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Gerald J. Baldasty. *Vigilante Newspapers: A Tale of Sex, Religion, and Murder in the Northwest.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. 192 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98529-9.

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Gerald Baldasty's *Vigilante Newspapers: A Tale of Sex, Religion, & Murder in the Northwest* examines how the press in Corvallis and Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, covered the dramatic early twentieth-century story of a controversial preacher who was gunned down by the brother of one of his followers. His study documents the press's role in stirring opposition to the preacher and in making his killer a hero. As Baldasty shows, the press coverage molded the story as a sensational morality play that reinforced traditional community values at the expense of fair, balanced, thoughtful coverage. In Baldasty's view, the press proved more dangerous to civilized values than the bizarre preacher did.

The charismatic preacher at the heart of story, Franz Edmund Creffield, threatened Corvallis's prosperity and challenged cherished cultural beliefs of womanhood when he attracted a cult-like following composed primarily of young women, both married and single. He counseled anti-materialism, leading his followers to burn household possessions; he also advised them to dress in simple unadorned clothing, and live in tents in the forest. Believers refused to speak to unbelievers. Wives abandoned husbands and children. Single women rejected cultural restraints to live in the commune, and unsubstantiated rumors swirled around the group, implying that Creffield seduced (and "ruined") the young women.

The preacher, a former volunteer with the then-controversial Salvation Army, attracted no more than a roomful of followers. But he attracted enough to enrage the Corvallis community, which saw his "church" as a threat to traditional values of family, womanhood, manhood, and community. Men from Corvallis captured Creffield, and tarred and feathered him before driving him from the community. Nevertheless, he remained in contact with his followers and eventually returned to Corvallis.

Emboldened by local and Portland newspapers that attacked Creffield as a home-breaker and defiler of young women, Corvallis community members succeeded in running him out of town a second time; Creffield then moved to Seattle. Even there, however, Creffield remained in contact with his Corvallis followers, including Esther Mitchell, who remained loyal to Creffield and his teachings. Enraged by Creffield's hold over his sister, George Mitchell traveled to Seattle and stalked the charismatic preacher. Stepping from a doorway after Creffield and his wife, Maud, passed on the sidewalk, George Mitchell pulled a pistol and shot Creffield dead.

Newspapers championed Mitchell as a man to be honored for protecting his sister and his community, and, in doing so, Baldasty convincingly argues, the story grew beyond a regional tale to become a larger story of traditional morality and the role of men and women in American society. Most of the newspapers called for Mitchell's acquittal during his trial on murder charges, arguing that male members of a family had an obligation to protect the "weaker" female members, so the killing was justifiable homicide. A jury agreed, despite Esther Mitchell's testimony against her brother. After he was released from custody, Esther Mitchell shot and killed her brother, causing the press to rethink its earlier support of vigilante justice.

Appropriately, Baldasty places the newspaper coverage in a larger journalistic context, arguing that newspaper coverage reflected the trend in urban journalism

of the early twentieth century. In that period, he notes, newspapers diminished the importance of politics and business news, offering instead a sensational "jumble of news, entertainment, and advertising" in which politics and business news was "crowded by articles about theater, sports, fashion, and society, and by comics and advice columns" (p. 73). Moreover, "such diversity was propelled by publishers' never-ending quest for greater circulation" (p. 73). The coverage of sensational stories of sex, religion, and murder fit well in newspapers that sought large audiences.

Nevertheless, like Andie Tucker in *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (1994), Baldasty places newspaper coverage of the murder and trial in the context of a wider social and cultural analysis. For Baldasty, the story that runs parallel to the tale of murder and seduction is the story "of the power of the press to define news in a way that far transcended those events. News, under the guise of a report on the day's happenings, became a broader affirmation of a particular set of values" (p. 164).

More specifically, Baldasty shows that the press coverage of the drama involving Creffield and his murder remained grounded in a culture that positioned proper women as homemakers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives who needed to be protected by the stronger, worldly men in their lives. Single women, like children, had to be saved from sexual predators. If civilization was to survive, the sanctity of the home and family had to be protected from forces that would destroy them.

Most of the region's newspapers crafted their coverage within this cultural framework, privileging sources, such as George Mitchell, who supported such traditional values and ignoring aspects of the story that would challenge preconceived ideas. The press largely ignored the prosecutor who brought the charges against Mitchell, leaving his views unreported. Any sympathetic or even neutral explanations of Creffield and his religious views were similarly absent. Baldasty reinforces his conclusions about many of the newspapers by contrasting sensationalistic papers from Corvallis and Seattle with a discussion of newspapers such as the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which provided a more tempered account, emphasizing that each newspaper's coverage represented individual choices by reporters and editors.

The reporters and editors of the Corvallis newspapers provided coverage that "exalted community solidarity and obligations above other considerations" (p. 164). Indeed, Baldasty points out, Creffield's first major transgression, according to that city's newspapers, "was that he threatened the town's ambitions for growth and prosperity" by giving outsiders reason to ridicule the town. In contrast, the reporters and editors of Seattle's sensationalistic press, the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Star*, told a story that "went to the heart of family obligations and even to the very essence of being a man.... This clear invocation of very traditional family values, circa 1900, was grafted onto the news about Creffield, and the Mitchell-Creffield case thus transcended the 'facts' of the situation and became a larger lesson about social values" (pp. 164-165). The coverage in the more temperate *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reflected the values of prosecutors and social control. Importantly, Baldasty documents the early twentieth-century sensationalistic press's blending of facts and values in which "the exact details were often lost, particularly if they undermined the larger [moral] lesson" (p. 166).

Baldasty's well-evidenced treatment of the Creffield-Mitchell case provides an historical lesson for student and veteran journalists alike, particularly as twenty-first century journalism meets the challenge of competition by moving toward interpretative reporting and commentary. Nonetheless, a problem for media historians and media theorists remains, and it is the question of effect. Baldasty argues that the press's dramatization and moral posturing contributed to the audience's attitudes, opinions, and behavior. To an extent, that is true. He suggests, for example, that the press's attacks on Creffield set up favorable social conditions that led to his murder and concludes the press had "a clear effect on the chain of events" (p. 167). Yet, readers should not conclude that the press created attitudes that would not have existed otherwise. Certainly, as Baldasty shows, there is ample evidence that the press exhibited traditional social and cultural values when it framed the story. Yet, Baldasty also provides evidence that community attitudes existed independently of the press. Indeed, it appears that the press's treatment of the story may have been an opportunistic reflection of base community sentiment, rather than a shaper of attitudes. An appropriate conclusion is that the press reinforced, by legitimizing and romanticizing a way of life that could not be supported any other way, attitudes in the community that were favorable to vigilante behavior.

Vigilante Newspapers offers a fascinating case study of how early twentieth-century sensationalistic newspapers on the West Coast embraced traditional nineteenth-century social and cultural values and their communities' deeply rooted beliefs about the proper role of women, men, and religion.

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