



**Shani D’Cruze, ed.** *Everyday Violence in Britain 1850-1950: Class and Gender*. Harlow, London and New York: Longman, 2000. xii + 233 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-41907-0.

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## **Intolerable Acts: Men, Women and Violence in Everyday Life**

**Intolerable Acts: Men, Women and Violence in Everyday Life**

This collection of essays seeks to illuminate violent behaviour in British everyday relations from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War. The whole gamut of messy and nasty violent conduct is here: wife-beating, infanticide, rape, sexual assault and murder, as well as brawls and gang fights, form the focus of the contributions. The interest of this volume is interpersonal violence: violent conduct between men and women, men and other men, and women and children. Inter-female violence rarely features, however—an odd omission in view of the book’s cover illustration which features “two heated women.”

Following Betsy Stanko’s work on contemporary violence in the United Kingdom and United States, this collection suggests that inter-personal violence is not deviant, random or unusual but an everyday presence informed by unequal gender and class relations. Violence, or the threat of violence, is everywhere—in the home, in the workplace, in the pub as well as on the streets. Most acts of violence are committed by known individuals, such as husbands and wives, parents and children, work-mates, and lovers, and are the consequence of everyday tensions over money, space, jealousy and a myriad other prosaic situations. Indeed, violence is represented here as a constituent element of British everyday life. In terms of actual physical experience and representation, and more especially as an intrinsic feature of

working-class culture, at least until the early twentieth century, violence has played out in private as well as in public. Indeed, as violent behaviour becomes increasingly unacceptable in British society, so it becomes more visible through the institutions of the law and the reporting of the media.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first considers ways in which violence was played out in working-class communities before 1900, with two chapters on what might be considered private violent conduct: the issues of wife-beating (Anna Clark), and infanticide (Margaret Arnot), and two which discuss male violence mainly in the public arena. John Archer tries to understand how violence is a constituent part of working-class masculinity in the second half of the nineteenth century while Andrew Davies considers the violence perpetrated by youth gangs in metropolitan areas. Some of this material is already fairly familiar to those interested in gender, class and crime but these chapters are important, it seems to me, for accentuating the physical reality of violent behaviour as it was experienced by perpetrators and victims. In contrast with the other contributions which are primarily concerned with ways of talking about, representing and regulating inter-personal violence, these pieces do attempt to give an insight into the rituals and codes of conduct which permitted male violence, in particular, and the ways in which female violent conduct was deemed unbelievable. By the middle of the century, the violent female, whether she be the murderer of her new born infant, or an armed and tattooed female gang

member accused of assault, was hard to square with the predominant discourse on the weaker or gentler sex. One consequence was the differential treatment of men and women by the legal system.

The third section of the book is concerned with the representation of violence, or rather ways in which violent conduct was written and talked about, and mediated through legal and feminist discourses and those purveyed by the press, and in popular literature and other art forms. Here the reality or experience of violence gives way somewhat to discussions of ways in which certain acts may be deconstructed to provide an insight into contemporary preoccupations. Thus Judith Rowbotham shows, through analysis of popular fiction, that certain forms of everyday violence were deemed acceptable in Victorian society—that is, those that conformed to contemporary notions of gender stereotypes. A working-class man might be excused his violence towards his wife and children, and even middle-class male violence was excused in certain contexts (the public school, for example). On the other hand, the violent woman of any social class was regarded as a “perversion of nature” (p.163). Women were the universal victims. Catherine Euler’s discussion of feminist attempts to politicise sexual violence in the late nineteenth century shows how activists like Josephine Butler and Frances Power Cobbe regarded women’s agency as the key to women’s escape from victim status and that the public discussion of sexual violence was a politically powerful strategy. It was important to talk about what was done to women so that women themselves could reclaim power over their own bodies.

The final two contributions to the “representation” section, Julie English Early on the Crippen murder case, and Lucy Bland on the murder of an Egyptian playboy by his French wife in London in the 1920s, shift our focus away from the overwhelming predominance of working class violence to the voyeuristic, the grotesque and the exotic in middle-class suburbia and wealthy cosmopolitan London, respectively. Both authors are adept at showing how dominant contemporary concerns came to the fore in the ways in which these murders were presented. In the case of Crippen it was his dead wife Cora, whose torso was discovered under the floorboards, who was portrayed as the less-than-sympathetic victim while the doctor garnered some sympathy. Cora, it was said, was a bad housekeeper and a “woman with a past” (p. 181), damning her as a bad suburban wife. Conversely, as Bland shows, it was race rather than inverted snobbery that saved Madame Fahmy at her trial for the murder of

her husband who was represented as “Oriental” and thus brutal and a sexual pervert. As Bland explains, the defendant symbolised “Western Womanhood, standing against the brutality of the East” (p. 193).

The middle section pulls together the themes of experience and representation through analysis of attempts to regulate violent behaviour. The focus of these chapters is domestic and sexual violence and child abuse and the ways in which the police, the legal system, and reformers engaged with dominant gender norms. Kim Stevenson’s chapter shows how female victims who did not conform to “respectable stereotypes” (p. 101) were considered predatory, dangerous or “ingenious,” that is, deceitful. Legal professionals commonly used the “ingenious” defence, playing upon notions of women’s inherent unreliability, in order to achieve favourable outcomes for their male defendants. Similarly, in the context of Manchester, Joanne Jones argues that popular representations of sexual violence reinforced common class and gender expectations so that sexual assault was presented as a working-class crime done in public to women who strayed too far into public spaces. Violence carried out in private and in middle class homes was immune from the popular gaze. At the end of the century, the possibility of reform of the divorce laws did permit a more public consideration of cruelty within the home between spouses. However, as Jacky Burnett shows, although the Women’s Co-operative Guild played an important role in facilitating women’s articulation of their views, cruelty was not included as a legitimate ground for divorce until 1937. Staying within the home, Louise Jackson is concerned with indecent assault and the role of female professionals in the policing of this form of violence in the inter-war period. She shows that although the argument for female police and surgeons was based upon their greater empathy with and ability to protect women and children, in fact the impetus towards professionalisation meant that female police officers were more likely to adopt explanations for male violence based on “mental deficiency” in both the perpetrator and the victim rather than feminist explanations based on unequal power relations.

This is a stimulating collection of relatively short, engaging, research-based articles, but considering the book as a whole, the content balance is skewed. One gets the impression that everyday violence in modern Britain is overwhelmingly sexual in nature and that most crimes involved male perpetrators and female victims. Yet a mere glance at the lists of criminal cases heard in British courts shows that the most common violent crimes were assault, breach of the peace, affray, grievous bodily harm

and various other male on male crimes. Men, and especially young men, are not only the vast majority of perpetrators of violent acts—they are also the vast majority of victims. Moreover, with the exception of Dr. Crippen and Madame Fahmy, middle-class violence is strangely absent from these pages. Discussions of representations of the “drunken brute” may serve, ironically, to reinforce the impression of the violent working-class male and the weak female victim that historians are at-

tempting to question. On the other hand, the emphasis on everyday violent acts committed by known individuals does refocus our attention on the reality of most violent crime, both in the past and today, which occurs in the home amongst friends and family. The notion of “stranger-danger,” which has become so pervasive and dangerously misleading in discussions of contemporary child abuse, also has little value in historical perspective.

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