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A History of Infanticide in Britain, c. 1600 to the Present

Anne-Marie Kilday

London: Palgrave, 2013, €103.99 hbk, ISBN: 9780230547070

Reviewed by: Karen Brennan, University of Essex, England

The crime of infanticide is one that holds an enduring fascination not only because of the status of the victim – a vulnerable and innocent baby – but also because of the status of the offender as the mother of the victim. It invites a range of emotional responses, including horror, bewilderment, censure, anger, sympathy, and a deep desire to understand why a woman would kill her own child and how we as a society should respond to this. It is a complex topic that spans a range of scholarly disciplines, including history, law, medicine and sociology. For the scholar of criminal justice, the crime of infanticide holds endless appeal, not least because of the fact that it provides a rare example of female violence that appears to challenge several stereotypes about women and their involvement in criminality.

Anne-Marie Kilday in her book, *A History of Infanticide in Britain, c. 1600 to the Present*, offers a rich, thorough and nuanced history of this crime. Spanning the period 1600 to the present day, this book provides a comprehensive account of the phenomenon of infanticide in Britain, being the first to include a wholly integrated approach by incorporating both the English and Welsh, and the Scottish perspectives. The research is based on a wealth of primary and secondary materials. Kilday's own analysis of historical sources, most significantly the contemporary court records, is particularly important in helping to illuminate the issues and to provide fresh insights into the subject, and the case study approach adopted is useful in helping to illustrate the complex and nuanced nature of this crime. In short, the book provides an excellent analysis of the nature and incidence of this crime; the evolving contemporary attitudes towards it, particularly as evinced in the criminal justice and medical contexts; and the shifting explanations of this form of criminality throughout the 400 year period covered. As such, it is an ambitious and important contribution to the existing scholarship.

Rather than provide a more detailed summary of this book, a number of specific aspects that this reviewer found to be particularly interesting and useful in terms of the contribution made to the understanding of this topic will be highlighted. First, Kilday's reading of the historical sources shows that, at least in cases of infanticide that appeared before the courts, this crime was more commonly committed by active and violent means. This challenges existing understandings, first of the crime of infanticide (generally accepted by historians as being mainly a passive crime) and, second, of female criminality (generally understood as being secondary, passive and non-violent). In short, Kilday's evidence helps to contest the stereotypical view of women as being passive and non-violent.

The second noteworthy contribution made is the analysis in chapter three that challenges the perception of this crime as one that involved only the mother of the victim. In this regard, Kilday makes an important

contribution to the historical literature by including in her analysis cases where men were charged with the murder of their infants during the Early Modern period. What is most noteworthy in this account is that men who killed their own infants appear to have been motivated by similar factors to those appearing in cases of maternal infanticide. In particular, the role of shame as a driver of this crime during the 1600–1800s is highlighted. An interesting perspective is also provided on the role the community played in indirectly contributing to this crime during the early modern period. Third, chapter six provides an overview of the factors that motivated, and thus help to explain, this crime during the pre-modern period. Whilst these factors have been observed before in the literature on infanticide, Kilday's analysis of the historical court records and newspaper reports provides a deeper and more rigorous account of contemporary understandings of this crime. The evidence confirms the significance of shame as a key explanation for infanticide, but also highlights that the killing of her baby could be an assertion of autonomy by a woman who sought to control her own destiny in choosing to kill her child as a pragmatic solution to her problematic situation.

The only noteworthy criticisms this reviewer can make relate to the analysis of the legal aspects of this topic. The precise legal implications of the 1624 and 1803 English statutes, particularly in terms of how the requirements under these laws played out in court in relation to the evidence needed to prove murder, were not clearly explained and at times the analysis had the potential to misrepresent the legal position. It would also have been useful if the legal problems during the early modern and Victorian periods were analysed in more detail, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with this issue. In this regard, the background to significant legal changes, notably the introduction of the 1803 statute and the Infanticide Act 1922 in England, could have been explored in greater depth. An interesting point was made about the 1803 law being enacted, not for humanitarian reasons, but to ensure a more efficient and effective legal response to this crime. However, the significance of the harsh aspects of the 1624 statute and how the 1803 law sought to ameliorate this was somewhat lost in this analysis. In particular, the fact that the 1803 legislation technically made it more difficult to obtain murder convictions because it reinstated the presumption of dead birth was glossed over. With regard to the Infanticide Act 1922, given the significance of this legal change, it would have been useful had a more detailed account of the background to this reform been provided. In particular, the precise problems with the law up to this point, though alluded to, were not explored in detail. Furthermore, the decision to adopt a rationale for this crime that is ostensibly based on the notion that these killers are mentally disturbed was not explained, particularly in light of Kilday's assertion that medical explanations for this crime had diminished by the end of the nineteenth century. On the whole, however, the book does prove a good overview of the criminal justice response to this crime, and the above is only likely to trouble those seeking a detailed account of the criminal justice response to infanticide. Indeed, the shortcomings in the legal analysis simply demonstrate the difficulty in writing on a topic that spans a number of different academic spheres.

In conclusion, for those unfamiliar with the subject of infanticide this book provides an excellent and detailed analysis, covering many different facets, including the historical, criminal justice, medical, gendered and social, to this phenomenon. For those who are not new to this topic, Kilday's monograph, aside from providing a comprehensive source for the history of this crime, makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature and helps to develop our understanding of this phenomenon and the social, legal and medical responses to it. By including an analysis of this crime in the twentieth century, Kilday also provides a useful starting point for further research on this subject from a more contemporary perspective. The lasting impression of this book is the sheer complexity and enduring nature of this crime, and the difficulty in ever fully understanding, and thus adequately responding to, it.

Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland: Webs of Significance

Tom Inglis

London: Palgrave, 2014, €88.39 hbk, ISBN: 9781137429124

Reviewed by: Christien Brinkgreve, University of Utrecht, Netherlands

What is the meaning of life in a secular postmodern age? It is an interesting question, not easy to answer, food for philosophers, but the way the Irish sociologist Tom Inglis tries to formulate an answer is a fine example of sociological thinking.

He tries to find an answer by asking people about the meaning of life for them, and finds that, after the decline of the influence of the church and its loss of the monopoly over religion and the meaning of life, there is no one definitive meaning. He interviewed a hundred people from five different areas (a working-class inner city area of Dublin, a large county town, a rural area in the west of Ireland, a satellite village near Dublin, and a third-level college in the suburbs of Dublin), to get an overall picture and understanding of the enormous variety in giving meaning. He conducted all the interviews personally, and 'one hundred was as much as I could manage on my own'; it is not the language of a sociologist who tries to give a picture from the outside based on a statistical analysis of a mass of data. Instead of this, Inglis gives a lively and subtle description of the varied way people give meaning to their life, from the inside, with much understanding of the context in which people are living, the context of social class, neighbourhood, family, work, religion. But he works in an even more refined sociological way by putting much emphasis on social interaction and on the way webs of meaning are constructed in interactions: 'The meanings of the webs depends on the social field in which people are operating, the general context, the institutional setting, and the specific interaction. The webs of meaning between a husband and wife will change depending on whether they are alone or with their children, whether they are in the privacy of their home or in a public space. Context, therefore, is extremely important' (183). That includes not only the broader context of economic growth, known as the Celtic Tiger, followed by the recession, or the declining influence of the Church and the cultural globalisation, but also the more subtle and variable context of the social interactions.

We see here the influence of Erving Goffman with his focus on social interaction, but Inglis enlarges the use of this concept by not losing sight of the broader social context in which the interactions take place and by his sharp eye for the processes and dynamics of change: 'People are socialised into webs of meaning that they re-spin and keep going, all the time making small adjustments that, over time, change the structure and the content of the web. They spin these webs using many of the same cultural ingredients as their parents did – the same ideas, beliefs, codes of behavior, ritual practices, and so forth – blended with other cultural ingredients that they have picked up elsewhere and made their own' (182).

But the cultural ingredients and the ways people in contemporary Ireland spin webs of meaning are very different from those spun fifty years ago, Inglis notes. There have been major transformations in economy and society, but the most important transformation in Irish culture has been the demise of the power and influence of the Church with its monopoly over religion and the meaning of life. But the values of the Church of self-denial, humility, piety and chastity lost their coercive power and were replaced by the messages of the media: of desire, pleasure and self-fulfilment, the messages of individualism and hedonism. The media were a central part of the new flow of cultural globalisation, and began to replace the church as a social conscience of Irish Society. The media and the market became dominant forces in the changes in social structures and

discourse: the penetration of consumer capitalist culture into everyday Irish life becomes concrete and palpable in the interviews.

We recognise the themes of Inglis's earlier work on the moral monopoly of the Church, of sexuality and love, and on globalising Ireland. He really has built a coherent oeuvre of books in which he elaborates his themes in a consistent and also personal way. His books are very well written, and he is a master in the sociological art of linking the macro and the micro, with much attention to the level of emotions.

What are the central values for the Irish today, which webs of meaning are they spinning with the cultural ingredients of this time? People are deeply attached to their families. When asked for the significance of success, many of them answered that success for them was having a good family life, having happy, healthy kids. Family and health are more important than money and material success. The strong webs of meaning in their lives were built around love and care for others. There are other important threads of meaning: people are attached to the places where they live, their homes, pubs and neighbourhoods, to their pets, to sport teams. For many of the people Inglis interviewed, sport has much significance, more than either religion or politics. Sport is providing a sense of identity, bonding and belonging, of collective effervescence, sometimes almost spiritual, even if it does not generate moral commitments. Sport is interwoven with personal and family life. For many people, the rhythm of their life was based on family, work and sport. For them the meaning of life was not an issue for reflection on ideas, beliefs and principles, but lies in their way of living within different webs of meaning. Everyday life revolves around habituated practices that provide us with a sense of security and well-being, and we develop ideas and values that accommodate these rituals and routines. They become the structure of our life, and our webs of significance.

But the core web of meaning is built on longing and belonging, and these are, Inglis notes, deeply Catholic values. He comes to an interesting conclusion: the Church no longer has the formal authority, but religion is still part of the cultural repertoire of everyday life, not only to mark life transitions, but also on a deeper level of core values. This kind of finding sharpens our view on the persistence of values in a rapidly changing society. Inglis has a clear and sensitive eye for sameness and difference, for continuity and change, as elements in the multi-layered fabric of social life.

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