THE RED BARN MURDER: A VICTORIAN SENSATION

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HI318: Crime, Sex, and Scandal in 19th Century Britain

November 28th, 2016

 19th century Britain was a time of social, economic and political change, not only in society as a whole, but specifically when it came to crime. The word “murder” alone would be enough to stop a crowd of Victorians and have them beg for more details. Crime was a sensational form of entertainment in Britain at this time, with murder cases attracting the most attention. Stories of even the simplest murder would make its way into newspapers, broadsides and penny dreadfuls, riddled with drama and in vivid details.

Polstead at the time was a small town of 20 little homes.[[1]](#footnote-1) Maria Marten, daughter of a mole catcher, and William Corder, were unlikely lovers. Together they bore a child who died shortly after birth[[2]](#footnote-2). Corder, while amenable to the idea, was pressured by Marten’s family to marry and support her. He lured her to the Red Barn, a residence on his property, under the false pretence that he would take her to Ipswich where he would then marry her.[[3]](#footnote-3) This was where the murder took place. Corder then left the barn that day in pursuit of another family in Brentford.[[4]](#footnote-4) Her body was found 11 months after her murder.[[5]](#footnote-5) Due to the location, the murder was deemed the “Red Barn Murder”, a name that has lasted through time.

The murder of Maria Marten by William Corder in 1827 drew so much attention and spectacle, that her story was turned into books, plays, paintings, ballads, puppet shows, etc. Some of these took mere days after the execution of Corder to be released to the eager public. On the surface, there is nothing extraordinary about the murder, but it had a profound impact on Victorian culture from the time of its occurrence and throughout the rest of the 19th century. The impact it had sheds light on numerous cultural and social ideas of the time and gives a window through which historians can learn more about the society at the time. Such themes include the sensation of murder itself (including executions and the courtrooms), domestic violence and murder, illegitimacy of childbirth and how media representations of crime served to satisfy the appetite of the curious, thrill-seeking Victorian.

Victorians had an intense fascination with the mysterious and the unknown. They held a fascination with the proverbial “other”, including criminals, especially murderers. Victorians were both titillated and terrified of what they did not understand. They sought to understand what made a person become a criminal, as labelling a criminal as a specific type temporarily alleviated fears that criminals might be lurking in every corner and on every street in Britain. This curiosity prompted criminologists and anthropologists such as Cesare Lombroso to link criminal tendencies to a specific type of person, identifying genetics and physical abnormalities.[[6]](#footnote-6) The fascination with the concept of a criminal meant public fascination and attention from the crime to the trial to the execution.

The Victorian people were enamored by the thrill of the courtroom and the melodrama that erupted from it. The trial of Corder vs. Marten was the quintessential battle between good and evil.[[7]](#footnote-7) Trials were sensational in that they painted the accused as the abominable villain, which gave the Victorians the chance to point blame and assign a scapegoat for whatever type of atrocity they committed that threatened the social and cultural fabric of society. As Walsh said, the trials sensationalized the “moral polarity of victim and perpetrator.” [[8]](#footnote-8)

Spectators began showing up at the courthouse as early as five o’clock in the morning, and when the members of the jury attempted to gain passage into the building, they had to bypass the hordes of people just hoping to catch a glimpse of the trial.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Times described it as “a force so tremendous as to risk the limbs of those who were not sufficiently athletic.[[10]](#footnote-10) Souvenir hunters and dark tourists were heard exclaiming “poor thing”, “ill-fated girl” and “poor Maria” as well as “cold-blooded villain” and “cruel wretch” in reference to Corder.[[11]](#footnote-11) Corder was described as a ruthless monster.[[12]](#footnote-12) The public condemned Corder just as harshly as the courts did.

The outside of the courthouse was so raucous the first day, that the police had to take measures the second day to ensure that there was no repeat of the chaos.[[13]](#footnote-13) The people were spirited before the trial even began.

Rumours of Corder’s attempted suicide (although proved false after inquiry) mentioned in the Times would have prompted further chatter amongst Victorians[[14]](#footnote-14) as suicide was illegal in all of England and Wales until 1961 (the Suicide Act) and was an unspeakable deed.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Public execution at the time was a kind of macabre entertainment in itself. Foucault described the violence of punishment as “one of the elements of its glory; the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Thousands of people would clamour to watch as convicted criminals faced the hangman’s noose; to hear their last words and to see them drop to their unceremonious deaths. Such a spectacle was described as carnival humour and comic ineptitude.[[17]](#footnote-17) Newspaper depictions of the scenes were often accompanied with a grisly photo of the scene of the hanging, always surrounded by a large crowd of spectators, sometimes as far as the eye could see. According to Gatrell, “audiences of up to 100,000 were occasionally claimed in London, and of 30,000 or 40,000 quite often”. However, the average crowd ranged between three and seven thousand spectators.[[18]](#footnote-18) Some 6,000 spectators turned up to witness the hanging of William Corder on August 11, 1828.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Hanging as a form of execution was popular in Britain beginning in the 16th century. Between 1530 and 1630, 75,000 people are thought to have been executed by way of the hangman’s noose or by beheading.[[20]](#footnote-20) Though these rates declined over the hundreds of years following, it continued to be a popular form of entertainment. Corder was hung in 1828, one of 672 people hung in the 1820’s. This decade marked the end of the tradition, as in 1832, the Reform Act challenged capitol punishment by way of hanging and its frequency shrank to one tenth of its score the previous decade.[[21]](#footnote-21)

There was a tremendous amount of build up leading to the execution of William Corder on August 11, 1828. An estimated 200,000 people visited the scene of the murder, an estimated 7,000 people showed up for his hanging, and approximately 6,000 people showed up to view his corpse afterwards. Walsh described it as a “public exhibition of a disrupted private sphere”, implying that a domestic murder had become a public sensation.[[22]](#footnote-22) People travelled far and wide to witness the execution of William Corder. Polstead and Bury St. Edmunds would not have been an easy place for tourists to travel to, as it was remote.. It was reported in the *Times* that “the whole of the laboring classes in (Bury St. Edmunds) struck for the day, in order that they might have an opportunity of witnessing the execution of this wretched criminal.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This *Times* article was released the day after the murder and provided vivid detail of the execution.

Part of what made the murder of Maria Marten, an otherwise simple murder, such a sensation at the time, was the illegitimacy of her child with William Corder. There were several issues surrounding the taboo topic of illegitimate children in 19th century Britain. “The bastard, like the prostitute, thief and beggar, belongs to that motley crowd of disreputable social types which society has generally resented, always endured. He is a living symbol of social irregularity.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Not only did legislation impose sanctions upon the parents of illegitimate families for a large part of the 19th century, but there was also a social “sanction” imposed upon those parents by the cultural stigma in Victorian society.

Maria Marten in her lifetime bore three illegitimate children; one to William Corder and one previously to Corder’s brother.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the case of Marten and Corder, their illegitimate son would have been born to what was termed “general bastardy”, meaning the parents did not get married after the birth of the child. It was coined “special bastardy”, however, if the couple were to later marry. There can be no doubt that Marten was hoping for the latter of the two, as she and her family pressured the two to be wed. If this had been the case, their son would have been considered legitimate by the law of the church[[26]](#footnote-26). Maria Marten was considered a respectable, moderately well educated woman, and therefore she would not have been morally pardoned for these illegitimate children.[[27]](#footnote-27)

 Legislation in the 17th century declared criminal punishment should be imposed upon unwed mothers of illegitimate children, especially amongst poorer classes.[[28]](#footnote-28) This escalated the frequency of women who murdered their bastard children.[[29]](#footnote-29) New statutes had to be put in place to punish mothers who could not prove that the child was, as they would claim, born dead. Men and women were both punished for their illegitimate children, but women were the primary victims of imprisonment for this offence.[[30]](#footnote-30) These laws were revisited several times, altered, and by the mid 19th century, an unwed woman bearing a bastard child was no longer found to be a criminal.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Despite the laws being altered in the mid 19th century to remove penal sanctions against the parents of bastard children, there was still a stigma that lay just under the surface of society. There is some evidence that women who bore bastard children carried a burden of considerable shame.[[32]](#footnote-32) As discussed in the theme of the idyllic Victorian home, Victorians would not have viewed a bastard child as belonging in the picture.

Another aspect of the Red Barn murder that made it so sensational was how it shed an uncomfortable light on the possibility of violence within a Victorian home. What went on behind the closed doors of a Victorian home were very private and rarely spoken about. Matters that took place behind closed doors between couples became scandalous when they became public. Walsh asserted that “the preservation of the domestic sphere was central to Victorian ideas of nationhood, and anything which might threaten the domestic space was a threat to the nation as a whole.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The domestic incident between Corder and Marten became a public sensation. Although they never technically shared a home, the same concept of the home was apparent in this murder, as Corder had taken Maria as a lover and she bore his child. This story formed the basis of some of the most popular melodramas of the 19th century.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Domestic murder sparked 19th century cultural imagination. There were an unfortunate number of spousal murders in 19th century Britain for financial reasons, revenge etc. Many of these murders went by the wayside as they weren’t unusual and most didn’t receive nearly the attention (maybe a newspaper article or two).[[35]](#footnote-35) Domestic murder was particularly sensational because it shed a deadly and terrifying light on the otherwise idyllic family structure. Walsh described the family as the “stable domestic space at the heart of national identity.”[[36]](#footnote-36) The idyllic family was important to Victorians, and when instances of domestic violence or murder graced the pages of the media, there was both public discomfort and intrigue.

The driving force of the sensation surrounding murder and crime in 19th century Britain was the media coverage that it received, which could reach Victorians of all ages and social classes. Sensational stories had become a morbid addiction and served as a “form of cultural malaise; addictive, debilitating and self-indulgent.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The details recounted in sensational crime stories in many of the media sources (newspapers, broadsides) had elements commonly found in melodrama. Maunder and Moore suggested that what made a sensational crime story were all the elements of sensational fiction, which would have included thrilling characters, romance, realism and themes that wrestled with social anxieties.[[38]](#footnote-38)

 British media of the time were very theatrical in playing up the details and creating the most titillating story possible. In 19th century Britain came a “rise of inexpensive mass print culture and an expansion in readership,” which “led to a growing public fascination with crime and punishment.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Even the simplest of crime stories made the front pages of newspapers and, like in the case of Corder and Marten, turned into stories found in novels. The first mention of the case in the Times was on April 23, 1828, the day before Corder was arrested and the story continues to be told today.[[40]](#footnote-40) Between April 23 and September 20th 1828, the murder was covered in the *Times* 21 times.[[41]](#footnote-41) The case was viewed as a “living melodrama by the public and the press.” [[42]](#footnote-42) There was always the concern of fact blurring into fiction, which applied to reading material of all classes. Broadsides and “penny dreadfuls” were inexpensive, accessible reading material that sensationalized and glamourized many different types of crime.

 Penny dreadfuls, otherwise known as penny bloods, were inexpensive crime stories that “specialized in drawn-out melodramatic tales of crime, adventure and romance” and capitalized on the hungry market of thrill-seeking Victorians.[[43]](#footnote-43) These “true crime” stories were known to “revel in the brutality and callousness” of the crimes they were describing.[[44]](#footnote-44)

 The Newgate Calendar was a collection of crime stories. These stories would include titillating details including specific details of the execution and last words of the condemned. Newer volumes of this collection were released, as more and more crime stories became the hit of broadsides and penny dreadfuls.[[45]](#footnote-45) Old photos depict scenes of mothers handing their children these collections, as if to teach them a lesson in crime and punishment.[[46]](#footnote-46) In a tale of a similar occurrence as Corder and Marten, one broadside was entitled “George Caddell, Executed for the cruel murder of Miss Price, who he had seduced and promised marriage.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Broadsides were a Victorian form of crime entertainment. The broadsides were cheap and widely available to all social classes. They were widely popular until the mid 1860s. They were the first publication to feature illustrations. Broadsides were hugely popular when they featured stories of murder and sensation, trial and execution. The story would be glamorized and described vividly, peaking the interest of the readers.[[48]](#footnote-48) The murder of Marten lead to such public interest that it ended in the sale of 1,166,000 broadsides (although this number should be taken with caution).[[49]](#footnote-49)

Maria’s beauty was accentuated in almost all media accounts, almost as though to make the severity of the crime even graver. She was depicted as the innocent, attractive heroine, casting Corder in an even deeper shade of inhumanity. The Times deemed her “a pretty face and fine form and figure”, as well as describing Corder as “so unfeeling and wretched at heart” and calling him a “monster” multiple times.[[50]](#footnote-50) For a generally conservative paper, these were bold accusations, and these words would have been ingested eagerly by Victorians.

To add to the sensation in the media, the stepmother of Marten, Ann Marten purportedly had reoccurring dreams of Maria being murdered in the Red Barn. She brought these dreams to her husband, which led them to search the Red Barn and find the decomposing body.[[51]](#footnote-51) This news was distributed in all types of newsprint and mentioned unquestioningly, blurring lines between fact and fiction and fuelling the fire of sensation for the Red Barn Murder.

To date, the village of Polstead is still haunted by the grisly murder in 1827. The legend lives on, as does William Corder in an eerie and haunting kind of immortality. Corder’s lingering memory serves as a kind of macabre totem of the principles by which justice is served. The Red Barn was appointed a guard not long after the execution of Corder, as it had been stripped almost clean by numerous souvenir hunters and dark tourists.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Victorians craved the drama and sensation of crime stories, and murder was the most popular of those crimes. The murder of Maria Marten by William Corder served this role well, as its sensational trial and execution scene fit the bill of the sensational Victorian crime story. It had additional elements that added to the sensation, including an illegitimate child, the element of domestic unrest and the paranormal piece that was Maria’s stepmother supposedly “dreaming” of the murder. There can be little question as to why Marten’s murder became such a spectacle and why its story became the catalyst for plays, ballads, paintings, pottery and even a movie released in 1936. Its impact on the Victorian people extends to modern day, and continues to fascinate scholars and historians as a seemingly simple, yet impactful murder that ended the life of one poor girl who’s memory is sure to live on.

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