Murder and morality in Victorian Britain: the story of Madeleine Smith


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Abstract

This book explores the life of Madeleine Smith, who in 1857 was tried for poisoning her secret lover. As well as charting the course of this illicit relationship and Madeleine's subsequent trial, the authors draw on a wide range of sources to pursue themes such as the nature of gender relations and the extent of women's social and commercial activities, and to bring vividly to life the world of the mid-Victorian middle class. In particular, Madeleine's letters, full of gossip and passion as well as the details of her daily life, offer unique insights not only into her relationship with her lover, L'Angelier, but also into the life of her social circle, filled with partying, fiends and shopping. Her trial and the press response to it reveal much about contemporary views on sexual morality, parenting and the essence of 'Britishness'. The authors analyse the ways in which the case has been written about by subsequent authors and demonstrate how the concerns of the present shape the telling of the past. The book contains new discoveries about Madeleine's long and colourful life after the trial which confirm the view that it is only in fiction that the bad end unhappily. The book will be of interest to academic social historians, but the fascination of its subject matter and the way in which much rich material is used to evoke a vivid sense of time and place, will also promote a wider interest among a more general readership.

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This book explores the life of Madeleine Smith, who in 1857 was tried for poisoning her secret lover. As well as charting the course of this illicit relationship and Madeleine's subsequent trial, the authors draw on a wide range of sources to pursue themes such as the nature of gender relations and the extent of women's social and commercial activities, and to bring vividly to life the world of the mid-Victorian middle class. The book contains new discoveries about Madeleine's long and colourful life after the trial which confirm the view that it is only in fiction that the bad.


More than 150 years have passed since the 22-year-old Madeleine Smith, eldest of five children born to upper-middle class parents in Glasgow, was charged with poisoning a handsome, social-climbing, 33-year-old warehouse clerk named Emile L'Angelier. Soon after, the authorities discovered scores of her letters in the dead man's rooming house, and Madeleine was brought to trial for murder in June, 1857 at the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh. Seventy-seven of her letters were read aloud in court, consuming nearly a full day of the nine-day trial. "The Madeleine Smith affair", explain Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair in their fascinating new book, "offers us a window into the day-to-day life of a young middle-class woman who, despite her involvement in an extraordinary event, was in most other ways unexceptional and typical". It was a sensational case. Challenging, informative and accessible, Murder and Morality is a fine book. Indeed, it is much more than a publisher's wishful thinking for Manchester University Press to claim that it should prove of interest not just to academic historians but also to a more general readership. Murder and Morality in Victorian Britain: The Story of Madeleine Smith. By Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair. Manchester University Press 240pp, £60.00 and £16.99.