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Angela Brabin. *The Black Widows of Liverpool: A Chilling Account of Cold-Blooded Murder in Victorian Liverpool.* Lancaster: Palatine Books, 2003. 153 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-1-874181-21-7.

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Sisters in Crime

In 1884, Catherine Flanagan and Margaret Higgins were hanged for murder side-by-side at the Kirkdale Gaol in Liverpool, England. A jury convicted the two sisters of poisoning Margaret's husband, Thomas Higgins. There also was convincing evidence that they had killed perhaps three others: ten-year-old Mary Higgins, Thomas's daughter from a previous marriage; John Flanagan, Catherine's twenty-two-year-old son; and Margaret Jennings, an eighteen-year-old who, with her father, had lodged with one of the sisters for twelve years. The motivation? Unbeknownst to Thomas Higgins and the other victims, Catherine and her sister Margaret had purchased multiple life insurance policies on the four. In *The Black Widows of Liverpool*, Angela Brabin argues that this was merely the tip of the iceberg. Brabin began her investigation of the case expecting to focus on gender, particularly how the media depicted the two sisters. Were they presented fairly? Or were they demonized and dehumanized by an outraged community for deviating from accepted gender roles? However, during the course of her research, Brabin discovered that there was much more going on in this case than she or others initially thought. She had stumbled upon a "killing syndicate" operating for profit in Liverpool. Flanagan and Higgins apparently often teamed up with friends to commit these crimes. Most scholars of female criminals are familiar with the lone murderess wreaking havoc throughout Victorian England, but a group of deviant (and business-minded) women is very unusual. This fascinating study serves to highlight a very unusual situation in the annals of crime and is a valuable addition to the historiography.[1] The book is meticulously researched and Brabin's twenty-five-year career as a lawyer specializing in criminal law and social security law proved invaluable to her as she waded through inquest transcripts, depositions, court documents, the correspondence and records of government officials, arrest statistics, census reports, and contemporary newspapers. She has uncovered both new and long-forgotten information, and has woven it into an intriguing tale. Brabin includes photographs, maps, and copies of documents which facilitate still more insight into the case for the reader. More important, they remind the reader that this is not a fictional account and allow the reader to do a little "sleuthing" on his or her own.

Flanagan and Higgins were part (and perhaps the leaders) of a large group of women operating a "wholesale poisoning" business. Victims were chosen and insured by one or more of the women, who often used aliases on insurance forms and who sometimes lied about their relationship with the insured. It is possible that as many as twenty-three men, women, and children were murdered by a group comprised of perhaps as many as eight women. The killers purchased poison or soaked flypaper in water and then used the arsenic-spiked liquid to poison family members, lodgers, and friends.

Brabin first offers some general information about the case, and then focuses on the probable and possible victims, dividing them into three categories: the four referenced during the trial who, given the evidence presented at trial and in newspapers, were most certainly victims of poison; six more who the authorities and Brabin believe were probable victims (Flanagan herself stated as much to her lawyer, although she denied any involvement in the murders); and seven individuals who were probably not victims of the conspiracy, since the only "proof" of a connection consists of contemporary gossip and speculation. Brabin offers an impressive amount of detail for each of the seventeen cases, highlighting their relationships to Flanagan and Higgins, how and when they died, and their ages and occupations, as well as the likelihood (or not) that the syndicate murdered them. Understandably, there are some gaps in the information due to the lack of records for some of those involved, but she does an admirable job with what information she has been able to obtain. She painstakingly

traces the relationships between the two sisters and their friends, and the connections they had to possible victims.

She then tackles the subject of gender in the case. Brabin briefly discusses murderesses in Victorian England and how their communities perceived them. She then narrows her focus to how Victorians reacted to the news that Flanagan and Higgins had poisoned and killed several family members. This is perhaps the weakest part of the book as the author insufficiently engages the topic, tantalizing the reader with statements about the "deviant Victorian woman" (p. 70), the "epidemic of poisoning cases" (p. 54), and the "fascination ... horror" (p. 64) that Victorians felt when confronted with these crimes. Yet she does not define these terms or explore these issues fully, nor provide statistics on arrested/convicted murderesses. She names other famous murderesses of that time, but provides little if any information about their crimes. This is perhaps where her background and training in law, as opposed to history, is most apparent. She is adept at gleaning information from a myriad of sources and fashioning powerful and enlightened arguments, but then often fails to sufficiently place them into historical context.

Another example is found earlier in the text. Brabin argues that the two sisters were not, contrary to what one might expect, dehumanized and vilified in the newspapers. The public was much more upset by the roles of the insurance companies and agents rather than what the women had done. One wonders what else might be going on here, though. Brabin quotes from a contemporary newspaper article where the writer referred to the "infernal craft which these women practiced" (p. 2). This comment appears to reference witchcraft, and it would be interesting to know whether it was hinted at in other articles. Brabin does not address this possibility though. Similarly, the fact that Flanagan and Higgins were Irish and residing in Liverpool, England is not explored. Surely ethnicity or religion must have had an effect. This also highlights another problem–the city of Liverpool is not sufficiently described. What was the population? Was it largely Irish or English? Was it predominantly working class? Were there strict lines of demarcation between the classes when it came to housing?

In the next chapter, Brabin traces the movements of Catherine Flanagan during the ten days she hid out from the police once her crimes had been discovered. Brabin argues that the community protected her and even helped her hide from the authorities. Although Brabin hints at some tension between Flanagan's peers and authorities, she does not provide enough details. What were the attitudes of the community regarding the press and the police? Also, while several people seem to have helped Flanagan escape notice, it does not appear, by Brabin's own evidence, that many of those same people knew who she was or, if they did, knew that she was hiding from the police. Flanagan told many of them that she was running away from a violent son, not the police, and she used aliases and changed her appearance. For these reasons, Brabin's assertion that the community protected a known killer is weakened.

Brabin also examines the possible culpability of doctors, insurance companies, and the government. She argues that while the doctors were guilty of misdiagnosing some of the victims and, most importantly, often filled out death certificates without ever seeing the deceased, it is difficult to blame them for not assuming that symptoms that mimic dysentery and other illnesses were in fact the product of poison. However, the ease with which one could purchase poison is appalling, as were the business practices of insurance agents, who often allowed people to insure others without their knowledge and cared little about the details or possible fraud as long as the agents collected their commissions. This is an area that would profit from more research and analysis. What kinds of reform movements were active at this time? Was this case, along with others, used to effect change in British law? Brabin references a *Punch* cartoon, reprinted in 1849, which registered disgust and dismay at the ease with which poison could be purchased by the working class, a group in dire financial straits and keen to collect on insurance policies. Yet she does not go beyond reprinting it. She also mentions a largely ineffective Sale of Arsenic Act, passed in 1851, that attempted to make it more difficult to purchase poisons and easier to trace those who did. How big a problem was this? Were any groups using this case to secure still more legislation against those distributing poison and against insurance companies who were, at best, lax when it came to controlling fraud? A sketch from the *Illustrated Police News*, reprinted in the book, is very telling (p. 91). It illustrates "Flanagan's Flight Through Liverpool" in five cells. She is pictured in only one of the cells, and in the final cell "The Cause of All" is depicted–a life insurance policy resting on some coins. Brabin has assembled evidence of an even larger and more intricate "web" of deceit than she seems to recognize.

While the gender of the murdereresses appears to have had little effect on how the community reacted, Brabin's text is rife with class-conscious comments, an is-

sue begging for more attention. Quotes from newspapers and the authorities point to more surprise that a member of the working class was clever enough to fool countless doctors for so long, than the fact that women had accomplished this feat. A chapter devoted to class issues revealed in the case would offer valuable insight into the Victorian world of the working class. Even as Brabin registers surprise at the rather low-key response to the fact that women in their midst were guilty of murder, she fails to address an obvious component of the crimes–that the women were killing other members of the working class and not the elite. Would the reaction have been different had they not been targeting their peers? Brabin hints at this, providing quotes from contemporary newspapers, but does not flesh it out. For example, after the verdict, the following appeared in the *Liverpool Daily Post*: "More uninteresting beings than the women sentenced on Saturday could not be imagined. [They are] squalid, ignorant and showing by every glance and movement that brute-like sullenness which the life of courts and alleys stamps on the faces of those who live in it" (pp. 102-103). The same paper argued that "among the squalid poor the blankness of life destroys the conception of its sacredness. Those whose lives are worth living seldom have much compunction in destroying the lives of others. A tradition of successful crime operates powerfully among the wretched and ignorant…. Society does not investigate too curiously into the deaths of its worthless members" (pp. 117-118). Is this perhaps reinforcing Social Darwinist theory, or is the writer challenging it? Is it possible that this case helped fuel reform? Or was it used as evidence to bolster nativists' arguments?

This review is not intended as a criticism of Brabin or the book. Brabin set out to write a local history, one geared toward students and anyone fascinated by the topic and the history of Liverpool. She has succeeded in producing just that–a rich and haunting tale of working-class women who lost their way in the narrow, dirty streets of Liverpool in the late nineteenth century. It is a measure of how intriguing the material and her presentation is that it leaves the reader wanting more. This work would serve as an excellent jumping off point for further, and much needed, research into the history of crime and what it reveals about society.

Note

[1]. For excellent works regarding the history of female criminals, see Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); and Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt, 1980).

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