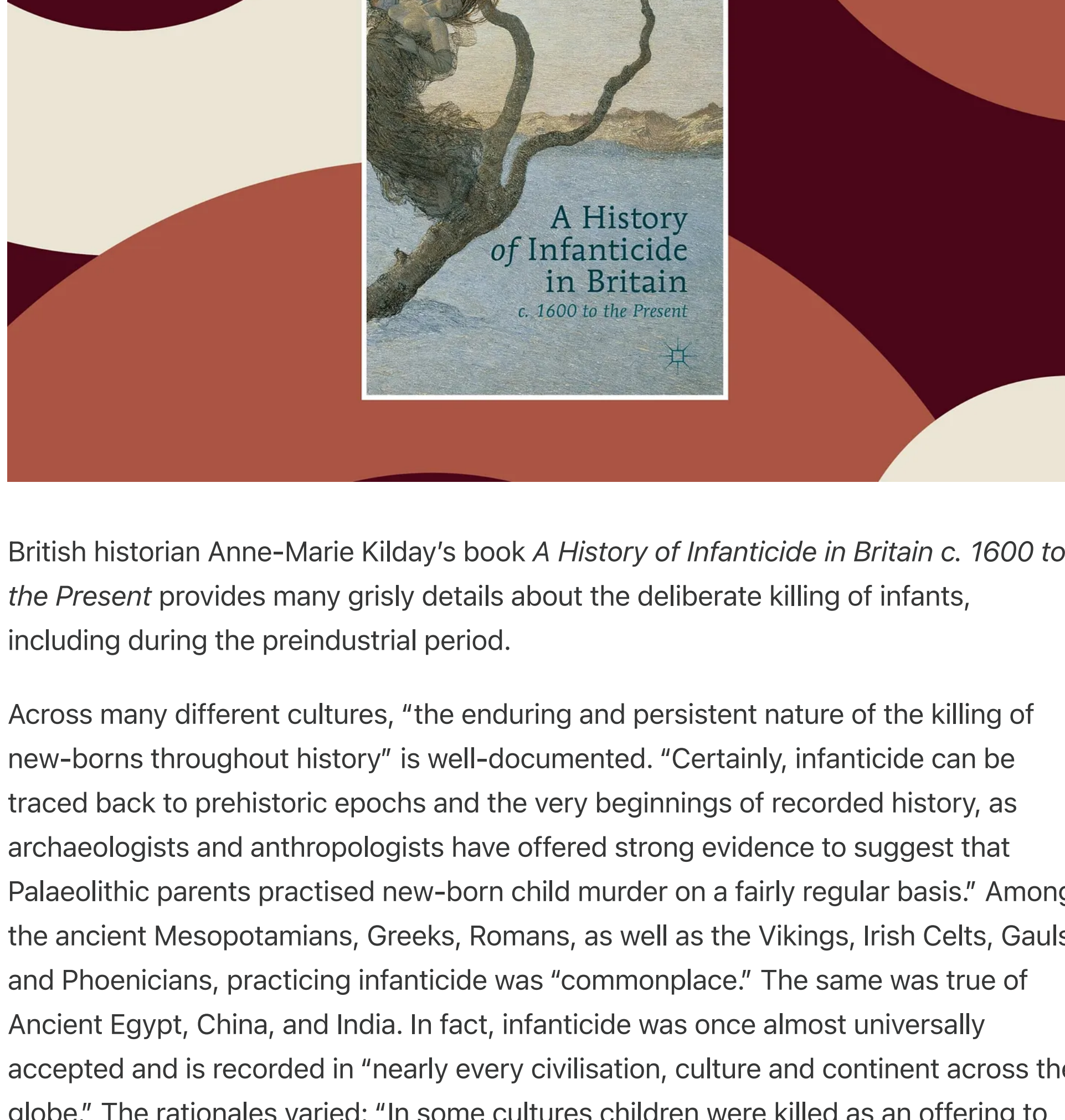


Grim Old Days: Anne-Marie Kilday's History of Infanticide in Britain

The history of infanticide exemplifies the brutality of the laws, beliefs, and social norms of humanity's not-so-distant past.

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British historian Anne-Marie Kilday's book *A History of Infanticide in Britain c. 1600 to the Present* provides many grisly details about the deliberate killing of infants, including during the preindustrial period.

Across many different cultures, "the enduring and persistent nature of the killing of new-borns throughout history" is well-documented. "Certainly, infanticide can be traced back to prehistoric epochs and the very beginnings of recorded history, as archaeologists and anthropologists have offered strong evidence to suggest that Palaeolithic parents practised new-born child murder on a fairly regular basis." Among the ancient Mesopotamians, Greeks, Romans, as well as the Vikings, Irish Celts, Gauls, and Phoenicians, practicing infanticide was "commonplace." The same was true of Ancient Egypt, China, and India. In fact, infanticide was once almost universally accepted and is recorded in "nearly every civilisation, culture and continent across the globe." The rationales varied: "In some cultures children were killed as an offering to the gods in order to secure an abundant harvest, or some other good fortune, as it was believed that their bodies could transfer growth and fertility. Other infants were slain for medicinal purposes as it was held that the blood and flesh of neonates could confer health, wellbeing and even youthfulness to the recipient. In various primitive societies twins were considered evil and condemned to be destroyed immediately after parturition."

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Many societies eventually outlawed infanticide, which is forbidden in faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But even where infanticide was illegal or violated the prevailing religious tradition, it was often nonetheless common and widely tolerated, with laws against the practice ignored or only sporadically enforced. "Although the coming of Christianity brought a change in attitudes towards the killing of infants, the practice persisted nonetheless, because in many societies it was regarded as a conventional and accepted part of everyday life." In the infrequent cases when the crime was prosecuted, the punishments could be brutal. In the Middle Ages, "torture (such as being flogged, blinded and then clawed at the breast with red-hot pincers) typically preceded execution via decapitation (sometimes with quartering) or live burial after impalement. Alternatively, those convicted might likewise be sewn into sacks along with dogs, cats, roosters and/or vipers and be thrown into a local river and left to drown amidst the frenetic and fatal struggle which must have ensued."

That said, across Europe, married women who killed unwanted or sickly babies were largely quietly tolerated, with prosecutions instead targeting unmarried women. To the preindustrial mind, "illegitimacy and new-born child murder were inextricably linked. . . . Illicit sexual activity coupled with child murder and thus the spilling of innocent blood resulted in this offence being seen as an explicit example of a composite crime" worthy of special condemnation compared to infanticide committed by married parents. Seemingly, "contemporary concerns regarding sexual non-conformity and illegitimacy" were deemed more urgent than the act of killing children itself.

Public obsession with single motherhood could become highly invasive. "For instance, in the eighteenth century, a German physician suggested that all unmarried women between the ages of 14 and 48 should be examined monthly at public baths in order to determine whether or not their bodies showed any signs of pregnancy."

In fact, births outside marriage were often illegal. "In England and Wales, legislation against bastardy was passed in relation to secular court jurisdictions for the first time in 1576 and then revised in 1610," targeting unmarried mothers for punishment. Under the act, "the mother of an illegitimate child could be imprisoned for up to one year," creating strong incentives to commit infanticide to conceal children born out of wedlock. As such, children born outside of marriage were often subject to neglect and even infanticide. In England, a statute in 1624 criminalized concealing the death of a child born outside marriage unless the mother could prove that the baby had been stillborn—in other words, there was a presumption of guilt. That statute, "An Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murdering [murdering] of Bastard Children," noted that "many lewd Women that have been delivered of Bastard Children, to avoid their shame and to escape Punishment, doe secretly bury, or conceale the Death [of said children]." A 1690 piece of legislation in Scotland similarly sought to deal with "the frequent Murthers that have or may be committed upon innocent infants."

Research suggests that "the immediate impact of the new statutes brought something close to a four-fold increase in prosecutions for infanticide against unmarried women." However, "the prosecution of infanticide [was] something of a lottery in terms of outcome," with local authorities' willingness to show leniency varying wildly. "Rather than adopt a consistent policy towards infanticidal women in the early modern period, it seems that the British courts decided that the selection of a few offenders as examples of the potential reach and significance of the law was a sufficient deterrent to curb this kind of criminal activity. . . . Daniel Defoe, for instance, famously claimed in 1728 that 'not a session passes, but we see one or more merciless Mothers try'd for the Murder of their Bastard-Children; and to the shame of good Government, generally escape the Vengeance due to shedders of Innocent Blood.'" Many of the accused successfully argued that their children were stillborn or died of prematurity-related complications. "Within the limits of early modern medical knowledge, proving whether or not a child had been born alive was a difficult task," which was deemed impossible by some. "For instance, at the trial of Elizabeth Curtis in 1784, London surgeon William Holt was examined by counsel regarding the dead body of a new-born female child suspected to have been murdered. He was asked: 'Could you, from any observation you made upon it, be able to say whether it was born alive or dead?' Holt answered 'No man can ever swear to that.'"

The bodies of dead infants were found hidden in a variety of locations, particularly toilets. "Sometimes women kept the dead bodies of their infants with them: either locked in a trunk in their room (as Anne Mackie from Tranent in East Lothian did in 1776), in the bed alongside them or hidden on their person whilst they returned to work. More commonly, during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, bodies were disposed of in the privy or water closet. This was the case in the trials of Christian Russel at the Old Bailey in 1702 and Wenllian David at the Court of Great Sessions in 1752." Because people lived in far greater proximity to animals in the past, with pigs and other farm animals common even in urban areas, "animals frequently dug up shallow graves (as happened in the case brought against Pembrokeshire woman Catherine Lloyd in 1798."

While many of those who were prosecuted were not ultimately convicted, some were, and the penalties they faced ranged from death to banishment. For example, in 1681, in England, unmarried servant woman Ann Price was found guilty of killing her newborn and sentenced to death by hanging.

Illegitimate fathers sometimes committed or aided infanticide, but sexist attitudes meant that men were rarely blamed for infanticide even when their involvement with the crime was well known:

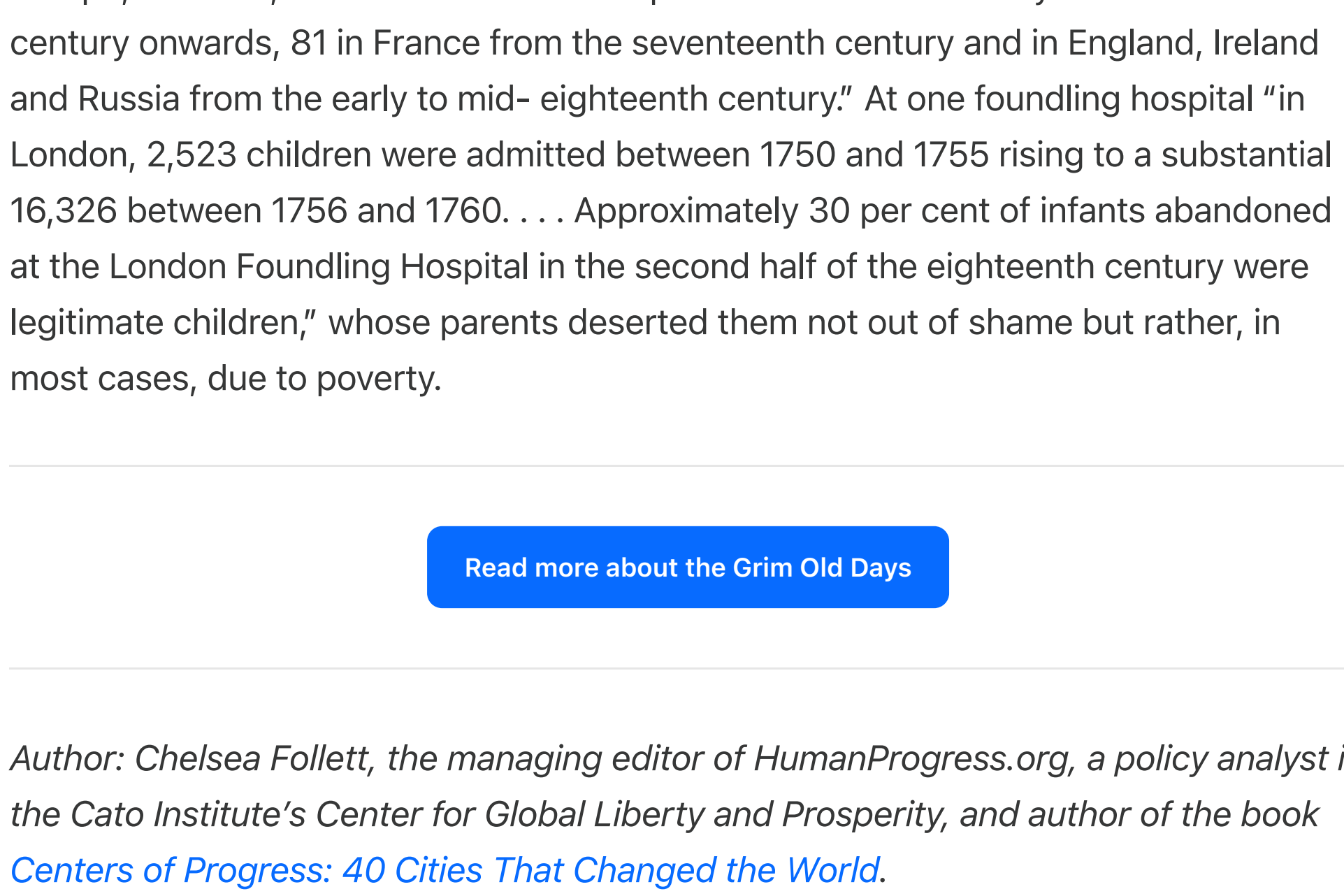
A good example of the gendered attitude towards episodes of infanticide comes with the early seventeenth-century work The Bloody [sic] Mother. This famous piece recounts a series of 'inhuman murders' committed by an unmarried domestic servant called Jane Hattersley, which were carried out on numerous infants said to be 'the issue of her owne bodie'. The text itself solely concentrates on the actions and character of Jane. Yet, the frontispiece of the work ... clearly depicts a man called Adam Adamson – Jane's master and erstwhile lover – helping her to bury one of the infants' bodies in the garden of his home. However, the piece gives no description of Adam's involvement in the crimes that occurred, or the attempts he made to hide the evidence after the fact. Clearly, his contribution to events and the degree of his culpability were considered largely unimportant and incidental by the contemporary author.

For a man to be prosecuted for infanticide necessitated exceptionally horrific circumstances. Such was the case with George Dewing, keeper of the House of Correction at Halstead in Essex, sentenced to death by hanging for infanticide in the 1720s. Dewing repeatedly raped a female prisoner named Susan Baldwin, who was serving a sentence for the crime of having borne a child out of wedlock, and she again became pregnant. Subsequently:

About six weeks before the end of her sentence, George Dewing ordered her down to the whip-post in the gaol to be punished by Thomas Diss, the whip-man, in the presence of Dewing and Thomas Diss's daughter Judith. Both Thomas Diss and his daughter served as witnesses for the prosecution in Dewing's subsequent trial. Thomas Diss testified to giving Susan seven or eight lashes in punishment for a minor act of insubordination at the insistence of George Dewing. This happened despite Susan pleading with Dewing 'I am with child by you, and you know how long I have to go, pray do not whip me!' This plea was entirely disregarded, however, and immediately after the punishment was concluded, Thomas Diss heard Susan Baldwin say that she was very unwell and in need of assistance. He then saw the body of a child fall from her on to the ground. Judith Diss, Thomas's daughter, testified that she saw George Dewing 'take the nonethless he squeezed it very hard until its bones were crushed.' After squashing the child's remains into a chamber pot, Dewing ordered Thomas Diss to throw it into the 'House of Office' (or privy), which he duly did. At this sight, Susan Baldwin cried out 'Murder' and then promptly collapsed at the whipping post in front of her abusers.

Like men, *married* women were also rarely prosecuted for infanticide. "In Germany, France, England, Scotland, Sweden, Russia and the Netherlands, women tried for murdering their children between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries were overwhelmingly either single women or widows, and their children illegitimate," often because the statutes against infanticide could only be leveled against unwed women. Only on rare occasions were infanticidal married women or couples prosecuted. "For instance, in eighteenth-century Wales, 6 per cent of the 190 women indicted for newborn child murder were married and in Scotland between 1700 and 1820 the figure was less than 3 per cent of the 480 women accused." It is hard to gauge the true rate of infanticide among married parents given the low rate of prosecution. "It is likely . . . that there were many more cases of new-born child murder committed by married women in the pre-modern period than is suggested by the available indictment evidence." For married couples, infanticide was *almost* legal, because "the specific nature of the legal directives within the original new-born child murder statutes made it very difficult for the authorities to accuse married women of this crime." A strong bias against single parents remained on the books in many areas even well after industrialization. "Indeed, it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that English courts recognised that infanticide could be committed by 'any person' and revised and consolidated its legislation accordingly."

Married couples did, unfortunately, also kill their infants. "Married women . . . allowed their infants to die from neglect and passive cruelty . . . such cases were by their very nature difficult to detect." It has been said that "during the pre-modern period, infanticide was 'understood to be a crime not of violent activity but of passivity and neglect.'" Because neglect was difficult to determine as a cause of death in an era when even well cared-for infants frequently died, most infanticide prosecutions involved more violent methods such as strangulation.



The methods used to kill infants were varied:

Babies were also thrown from windows, flung over cliffs and hit off inanimate objects such as trees and the side of buildings. Sometimes common household goods or items of clothing were used in attacks, such as candlesticks, irons, pokers, buckles, shoes and clogs. To give some more specific examples: in pre-modern Scotland, for instance, Marion Dalgleish stabbed her new-born son to death with a pair of shears near Edinburgh in 1703; Highland-woman Jean Black battered her baby to death with a spade in 1747; Helen Munro dismembered a neonate with an axe in 1763. . . . In England, during the long eighteenth century, Ann Armor was indicted for infanticide for having fractured her new-born baby's skull after throwing it into a 'house of office' or latrine where it received a mortal bruise on the side of its head; in 1737, Mary Shrewsbury was accused of killing her child through attempted decapitation using a knife; in 1774, Jane Cornforth used a nail to rip open the stomach of her new-born child, thus exposing its bowels and intestines, resulting in its immediate death. . . . In Wales during this era, Mary Robert from Pembrokeshire forcefully dashed her baby off the ground several times, which occasioned its death, in 1766; in 1793, a woman called Margaret Evans from Montgomeryshire battered her newborn infant to death with a brick; in Carmarthenshire in 1802 Gwenllian Richard stabbed her child repeatedly in the throat with a knife.

One murdered infant discovered in Scotland in 1758 had at least 16 distinct injuries, as it "was wounded and hurt in several parts of the Body . . . after having been battered and then attacked with a pair of scissors . . . the nose was cut off . . . the throat was much bruised . . . the skull and spine crushed to oblivion . . . the arms, legs and thighs stabbed in several places . . . and . . . the right eye was pierced through to the back of the head."

Simply abandoning babies to let them die of exposure was also common, and in fact, "the practice occurred on a substantial scale . . . in the eighteenth century. . . . Abandonment (or exposure as it was more commonly referred to in that context) was not an offence regularly prosecuted at common law. . . . Strenuous efforts to track a suspect down were only made if the child had not survived its desertion, and these investigations were inherently problematic owing to the anonymous nature of the practice and the associated difficulties of conclusively linking a particular woman to a discovered infant." It is estimated that "more newborn children were abandoned than were victims of infanticide" in the premodern period. "Girls were more commonly exposed than boys" initially, but the gender disparity disappeared by the premodern period.

Many foundling hospitals existed where unwanted infants could be abandoned to improve their odds of survival. "Foundling hospitals were established in some cities as early as the Middle Ages, the first being built in Milan in 787. More generally across Europe, however, the foundations of this provision were laid in Italy from the sixteenth century onwards, 81 in France from the seventeenth century and in England, Ireland and Russia from the early to mid- eighteenth century." At one foundling hospital "in London, 2,523 children were admitted between 1750 and 1755 rising to a substantial 16,326 between 1756 and 1760. . . . Approximately 30 per cent of infants abandoned at the London Foundling Hospital in the second half of the eighteenth century were legitimate children," whose parents deserted them not out of shame but rather, in most cases, due to poverty.

[Read more about the Grim Old Days](#)

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