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Nameless Indignities: Unraveling the Mystery of One of Illinois's Most Infamous Crimes

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Nameless Indignities: Unraveling the Mystery of One of Illinois's Most Infamous Crimes, by Susan Elmore. True Crime History Series. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2013. xvii, 326 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Jeffrey S. Adler is professor of history at the University of Florida. His most recent book is *First in Violence, Deepest in Dirt: Homicide in Chicago, 1875-1920* (2006).

In June 1882 an almost unspeakably brutal crime occurred in central Illinois's Christian County. Emma Bond, a young schoolteacher, was gang-raped and mutilated so sadistically that a newspaper termed her wounds "nameless indignities." In the aftermath of the crime, law enforcers charged six local men with the assault, a mob nearly lynched the suspects, and someone attempted to kidnap the victim. The ensuing trial exposed searing divisions in the community and shattered the lives of nearly everyone involved in the case. Genealogist Susan Elmore, a great-great niece of Emma Bond, reconstructs the crime, the trial, and the post-trial lives of the key figures. Because the jury acquitted the defendants, Elmore also attempts to solve this "spellbinding whodunit" (xii).

Elmore writes in the "true crime" genre. In the first two-thirds of the book, she provides a detailed description of the crime and the legal proceedings. Recounting those events, however, proved to be a challenge, for the trial transcript has not survived. But newspapers devoted copious attention to the case, and Elmore pieces together the story by drawing on dozens of newspaper accounts of the crime and the trial. Relying on her skills as a genealogist, she traces the victim, the accused, their relatives, and criminal-justice officials through census records and other sources. Although *Nameless Indignities* is lightly footnoted, Elmore's research is impressive. In the final third of the book, the author follows newly discovered clues to try to establish the identity of Emma Bond's attackers. Conveyed through a telephone conversation with an unidentified, elderly descendant of a resident, this information was largely unverifiable, though Elmore tries to determine "whodunit."

The author is at her best when reconstructing the trial. If the goal of a true crime book is to engage the reader with a riveting story, then Elmore has succeeded. If the goal is more ambitious, such as using a crime story to immerse readers in a different time and place, then *Nameless Indignities* is somewhat less successful. The final third of the book drifts away from Elmore's careful research and lapses into speculation, complete with fictionalized conversations, introduced with phrases such as "Hobbs might have said something like . . ." (253). Again and

again, Elmore uses this literary device as she attempts to solve the mystery, writing, for example, “a scenario that may have unfolded something like this . . .” (264). She acknowledges that the crucial new lead that undergirds the final section of the book is of questionable use: “Whether that [the recently revealed information] was true or the figment of an aging and clouded memory is hard to say” (278).

Finally, the author’s depiction of the historical context is a bit stylized. Elmore describes the local residents, for instance, as “all good Christians” and “friendly souls” (11). Yet some among these “good and trustworthy” people (13) committed a gang-rape, attempted to kidnap the victim and lynch the suspects, and levied threats against one another. Clearly social life in a small Illinois town in the 1880s was not entirely harmonious. In addition, Elmore might have consulted recent studies on sex crime, criminal justice, and journalism in the late nineteenth-century Midwest to place the trial more effectively in the legal context of the era. When the defendants were acquitted, for example, Elmore asserts that local residents were shocked. But observers of the trial certainly knew better, for prosecutors rarely won convictions in criminal cases during this period.

In short, the final section might have been better supported with evidence, and the description of the trial might have been better contextualized. Still, *Nameless Indignities* is a fascinating, thoroughly engaging book.

The Quack’s Daughter: A True Story about the Private Life of a Victorian College Girl, by Greta Nettleton. Revised edition. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. xxiv, 371 pp. Illustrations, notes, glossary, bibliography, name index. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Jane Simonsen is associate professor of history and women’s & gender studies at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. She is the author of *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860–1919* (2006).

Cora (Corize) Keck, daughter of Davenport’s famously unlicensed medical practitioner Mrs. Dr. Keck, was the “trophy daughter” whose acceptance at Vassar was a way of thumbing her nose at the midwestern elites who marginalized her family. Like other microhistories, Nettleton’s meticulous study of institutional records, Cora’s diary, and (most fascinatingly) her scrapbooks sets one life in the stream of other historical currents. It charts the social and work opportunities that education presented eager co-eds—and the gendered conventions that closed the door on them as resoundingly as they had on Cora’s mother.