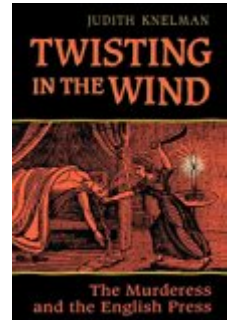


**Judith Knelman.** *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. xii + 322 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8020-7420-1.



**Reviewed by** Malcolm M. Feeley

**Published on** H-Law (April, 1999)

If one picks up any of the standard texts on the history of criminal justice in England (and for that matter elsewhere) written over the past fifty years, turns to the index, and looks under W or F for entries for "women" or "female," there will not be much to find. These terms do not appear in some indexes, but if they do, they are likely to refer to a limited set of "female" offenses, such as witchcraft, prostitution, or infanticide, or else to an especially sensational case. Apart from some recent scholarly work, women as ordinary criminals, committing a wide variety of offenses, have been ignored by historians of crime and by historically-oriented criminologists. Indeed, these works may buttress the conventional wisdom of contemporary criminologists, that crime is and always has been a male activity.

This failure to consider women as ordinary criminals is not simply a failure to accord women a symbol of equal treatment; it is a monumental blunder. Scholars have long been blinded to what has been before their very eyes: women once constituted a substantial portion of all those charged with serious criminal offenses, from thirty to fifty

percent or more of those charged with serious crimes in eighteenth and nineteenth century England and elsewhere. Although men like to gaze at women, here their eyes have glazed over. Readily available data revealing women's high proportion of serious criminal offenses in an earlier era have been ignored. Indeed, it is worse; to ignore implies a conscious decision to pretend something does not exist. Here, scholars did not see what was often presented in their own tables. Women were not ignored; they were invisible. Women crime historians have fared somewhat better in all this; a number of them have written outstanding studies of women and crime, but still their work has concentrated on "female" offenses and ignored the important position of women in "ordinary" crime.

As I indicated above, in England, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, women once constituted from 35 to 50 percent or more of those charged with serious criminal offenses, in contrast to the eight to twelve percent in contemporary America and Europe. There are no good causal studies of the origins of this high level, but it is now fairly

clear that this level declined throughout the latter part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and reached contemporary levels somewhere in the late nineteenth century.[1] This pattern holds for both crimes against property and crimes against persons, including violence. Still there is much work to be done exploring shifts in the mix of crimes committed by women. One unsolved mystery is what caused the marked decline in women's involvement in the criminal process.

As noted above, in recent years a few historians or historically-oriented social scientists have begun to address these issues. Once women were rendered visible, their prominence in crime pleaded for investigation. University of Toronto historian John Beattie was perhaps the first historian of the English criminal process to devote considerable attention to women and ordinary crime. His monumental study, *Crime and Courts in England: 1640-1800*, [2] devoted a lengthy chapter to an examination of the high (by contemporary figures) levels of women charged with serious but ordinary criminal offenses in England (and ten years earlier, he published a separate important article on the topic.[3] Others have followed suit. This author, with Deborah Little (1991), carefully charted the decline of women accused of serious (often capital) offenses in England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century (from nearly forty percent to around ten percent), and in a second article (Feeley 1996) reported the same pattern in other countries, and began relating it to patriarchy brought on by the rise of industrial capitalism. University of Toronto sociologist John Hagan and colleagues have traced the decline--from high levels to much lower--of women charged with serious crime in Toronto.[4] And Oxford legal historian Lucia Zedner has written a major book on women and crime in the Victorian era, which argues that the marked decline in women charged with serious crimes can be attributed to a shift in popular attitudes about women. [5] She argues that popular understanding redefined deviant women from bad to mad during the

late Victorian era, and as a consequence women were shunted away from the criminal process and into the newly emerging mental asylums. Others too have begun to mine this territory, which was readily obvious once women became visible.

Judith Knelman's recent book, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*, is a welcome contribution to this important new area of scholarship. Rather than examining women and crime generally, she focuses on women murderers in the nineteenth century. She observes that in the nineteenth century, "there was a significantly higher participation rate for women in murder than in other crimes" (p. 4), and proceeds to explore this little-known and under-examined phenomenon.

Part I begins with an introduction and first chapter which outlines her ambitious agenda: "the reality of the female homicide in the nineteenth century is examined so as to sketch out its causes and extent, and also to provide a context for the analysis of its representation that comes later" (p. xi). In Chapter One she sets out her concerns: the backgrounds of deprivation and oppression of murderesses; their motives and methods; and how they fared in the criminal process; how the types of murders they committed changed over time; and how all this differed from the ways male murderers were treated. Chapter Two is directed at her central concern, indicated by the book's subtitle. It outlines the book's plan to explore how murderesses were represented in the popular press, and describes the various forms the popular press took in the nineteenth century. Her aim is to show how the Victorian press "constructed" murderesses according to preconceived and shifting notions of femininity. This is an ambitious and exciting agenda indeed.

The six long chapters in Part II constitute the core of the book. Here she presents and examines her data, case studies of women who murder. Each chapter examines a different type of mur-

der: multiple murders; murder of husbands, lovers, or rivals in love; child murder, baby farming fatalities, and infanticide; murder of and by servants; and murder of the elderly. Each has a similar structure, which consists of accounts of the circumstances of the murderesses, their paths through the criminal process, and how they were portrayed in the popular press. Some of the chapters also include additional discussions of still other murders, and more generalized discussions of sensational forms of murder and the public's and press's reaction to them. For instance, one chapter contains the best analysis of baby farming that I have read. Baby farming involved a mother in desperate straits sending a young child—usually an infant—to a woman or couple, for a lump sum payment in what might be considered an informal adoption or a foster care arrangement. However, these caretakers in turn would allow the child to die through neglect, starvation, poisoning, or failure to treat an illness. This practice was well-known in the nineteenth century, although how common it was is difficult to determine, since (as Knelman reports) until the late nineteenth century few people, including public officials, cared to investigate rumors about it. A section in another chapter examines poisoning of family members in order to collect relatively modest amounts of insurance benefits, a practice that apparently disappeared as chemical testing improved and insurance companies developed more aggressive and sophisticated techniques to investigate fraud. (This in itself would be the subject for an interesting book.)

Part III consists of four short chapters that explore the "meaning" of female crime. They are designed to show "how the emphasis on sexuality in press representations of murderesses reflected changing popular attitudes and contributed to the Victorian construction of femininity" (p. xi). Topics include the image of the murderess, the feminine perspective, the body of the murderess, and the murder of the murderess. Each examines a

different facet of popular characterization of and reaction to murderesses.

By my count Knelman's book is only the second full-length scholarly book, at least with a broad sweep, in recent years which seeks to understand women and ordinary crime (here murder) in nineteenth century England. The other is Lucia Zedner's *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (1991). But as important as it is, this book is seriously flawed. Although it purports to be a scholarly academic inquiry into an under-examined phenomenon, it nevertheless shares a great deal in common with the many sensationalized accounts of female murders published in the nineteenth century, which the author herself draws upon. The book dwells upon the exceptional, rather than the typical and the mundane. Almost all of the important substantive chapters consist of discursive accounts of "sensational" murders drawn from the popular press.

At first blush, the author cannot be faulted for this focus. After all, her book is about "the murderess and the English press," and so it might seem reasonable to concentrate on notorious and newsworthy cases. But this focus is problematic for several reasons. First, she never describes how she obtained her core data—the set of sensational cases. They are not a random sample of all cases involving female murders. Nor are they a sample of women charged with murder. (Among other things, it would have been nice to know why some of those accused later had charges dropped or were acquitted.) In short, she offers no criteria for identifying "the women whose murder cases were among the most sensational of the century in England" (p. 275).

Presumably she identified them by reading widely in the English press of the day, and rummaging through the archives of Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. However they were selected, it turns out that there are exactly fifty "most sensational murderesses," and her study consists almost entirely of telling the reader about them.

This casual selection process prevents her from successfully pursuing three of her central objectives, identifying what was distinctive about English murderesses in the nineteenth century, showing how the press "constructed" them, and demonstrating how these two factors related to each other and changed over time. In her first chapter, Knelman proposes to identify distinctive features of female murderers by contrasting male and female murders with respect to both the frequency and types of murders committed, and by showing how murders of both sexes were represented in the press. She even presents some quantitative data comparing male and female murderers which reveals that women committed roughly one third of all murders in the nineteenth century, a proportion much higher than in the twentieth century. This is an intriguing and important finding. But her case selection process does not allow her to explore it systematically, and she loses focus on the issue. Even when she does return to differences between male and female murderers in order to highlight distinctive features of murderesses, it is not always clear exactly what she is comparing or precisely what is distinctive. At the outset, she says that her "research shows that expectations about criminal behavior were different for women and men" (p. xii), but nowhere does she explain what she means by this or systematically compare differences in treatment, either by the courts or in reports of sensational murders in the popular press. At one point, for instance, she compares figures for all (reported) male murderers with her sample of fifty of the most sensational murderesses. This of course is no meaningful comparison at all. Elsewhere, she says she cannot make careful comparisons of males and females because national judicial statistics did not begin distinguishing by sex until mid century. This might be the case, but it would have been relatively easy to collect such figures for central London by quickly going through the indexes of the Old Bailey Sessions Papers. Or, as she was culling reports of sensational female murders, she might

also have collected a sample of sensational male murderers. If one wants to identify the distinctive ways women who murdered were portrayed in the press (e.g. evil, sick, malformed, and the like), such comparison is crucial

Perhaps her response would be that her central purpose was not to compare men and women (though comparison would seem to be necessary to identify "distinctive" features), but to explore, as her subtitle indicates, "the murderess and the English Press." But here too, case selection poses problems. Although she does present stories about the "most sensational murderesses," the social constructionist approach she explicitly embraces requires a broad sample of cases in order to answer the question, how and why were some women and some offenses made sensational and others not? What distinguishes some cases from others? What functions for the press and for society did these particular constructions serve? A social constructionist perspective requires an examination of the "filtering" out process and the functions served by it. But this book does not pursue such questions very far.

Furthermore, to argue, as she does, that the image of the murderess shifted over time, requires a more systematic analysis of change than is provided in this book. Although she does offer a lively and informed discussion of the various forms the popular press took throughout the nineteenth century, this alone does not accomplish her stated objective. The book covers almost an entire century--the first sensational murderess in the nineteenth century was convicted in 1807, and the last in 1899--and at times she pauses to briefly discuss changes over time. Yet nowhere does she present in systematic fashion ways that the image of the murderess changed over time. Nowhere does she undertake a content analysis (of even a casual sort) of language or images in the press to see if it presented distinctly different images of women at different times. Nowhere does she convincingly show that popular conceptions of femi-

ninity changed, and this in turn affected which murders were deemed sensational. No where does she identify and examine "moral panics" over types of murderesses that were "created" by the media, or to which the media responded.

She does describe some important changes; shifts in forms of murder, and reasons for murder. But she has little to say about them, and indeed from her data it is not clear that these were shifts in actual (all) murders by women or only in sensational murders. For instance, she discusses the decline in poisonings after a spate of arsenic poisonings in the 1840s led to enactment of a law banning over-the-counter sale of arsenic. In her treatment of this, Knelman presents the increase in arsenic murders as well as their subsequent decline as fact. Yet she provides us with no convincing data to show this (all one can do is cull her appendix and find that sensational murders by poisoning decreased after mid-century). Very probably she is correct. Yet one would think that a social constructionist would have jumped at the opportunity to ask, was there really an increase in arsenics in the 1840s? Did passage of the law really reduce poisonings? Or was the increase and subsequent decrease constructed by the media? And if so, for what purpose? There is certainly nothing constructionist about her analysis of this interesting issue. Nor is there elsewhere.

More generally, one wonders why the author did not build on Lucia Zedner's fine, but incomplete investigation of women and crime in late Victorian England. Zedner presents a strong thesis, but her work cries out for further investigation. She argues that between mid and late Victorian England as the first rudimentary elements of the social welfare state were being created, the popular press and popular criminology redefined deviant women from "bad to mad." She shows that the popular image of deviant women underwent a marked change, and that this change was paralleled by a decrease in female crime. But perhaps because she casts her net so broadly, Zedner

fails to develop a close connection between these two developments. A detailed study of a single type of serious offense--murder--would have provided an elegant opportunity to extend Zedner very important work. I hasten to add that I am not suggesting that Knelman should have written a different type of book, only that she could have profitably drawn on materials directly related to her own concerns and readily available to her.

Knelman's book deals with an interesting, important, and much neglected topic. It begins with a bang, setting out a very promising agenda. It has some fascinating and informative discussions of little-known and understood practices. But it is not well constructed to answer the questions it poses. It bogs down in a discursive discussion of mini-histories of sensational murderesses, and fails to draw on data systematically to address the important concerns stated at the book's outset. It thus makes generalization impossible, despite the obvious quest for it. This may explain why the book ends with only a one page conclusion.

Despite these significant shortcomings, *Twisting in the Wind* is a valuable contribution to the study of women and crime. It makes a major contribution to the field by moving away from an exclusive focus on "female" crimes to explore the wider range of women's criminal activity. Its findings underscore the importance of and need to examine greater women's criminality in the nineteenth (and earlier) centuries. It successfully links women's criminality to the larger patriarchal social structure. It provides valuable information on little-known criminal practices. It mines the wealth of materials in the press on women's criminality.

*Twisting in the Wind* is one of a small but growing number of studies that are making women visible in the history of crime. As such, it is a book that belongs in the libraries of all those who have a serious interest in historical studies of women and crime.

Notes:

[1]. Feeley, Malcolm and Deborah Little. "The Vanishing Female: The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process, 1687-1912," *Law and Society Review*. 25 (1991): 719 . Feeley, Malcolm. "The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process: A Comparative History," *Criminal Justice History: An International Annual* 15 (1996): 235.

[2]. Beattie, John M.. *Crime and the Courts in England: 1660-1800*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[3]. Beattie, John M.. "The Criminality of Women in Eighteenth Century England," in K.K. Weisberg (ed.) *Women and the Law: A Social Historical Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Pub. Co. (1975).

[4]. Boritch, Helen, and John Hagan, "A Century of Crime in Toronto: Gender, Class, and Patterns of Social Control, 1859-1955," *Criminology*. 28 (1990): 567.

[5]. Zedner, Lucia. *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

**Citation:** Malcolm M. Feeley. Review of Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3047>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.