

Understanding 19th century 'baby-farming' women who killed: aberration or 'rational' act?

Writing for Frontier, PhD student **Joshua Stuart-Bennett** explains his research into the child killing activity associated with Victorian 'baby-farming'. In contrast to understandings that have been based upon cases of individual women and their nature, he hopes to place the phenomenon within the wider social, cultural and historical context to reframe our perception of these women and their crimes.

The term 'baby-farming' was coined in the 19th century to describe a largely unregulated business practice where certain working women provided, either temporary or permanent, paid child-care services for parents (predominantly single mothers) with children who either could not be cared for or were unwanted due to social and economic pressures. Particularly for unwed women at the time, childbearing often brought with it a high level of stigmatisation, social hardship and exclusion. Without sufficient resources and support, this stigma led to exceptional adversity for both mother and child. Insufficient structures surrounding child care services encouraged the 'farming' of children, a scheme that afforded little incentive to keep the children alive. Investigations by authorities were believed to have uncovered a pervasive and clandestine 'baby-farming' enterprise where considerable motive and opportunity resulted, either by act or by omission, in the child's death. By providing insufficient care and sustenance, or by straightforward infanticide, some 'baby-farmers' were therefore thought to have established a maximum profit venture.

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Media perception of baby-farming killers

Being interested in how society comes to understand those (especially women) who kill, my research critiques the notion of 'aberrant individuals' as well as the approaches often taken within the human sciences that predominantly seek an explanation for such behaviours on the level of the individual. In making sense of acts that are deemed socially objectionable, such as instances of unlawful killing, there is a common tendency to infer that some inherent factor, a distinctive and innate causal characteristic, corresponds to such behaviours. This approach results in a fixation



The case of Amelia Dyer (1837-1896), often referred to as 'the Ogress of Reading', became a cause célèbre with many speculating that she had killed hundreds of children during her career as a baby-farmer. Amelia was hanged in 1896 with six confirmed murders attributed to her. This image of Amelia Dyer, like the iconic photo of Myra Hindley, has become symbolic of 'evil' and 'monstrous women'. The image adorns several 'true crime' texts where Amelia has been spotlighted as a 19th century serial killer with little attention paid to the context of these crimes or the number of other similar cases.



A nuanced understanding of 'baby-farming' women who killed requires the phenomenon to be viewed through the eyes of the past, not the present. Hardships that affected those social groupings most prone to denigration as well as issues surrounding illegitimacy and child bearing are just some elements that shaped the wider context in which these acts occurred.

upon the individual and, in doing so, deflects attention away from the context and circumstances that may have generated, shaped and facilitated such acts. Moreover, this approach tends to focus upon specific cases whilst others remain unknown, unconsidered and undiscussed. Accounts seeking to understand the behaviour of 19th century 'baby-farming' women who killed have overwhelmingly considered only a very small number of the most sensational and 'newsworthy' cases. Most notable is the fixation upon Amelia Dyer (1837-1896) whose case became a cause célèbre, attracting much speculation that she may have killed hundreds of children during her career as a 'baby-farmer'.

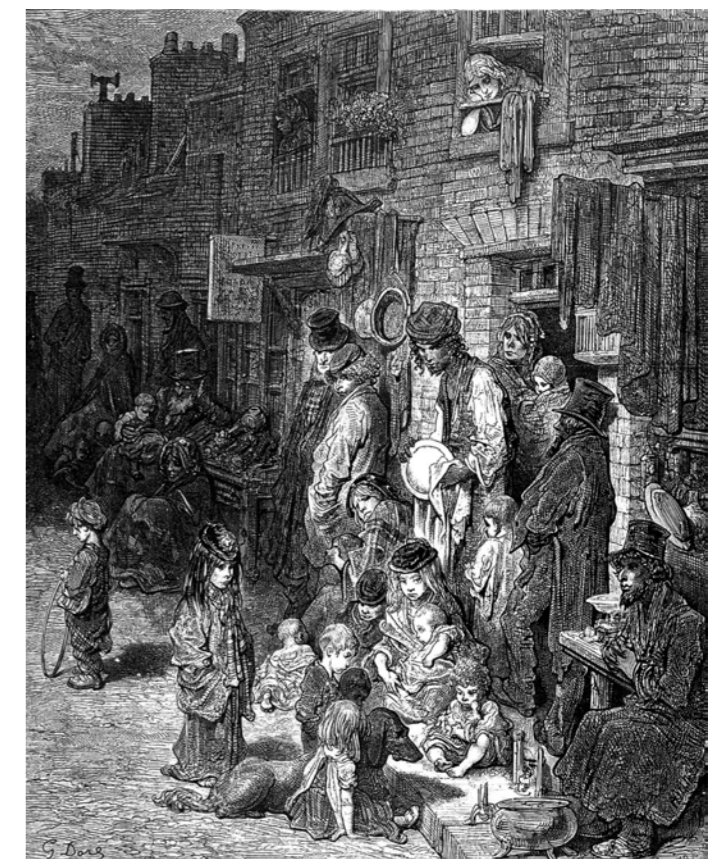
The way these women have been represented parallels the limited number of ways we tend to understand criminally transgressive women more generally; namely, that there is something inherently wrong or defective that caused the behaviour. 'Baby-farming' women who killed have frequently been depicted as being psychologically unstable, naturally weak and helpless, or intrinsically bad. Whether represented as mentally deranged, as serial killers, monsters or even as victims of sorts, the focus is always principally upon the individual woman and her nature. For instance, understandings of Amelia Dyer are predominantly built upon notions of mental illness, serial killing and 'evilness'.

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'Rational' within its context?

In seeking to address this concern, the wider social, cultural and historical context in which this child killing activity occurred may instead be considered. In this sense, a re-understanding of this phenomenon may first recognise that, at its core, such behaviour

was a response, or solution, to the universal and omnipresent problem of women being faced with pregnancies and children that they could not support, or did not want. In such circumstances, options or provisions to deal with this problem (legal or otherwise) manifest, and will be shaped by the surrounding social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Economic, moral, political and class based factors that framed and underpinned these acts may therefore be examined. Similarly, consideration should be given to the social construction of victim groups as unprotected, undervalued and 'problematic' individuals, as well as to the opportune circumstances that facilitated the killings. The phenomenon should also be examined in relation to other associated behaviours and practices, such as procuring abortion drugs (abortifacients), the use of 'backstreet' abortionists, and child abandonment 'baby dropping,' that comprised an array of 'solutions' which allowed those in need to deal with their 'problem'. Unknown and undiscussed cases from the United Kingdom and other parts of the Western world should also be spotlighted in order to highlight how baby-farming, rather than being the result of individual pathological weakness or 'evilness', was the product of social and cultural pressures and therefore 'rational' and comprehensible within its historical context. In doing so, explanations of mental illness, serial killing and evilness become overly simplistic and inadequate for making sense of this phenomenon. Thus, rather than fixing the causes and responses (treatment or punishment) at the level of the individual, this research brings to light the wider social involvement, construction, and complicity in such acts.



Victorian child rearing, whether of one's own or of other peoples' offspring, was predominantly assigned to women. This undertaking took place within the domestic sphere and could therefore be placed quite 'out-of-sight and out-of-mind' for the rest of society. The circumstances surrounding the care of babies, especially illegitimates, may have created certain incentives and opportunity structures for abuse.

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