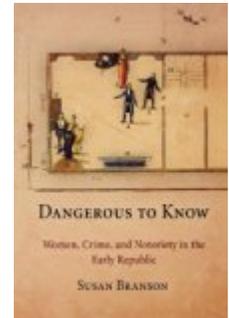


Susan Branson. *Dangerous to Know: Women, Crime, and Notoriety in the Early Republic.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xi + 182 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4088-7.



Reviewed by Rachel T. Van

Published on H-Law (December, 2010)

Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

In the swelter of the Philadelphia summer of 1816, Ann Carson stood trial as an accessory to the murder of her erstwhile husband. John Carson had been gone for two years when rumors surfaced of his death. While such an absence was nothing strange for a maritime officer, John's drunken sojourns and unwillingness to support his family left Ann fed up and ready to move on. She opened a chinaware shop as a licensed feme sole trader and, more provocatively, remarried. But John was not dead. When he finally meandered back to Philadelphia with six dollars in his pocket, he found another man laying claim to his wife and his property via her. The stage was set for confrontation and murder.

In *Dangerous to Know*, Susan Branson puts to paper a history of the "notorious" Ann Carson and the woman who dared to ghostwrite her memoirs, Mary Clarke. Branson tells the intertwined stories of these two women in five biographical chapters, but the heart of the book is a series of courtroom dramas: the trials of Ann Carson and Richard Smith for John Carson's murder, Ann Carson's

subsequent trial for attempting to kidnap the governor of Pennsylvania in order to save Smith from execution, and, following Carson's descent into a life of crime, her trial for passing counterfeit bills to local shopkeepers. Mary Clarke was an interesting woman in her own right, a widow who eked out a living as a journalist and playwright, but her story largely provides a foil for Carson. Yet by including Clarke as a principal figure, Branson is able to consider the author's role in the construction of Carson's notoriety.

Dangerous to Know illuminates the personal and discursive strategies of two women living on the edge of respectability. If Carson embraced vice and Clarke clung to claims of virtue, both women willfully played with the boundaries of gender and class in order to make a living in a world inhospitable to independent women. This interplay was visible in Carson's willingness to push at the cultural dissonance of juries who were unable to believe that such a woman could commit such crimes. It was visible in her use of her stature as a polished middle-class woman to pass counterfeit

notes and to secure better treatment in jail. And this play was visible in Clarke's public efforts to distinguish herself from Carson and thus maintain her reputation. She could delve into the sensational details of Carson's crimes and passions, while narrating them as a morality tale from the protected vantage of middle-class propriety. As Branson argues, in spite of their extraordinary strategies, the circumstances of Carson and Clarke "must have been familiar to a large group of people: middling women, fallen on hard times, who struggled to keep themselves afloat" (p. x).

The value of *Dangerous to Know* is in the wonderful stories that Branson has recovered. In Ann Carson, Branson has found an American Moll Flanders. Like Daniel Defoe's Moll, Ann Carson's experiences colorfully demonstrate the instability of class, the inconsistencies of gender ideals, and the slipperiness of identity in cosmopolitan port towns of the early nineteenth century.[1] As Mary Clarke and Susan Branson both recognized, Ann Carson made "good copy" (p. 60). Accounts of the notorious Mrs. Carson captivated the country. Such dignitaries as the president and vice president, members of congress, and the governor of Pennsylvania purchased the first memoir of 1822. We have no publishing statistics for the second memoir of 1838 and Carson's name faded from historical view, but knowing her full story must have been hard to resist.

Yet with such a wonderful story, one wishes the book provided a thicker narrative. Suzanne Lebsock's *A Murder in Virginia* and Patricia Cline Cohen's *Murder of Helen Jewett* come to mind.[2] How much did the context of Philadelphia matter to the Ann Carson's notoriety, such as with the confluence of her second trial with partisan bickering over Governor Snyder? Why did so many people seem to feel comfortable writing Stephen Girard for loans, despite his lack of response? How would a more focused look at Carson's family--especially her mother, whose testimony was pivotal in the 1816 trials yet was highly critical of

her daughter--complicate our picture of Carson and her life choices? Branson hews closely to her sources, but almost to a fault. Details such as the fate of Carson's children in all of her vicissitudes or the fact that their guardian following the 1816 trial was also a paramour of Carson's do not emerge until they are made public, when Mary Clarke reveals them to her readers. Surely these facets were important to Carson earlier.

Regardless, Branson offers readers a treat. This book is not a legal history in the traditional sense, but it reminds readers of the place that law and courtroom drama played in the lives of Americans of the early nineteenth century. Like Michael Grossberg's paternalist judges, Branson describes judges and juries grappling with what traits and actions made and unmade a husband or a family.[3] Further, sources expressing women's perspectives are difficult enough to come by for this period, much less for middle-class women. Carson's repeat visits to courthouses and her willingness to sell her story meant that time and again, Carson had to explain herself to justices, juries, and the public in ways that she felt would appeal to specific sensibilities. Carson's 1822 memoir is a particular treasure, in which she regales her audience with her sexual exploits and marital troubles, yet also seeks to establish her middle-class credentials. Whether as a fun read or as a case study for discussing gender, class, or meanings of modernity, *Dangerous to Know* is a worthy volume.

Notes

[1]. Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Unfortunate Moll Flanders* (London, 1722).

[2]. Suzanne Lebsock, *A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004); Patricia Cline Cohen, *Murder of Helen Jewett* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

[3]. Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Ameri-*

ca (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

it

away

se details

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Rachel T. Van. Review of Branson, Susan. *Dangerous to Know: Women, Crime, and Notoriety in the Early Republic*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31283>



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