an entire chapter to sentencing, she fails to engage the reasons underlying jury nullification, judicial leniency and the apparently widespread commutation of severe prison sentences in cases involving infanticide. This pattern points to a societal discomfort with allocating blame in these cases.
Similar to patterns observed in many other cultures, today and throughout history, upon closer examination, cases involving mothers who kill their children are not readily dismissed as the acts of a single, deranged individual. Instead, they often implicate far more than the defendant herself, shedding light on the extent to which other individuals, and even society itself, contributed to the child’s death.

To be fair, Rattigan’s focus is not on the broader literature regarding infanticide, but rather on the way in which circumstances contributed to a narrowing of options, such that by the time the women killed their children, their acts seemed almost foreordained. There are chilling examples of the pressures families placed on these women to kill their newborns, including letters from family members urging the women to kill their offspring (p. 86) or barring them from returning home to their families with their babies (p. 89).

One interesting twist on the resolution of infanticide prosecutions in Ireland during this time was the extent to which the criminal justice system embraced alternatives to prison. Primary among these, in both Catholic and Protestant Ireland (both before and after independence), was the practice of permitting women to serve time in religious convents. This resolution indicates the system’s perception that these women’s crimes indicated a particular sort of moral corruption – one tied to sexuality, and one perhaps amenable to correction through religious indoctrination. Rattigan ties her research to existing studies of the Magdalene asylums, showing how what might have seemed an act of mercy often resulted in an indeterminate sentence for these women, who were held at the pleasure of the heads of these religious orders.

Perhaps the most interesting alternative to incarceration emerged in the small number of cases in which courts permitted women convicted of infanticide to marry the men who impregnated them, rather than forcing them to serve time in prison (p. 218). Although there were only eight such cases in Rattigan’s sample, it is intriguing to observe the extent to which Irish society seemed, at least in these cases, to equate marriage to social control, if not captivity.

In sum, Rattigan’s history brings us the voices of women seldom heard, whether in their own time or in ours. Her archival research greatly enhances our understanding of the factors surrounding infanticide in early 20th-century Ireland.