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**Michael Ayers Trotti**. *The Body in the Reservoir: Murder and Sensationalism in the South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. ix + 301 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5842-4; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3178-6.

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**The Rise of the Mass Media and the Changing Nature of Crime Reporting in the Southern Press**

The murder trial and execution has been a central motif in Western culture since the story of the passion of Jesus was entered into the Christian canon. This timeless narrative has been expressed very differently throughout history, and how it is expressed is a window into the cultural assumptions of the tellers of the story. In *The Body in the Reservoir*, Michael Ayers Trotti effectively uses the study of the newspaper of one city, Richmond, Virginia, to examine this theme over the boundaries of time, region, and race. He looks first at the history of crime journalism and the emergence of the penny press in the nineteenth century, examining the issues in the context of the cultural differences of the U.S. North and South, and how those differences were lessened by the rise of mass culture. Trotti also examines an alternate view of justice reflected in Richmond's African American press, and shows how this perspective changed over time.

Trotti's book has two parts. The first part covers the history of the treatment of sensational murder trials in Richmond's newspapers, showing how that treatment changed and became first more sensational and later more realistic with the emergence of the popular press. The second part looks at the same themes from different perspectives. The distinctive view of murder and criminal justice by the African American press in Richmond is the theme of one chapter; another looks at the evolution of newspaper illustration from woodcut to half-tone and how such illustrations conveyed their own story of a murder trial. The final chapter discusses press coverage of executions, which often become tales unto themselves in which mythic elements of evil, redemption, and human doubt play in equal parts.

Trotti begins by surveying the beginnings of crime reporting in colonial and early republican Virginia. Virginia's newspaper press evolved from the early gazettes of the English-speaking world. These newspapers, chartered and strongly subsidized by the colonial government, were typically filled with state decrees, legislative enactments, public notices, advertisements, and reprinted extracts from British and other colonial newspapers. There were no reporters, but the papers published letters from readers that conveyed local news and occasionally political opinion–something that became more common leading up to the American Revolution. Virginia's governors were very wary of the press, and the colony's first paper, the Williamsburg-based *Virginia Gazette*, was only established in 1736. The *Gazette* was completely dependent on official business, which filled most of its columns, and had little interest in crime, failing even to reprint the moralist "execution sermons" popular in New England papers. The first murder case of any interest was the murder of Robert Routlidge by John Chiswell. Letters from friends of the two politically connected men were published, but in the five-month period from the murder to Chiswell's likely suicide relatively few column inches were used on the story.

The papers of republican Virginia at first showed the same indifference to crime, focusing attention on politics and the establishment of new governmental institutions, with only brief notices of murders and executions. When criminal activities were covered in any detail, the context was typically that of political scandal. Crime journalism first appeared in the pamphlet press, not in newspapers. The 1816 murder of Judge Peter Randolph by Captain Thomas Wells was the subject of a ninety-four-page publication by a local attorney that summarized the evidence presented and the arguments made at the trial. Between 1816 and 1830, seven murder cases were the subject of pamphlets as well.

The first murder to receive any serious newspaper coverage was a case from the North, the 1836 murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett in New York. The lurid case

drew much coverage in U.S. newspapers, and the newspapers of Richmond were no exception, with one notable difference. Unlike the northern press, the southern city's chivalric newspaper editors were reticent as to details of the victim's profession.

The coverage of murder in Richmond changed in 1850, when James A. Cowardin founded the city's first "penny paper," the *Dispatch.* New press technologies, along with the introduction of telegraph machines to newsrooms, brought inexpensive newspapers to the city, with more reporters and more columns to fill. The new expanded audience led to a more popular approach to reporting, reflected in the depth of crime coverage of the 1867 murder of Mary Pitts Phillips by her husband, James Jeter Phillips. The case, which involved two trials and a lengthy appeal, resulted in 124 stories in the *Dispatch*, ten times the number published for any antebellum crime, even the abortive slave revolt of Nat Turner.

But the real "murder of the century" in Richmond was the heavily reported murder of Lillie Madison, whose body was found in the old reservoir on the edge of the city. The investigation and the trial of Madison's cousin, Thomas J. Cluverius, in 1887, exhausted "exorbitant amounts of ink, testimony, banner headlines, and occasional heightened, melodramatic prose" in the Richmond *Dispatch* and the thirty-five daily papers sold in the city (p. 77). Despite the extensive and often sensational coverage, the city's press maintained its reserve regarding the female victim, leaving many indelicate details about the young woman's life out of print. Madison was portrayed as an unfortunate innocent woman despite a complex past that was marked by family conflict and mysterious conflict with a man against whom a lawyer had to be employed to secure the return of her private letters. Cluverius, in contrast, was cast into a villain's role that ill-suited the bland young clerk. Trotti argues that in one way the Richmond papers "explored this crime in all the same sorts of ways that northern papers" did, with the "important exception that they refrained from drawing Lillian's character into question" (p. 77).

The turn of the century brought a new realism to American crime journalism. The 1911 coverage of the trial of Henry Clay Beattie Jr. for the murder of his wife, Louise, showed that the Richmond press was in tune with this new realism and also that nineteenth-century southern particularism–reflected in a reluctance to place feminine virtue in a poor light–was eroding. Richmond's reporters had little problem reporting on Beattie's extramarital affair with Beulah Binford. The life of the attractive Binford was spread across full pages illustrated with large half-tone engravings. Moreover, the trial also reflected how readers were becoming more open to complexity in crime coverage, and that reasonable doubt was not restricted to the jury.

The second half of Trotti's book takes a thematic approach to its examination of Richmond's coverage of violent crime, starting by looking at the topic from the completely alternative view of justice by the city's African American community, represented by the Richmond *Planet*. The *Planet*, edited from 1884 to 1929 by John Mitchell, an energetic editor and political activist, saw the criminal justice system through the lens of lynch law of the South and its respectable counterpart, legal lynching by all-white juries uninterested in establishing the guilt or innocence of black offenders. The *Planet*'s readers were justifiably suspicious of Richmond's justice system, especially when African Americans were in the dock, and Mitchell used the paper's pages to agitate against the South's embrace of lynch law. However, Trotti also shows how Mitchell's later emphasis on black self-help in the twentieth century coincided with crime coverage in the *Planet* that tended more and more to mirror the white press.

In another chapter, Trotti describes the role of illustration in the development of sensational murder reporting. The visual depiction by newspapers of the murder cases changed significantly over America's first century and a half. Illustration in colonial and early Revolution newspapers was crude, with simple woodcuts providing the only graphics. Simple engraved illustrations replaced woodcuts, allowing the representation of individuals, but illustrations used to depict the victims and purported villains in celebrated murders were caricatures. The victims–especially women–were painted as stereotypical innocents while the visages of the accused murders were distorted to reveal the evil in their souls.

The introduction of half-tones, detailed engravings that simulated photographs, dramatically changed the emotive effect of the graphic depiction of the people involved in murder trials. Instead of monsters, the half-tone–perhaps shockingly at first–showed that reputed murderers looked like ordinary people. Trotti compares the graphic coverage of the Cluverius and Beattie cases discussed earlier in the book, making a persuasive case that the widespread use of half-tone coverage in the latter case engendered more complex feelings toward the accused. He suggests that the realism that visually confronted readers brought about more realistic journalism.

In the final chapter, Trotti discusses the history of executions in Richmond, from open-air hangings to private electrocutions. The coverage of capital punishment in the city's papers often featured mini-dramas in their own right, voicing doubt over the verdict unexpressed in the reporting of the trial. After all, the central feature of the type of trial that garnered sensational coverage was that it was not cut-and-dry. With the rise of the penny press and greater resources, more doubt found its way into print as reporters interviewed lawyers and followed appellate proceedings. Most of these trials involved circumstantial evidence that, while perfectly fine evidence for lawyers, the public mind has always doubted. The "get" most sought in an execution story was a confession from the killer, but in the Richmond cases that was not always given. The secrecy of the electric chair added dignity but often not resolution to the story. Trotti also notes that African American reporters sought a different resolution: The best story was one where an innocent black cheated the gallows.

Overall, Trotti has written a useful work that should be of equal interest to students of print culture and legal history. His use of a regional case study to explore the larger issue of how crime reporting and sensationalism contributed to the development of mass culture in America adds texture and subtlety to this enquiry. The organization of the book into a series of chronological chapters and a series of thematic chapters works well, and the two parts are well integrated. The result is a work that is accessible to general readers, but that covers a range of themes.

The book has a few minor technical errors regarding the early American judicial process probably noticeable only to a legal historian, but generally it is exceedingly well researched. The endnotes contain full discussions of the sources that are sometimes as interesting as the main text.

*The Body in the Reservoir* is an excellent contribution not only to the history of America journalism but also to the legal history of criminal justice as a feature of democratic society.

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