

Jeanne Winston Adler. *The Affair of the Veiled Murderess: An Antebellum Scandal and Mystery.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011. 313 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-3547-3.



Reviewed by Erin Bush

Published on H-Law (March, 2012)

Commissioned by Ethan Zadoff (CUNY Graduate Center)

Histories of true crime, specifically of murders, never seem to go out of style. For as long as people have been grappling with death, murder has always held a certain fascination in our collective psyche. To wit, Jeanne Winston Adler's *The Affair of the Veiled Murderess* joins the ranks of other true crime histories and explores the murder and subsequent sensational trial of an antebellum murderess in 1850s New York State. Adler argues that by evaluating these events, we will “see how political divisions, unease about women’s changing roles, and just the ‘slipperiness’ of identity in new urban centers combined to bloom one shocking crime into a half-century-long scandal and mystery” (p. 4). In this endeavor, she only partially succeeds.

In 1853, Mrs. Henrietta Robinson was arrested for poisoning her neighbor, James Lanagan, and his sister-in-law, Catherine Lube. Adding further intrigue to an already scandalous event, Robinson, who had only been a resident of Troy for a year, spent the duration of her trial hidden behind a veil, refusing to show her face to those

in attendance. Her attorneys argued insanity; the prosecution argued premeditated, cold-blooded murder. Robinson’s jury did not accept her insanity defense and sentenced her to hang. The governor commuted her sentence due to “female frailty” and Robinson spent the remainder of her life in the Mount Pleasant Female Prison at Ossining.

Adler deftly navigates an abundance of primary source material to recreate the facts of Robinson’s sensational murder trial in this enjoyable page-turner. She uses published trial reports, voluminous local newspaper coverage, and other manuscripts (both archived and unpublished from family collections) to paint a picture of a community in turmoil just prior to the Civil War.

Adler unravels the narrative in strict chronological order, dividing her book into eight parts, which span the events of Robinson’s arrival in Troy in 1852 to her death in 1905. She further subdivides each part into chapters, which explore thematic issues ranging from the symbolism of

Robinson's veil to the politics of antebellum New York. Part 4 examines the trial in detail. In it, Adler unravels the intricacies of a sensational murder trial with ease, writing it as a modern courtroom drama complete with detailed arguments from each side and the evidentiary bombshells presented at trial. Using the words of the witnesses themselves, she shows how early forensics work in poisons, autopsies, and psychological evaluation of the accused came together to influence the trial's outcome.

To help situate the arguments for and against Robinson, Adler smartly includes a discussion of other antebellum murder trials and outcomes in her chapter entitled "Day Five--Some Antebellum Lore." She focuses on the case law addressing pleas of insanity and in so doing provides a window into mid-century conceptions of psychology, particularly the psychology of women. Adler also offers the same contextual treatment of local politics and its effect on the trial. Robinson's alleged dalliance with a local politician cast a layer of intrigue over the lawyerly maneuvers typically seen at trial. Adler successfully explores how the political ambitions of the players involved--witnesses, lawyers, judges--affected Robinson's trial.

These two examples--other insanity cases and local politics--are bright spots of rare contextual analysis in an otherwise straightforward narrative history. Despite her early promise to explore the importance of women's changing roles and the "slipperiness" of identity, she never gets beyond a surface-level discussion of either. The supporting primary evidence is cumbersome and she uses unnecessarily long quoted passages throughout the book. While they add color for the reader, overabundant block quotations do not leave much room for analysis, nor do they allow her to put these two important themes in the context they deserve.

Robinson's identity became central to the coverage of her trial due to her refusal to remove the thick veil she donned. Indeed, Adler devotes con-

siderable space to exploring Robinson's possible family lineage. However, in choosing to adhere strictly to the chronology of events, the pages covering Robinson's identity span seven separate chapters, which are interspersed among those covering other themes. The result is a disjointed discussion that never coalesces into a coherent argument about why her identity was so important to the community.

Additionally, Adler chose to focus primarily on Robinson's potential family lineage and joins the debate by offering her own opinion regarding her identity. In so doing, she ignores the deeper meanings that asking such questions raise. Instead of drawing on previously published scholarly work about the emergent unease wrought by a shift over the course of the nineteenth century from a closely guarded hierarchy of rank and class to a society of strangers, she relies on long quotations detailing the debates regarding Robinson's origins. These larger societal changes undermined the fabric of community in America and created a sense of unease about strangers--especially strangers who murder local residents.

Robinson arrived in Troy in 1852 and less than a year later, she murdered two locals. The community's reaction and the resulting questions of Robinson's true identity are not at all surprising in this context. Yet, Adler never clearly connects the dots for the reader.

The book's shortcomings with regard to identity are indicative of a larger issue with the book; namely, some themes--Irish immigration, "public" and "private" women, and prewar industrial growth--that Adler chose not to pursue might nonetheless have shed further light on the period and advanced her arguments about life in nineteenth-century New York State. Weighing in at only 265 pages, *The Affair of the Veiled Murderess* is too short to give any of these important themes a rigorous analysis beyond the most cursory of views.

The Affair of the Veiled Murderess is an enjoyable read and an excellent entry to the subject for the general reader, but it will leave an academic audience searching for more.

: *An Antebellum Scandal and Mystery*

,

.

,

Mrs.

-

Mrs.

Mrs.

Four

to

s

-

es

Henrietta

o

s

as to

-

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

Citation: Erin Bush. Review of Adler, Jeanne Winston. *The Affair of the Veiled Murderess: An Antebellum Scandal and Mystery*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34780>



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