

"She Killed not from Hate, but from Love": Motherhood, melodrama and mercy killing in the case of May Brownhill

Lizzie Seal¹

School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex

This article examines press portrayals of and public reactions to a 'mercy killing' in 1930s England. May Brownhill, sixty-two, killed her 'invalid' adult son by giving him an overdose of aspirin and poisoning him with coal gas. Through the conventions of melodrama, May was portrayed in the press as a respectable, devoted and self-sacrificial mother deserving of sympathy. The case also resonated with contemporary debates about euthanasia. It is an historical example of popular leniency, whereby although guilty of a crime, an individual is not seen as deserving of punishment. The case contributes to our understanding of how popular leniency was shaped by gender, class and age, and by contemporary views on 'mercy killing'.

On the morning of 16 September 1934, May Brownhill, a sixty-two year old resident of Burn Bridge in Yorkshire and the respectable middle class wife of a travelling salesman, called her family doctor. She informed him that the night before she had 'put Dennis to sleep'.¹ Dennis was her thirty year old son whom she had given one hundred aspirin tablets and poisoned with coal gas. The police were called and May told the inspector 'I must tell the truth [...] I don't want any solicitor for my defence'.² May was charged with Dennis's murder. Her committal hearing took place in early October and revealed that Dennis was a 'helpless invalid' who required May's constant care.³ This she happily gave, but was now gravely ill herself. The week before killing Dennis, May had seen a surgeon who informed her that she had a large tumour on her right kidney and would only live for another six months if she did not undergo surgery. He arranged the operation for the following week.⁴ Fearing what would become of Dennis when she was not there to look after him, she decided to 'mercifully put him to sleep'.⁵ May received her surgery while awaiting trial, which revealed the problem to be a large kidney stone. On 1 December, she was found guilty of murder at Leeds Assizes and sentenced to death, the only penalty available at the time. The jury made a strong recommendation to mercy. Two days later, the Home Secretary John Gilmour reprieved her and commuted her sentence to penal servitude.⁶ On 1 March 1935 she was freed from prison having served 3 months of her sentence and returned home to Burn Bridge.⁷

¹ Contact Lizzie Seal e.c.seal@sussex.ac.uk School of Law, Politics and Sociology, Freeman Building, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9QE.

May Brownhill's case is a compelling historical example of what criminologist Richard Jones has termed 'populist leniency', the 'call for certain individuals *not* to be punished for offences they have committed'. Jones argues that populist leniency focuses on specific cases especially 'when the "victim" elicits a particular sympathy, or evokes a certain sentimentality, because of personal characteristics [...] or their social standing'.⁸ In such cases the offender becomes perceived as a victim. Populist leniency is characterised by indignation and outrage directed towards excessive treatment meted out by laws and institutions. Although there was some expression of indignation on May's behalf, there was a consistency across prosecution, defence and press narratives about the case, all of which painted May extremely sympathetically. She received lenient treatment in terms of a fast reprieve and a short period of incarceration. In borrowing this concept from Jones, I have adapted it to 'popular' rather than 'populist' leniency, which broadens its application. Populism is characterised by celebration of 'the people', especially in comparison with the perceived shortcomings of elites. There were interwar capital cases that attracted a populist response, but this was not how May's case was narrated or responded to.⁹ The significance of her case is rather that it enables a gendered, classed and historicised reading of the conditions of popular leniency, instances where someone is accepted as guilty of but not blameworthy for the crime they have committed.

This article explores the representation of May Brownhill's case in the press and in public responses articulated in thirty-one letters sent to John Gilmour in an effort to secure a reprieve and/or a free pardon for May, and which have been preserved in her Home Office file in the National Archives.¹⁰ It examines how, taking their lead from discourses circulating in the trial, the newspapers told May's story as a melodrama, which entailed using a sentimental register to portray her as an idealised mother. This made her 'mercy killing' non-threatening and consistent with respectability and feminine virtue. It can be understood as a 'clean case' of murder by a woman, which takes place in domestic space and does not disturb categories of gender.¹¹ Only fragmentary historical evidence exists for public responses to cases reported as crime news. However, where this can be found - as in this corpus of letters - it is possible to glimpse the meanings that people attached to such cases, how these cohered with and diverged from what they had read in the newspapers, and the generation of emotions such as empathy and sympathy.¹²

May Brownhill's Case as Microhistory

Microhistories entail small-scale observation of individuals and events in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the relevant historical context, including social, cultural and political factors. Big issues can be explored through close examination of a particular example. Previously overlooked and now forgotten individuals are suitable subjects for microhistory. Criminal cases offer much

microhistorical potential. Trials and the publicity that surrounds them generate meanings about the time and place in which they occur. They are windows into the culture and its contentious social issues and identities. Murder trials have the potential to be especially rich with meaning as they articulate 'normally unspoken cultural dispositions'.¹³ In addition to highlighting social and cultural expectations, criminal cases show how failure to meet these expectations was managed.¹⁴

Analysis of the press reporting of particular cases reveals popular discourses of, and attitudes towards, crimes in a given period and enables understanding of why certain cases grabbed the public's imagination. News articles both communicate and shore up the boundaries of cultural norms. Historical analysis of crime reporting can examine shifts in cultural meaning and the negotiation of new norms, pinpointing their emergence. This is apposite in relation to the Brownhill case, as the mercy killing she committed happened at the point at which euthanasia gained greater salience as an issue.¹⁵ Pardon letters, in which the writer asks for clemency from the authorities on someone's behalf, have been an important microhistorical source. The subjective voices of individuals as expressed in their letters can be conjoined with the wider social context. They reveal both the ways in which individuals contributed to the construction of social mores and also how they interpreted and internalised them.¹⁶

Cases of women accused of murder are culturally potent as they become the focus for anxieties not only about gender relations, but also wider social change. Women's trials reveal concerns about contemporary femininity as female behaviour is seen as a key indication of the state of society.¹⁷ Their murder trials have offered particularly fertile ground for a microhistorical approach. Women such as May Brownhill are conceptualised as 'normal exceptions'; they led ordinary and unremarkable lives until they came to official attention for an instance of rare behaviour.¹⁸

May Brownhill's case further contributes to our understanding of how, depending on the circumstances, women who kill can generate sympathy and popular leniency. For example, the 'wronged' woman may escape cultural condemnation due to suffering through the bad behaviour or cruel treatment of a man.¹⁹ The 'respectable' woman is not seen as deviant in terms of social expectations or perceived to have transgressed femininity.²⁰ Infanticide offers another illustrative example, with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century juries often choosing to convict women tried for the murder of their babies of the lesser crime of concealment of birth. Even where such women were found guilty of murder, they were frequently the recipients of mercy and escaped execution, especially if they projected a respectable demeanour.²¹ This persisted into the twentieth century, with newspapers representing infanticide trials sympathetically when the accused was perceived as respectable.²²

The circumstances of May Brownhill's case were such that acquittal or a lesser conviction were not possible, but she was constructed as an archetypal respectable woman. The novelty of her case for historians is what it shows about the cultural representation of and response to a mercy killing perceived as being for the victim's own good. Although her case is briefly mentioned in histories of the euthanasia movement, these do not focus on its cultural resonance or the significance of her gender and class.²³

May's long years spent caring for Dennis, and his status as an 'invalid', were integral to her portrayal. The police's resume of her case stated that 'everything had to be done for him' and that May occupied the same bedroom as Dennis so that she could care for him day and night.²⁴ It is not possible to determine exactly how Dennis would be diagnosed or understood in twenty-first century terms.²⁵ The statement of Walter Brownhill, May's husband, explains that Dennis had a 'nervous breakdown' aged nineteen due to studying too hard and spent almost a year in Scalebor Park Asylum, Wharfedale. Since then, a period of eleven years, he had been unable to speak or care for himself.²⁶ Dennis's condition made him suitable for institutionalisation and appears to have been understood as psychological-psychiatric in origin.

Debates on Euthanasia in the 1930s

The Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Society was established in 1935, its members including prominent figures such as George Bernard Shaw, H G Wells and Virginia Woolf. Early supporters included Unitarians who saw voluntary euthanasia as humane and consistent with both Christian traditions of mercy and modern science and technology. However, there were also VELS members who indicated approval for mercy-killing without consent.²⁷ Charles Killick Millard, Medical Officer of Health for Leicester and founder of VELS, drafted a Voluntary Euthanasia Bill in 1931, which generated press coverage and debate. Some advocates of euthanasia also approved of its non-consensual use as a eugenics-based measure to tackle the 'social problem group', defined in the Wood Report 1929 as 'the lowest 10 per cent in the social scale of most communities', including defectives, criminals and the unemployable. This issue of what to do about 'defective' individuals who might not be able to give consent was a thorny one. Euthanasia could be a humane solution to suffering, but it was also represented as a potential means of improving society through the diminution of its substandard members.²⁸

May's story did not have a causal connection with the formation of VELS, but shows the development of euthanasia as a social issue at this time. Debates evinced unease about whether,

when and to whom involuntary euthanasia should be applied. Interest in euthanasia was associated with concern about the responsible exercise of citizenship. In the early twentieth century, theories of public health emphasised the importance of prevention and the role of the citizen in maintaining their own health and fitness. This fulfilled their duty to protect the health of the nation and of their race. However, the picture was cloudier in relation to individuals who were designated 'mentally deficient', as they could not exercise this responsibility - raising questions about how far the state should have to support such individuals. This was relevant to tensions in contemporary understandings between voluntarism and involuntarism in relation to euthanasia.²⁹

Notions of what constituted responsible citizenship were central to conceptions of, and anxieties in relation to, mental deficiency. Mathew Thomson places policy and practice in relation to mental deficiency in the context of early twentieth-century processes of 'adjusting to democracy'. Mental defectives were classified as lying outside of the boundaries of responsible citizenship, as they could not support themselves economically or make significant contributions to the community.³⁰ Perceived as a threat to national efficiency and modernisation, they were targeted by eugenics. The Mental Deficiency Act 1913 included a four-part definition of mental defectives into idiots, imbeciles, the feeble-minded and moral imbeciles, with stress laid on the supposed dependency of idiots and imbeciles. The Act was updated in 1927 to extend its scope to certify individuals whose defects were not necessarily present from birth.³¹ The legislation on mental deficiency reflected ideas (and lobbying) from eugenicists, but also prevailing social and moral justifications about who was worthy of inclusion in citizenship.³² As an adult unable to speak and dependent on his mother's care, these contemporary views on mental deficiency and citizenship were relevant to perceptions of Dennis Brownhill.

Motherhood in Interwar Britain

Questions of citizenship were also fundamental to interwar understandings of motherhood. White middle class motherhood was constructed as the solution to anxieties about national decline, particularly in terms of the 'quality' of the population. Middle class women embodied the nation's 'civilizing values' and were to exert a moral influence over their families and society as a whole.³³ Motherhood was both idealised as a patriotic duty and functioned as women's route to citizenship. It was understood as entailing work and requiring craft and skill. Women needed healthy bodies in order to reproduce and expertise in child-rearing and domestic management in order to successfully raise the next generation of workers and soldiers. Their mothering role would enable them to be agents of positive social change.³⁴

The 'Mother/Citizen' was conservative in terms of gender but was linked to certain progressive social policies, such as increased provision of services for pregnant women and new mothers. Women's organisations and interwar feminists argued for recognition of the mother's social importance and rights, including through the availability of better housing, payment of family allowances, access to free healthcare and pension rights for married women. Feminists pursued campaigns for greater availability of birth control, abortion and divorce. Maternalism could prioritise empowerment and rights, but ultimately motherhood entailed women's dependence on men, which meant a lack of possible alternatives or more autonomous lives for married women.³⁵ Contemporary feminist critics of maternalism, such as Winifred Holtby, highlighted its tendency to sentimentalise mothers and to expect them to sacrifice themselves for their children. She argued that women were consequently encouraged to regard their own interests as unimportant.³⁶

The sentimentality that Holtby diagnosed at the heart of maternalism highlights continuities with melodramatic nineteenth-century portrayals of motherhood and the meanings given to motherhood during the First World War. The normativity of maternal sacrifice, a key aspect of nineteenth-century representations, endured.³⁷ Susan R. Grayzel argues that the experience of the First World War maintained and enhanced the importance of motherhood for constructing women's gender identities in Britain. In particular, the figure of the grieving mother had deep cultural resonance for expressing collective sorrow. Wartime was a period of gender upheaval during which motherhood was a stabilising concept, helping to keep norms of femininity and masculinity in place.³⁸ New attitudes to mourning emphasised the need for stoicism and self-restraint; elaborate Victorian bereavement rituals had faded. Mothers symbolised and expressed collective grief, but were expected to do so appropriately.³⁹ This point about maternal grief is significant in recognising motherhood as an enduring social and cultural identity. Women remain mothers when their children grow up and even when their children die before they do. May Brownhill's case enables exploration of the resonance of motherhood in the interwar period beyond more familiar portrayals of young women's reproductive potential or young mothers with babies and small children.

Interwar Crime News

Shani D'Cruze has highlighted the literary devices shared between interwar crime news and crime fiction. Press reporting of crime 'self-consciously adopted hybrid and partially fictionalized representational and market strategies directed towards middlebrow and popular consumption'.⁴⁰ There was shared ground in novels and news reports in terms of attention to the disruption of domesticity. Fewer people at this time were tried for murder than at any point since the 1830s and murders of intimates predominated, meaning that trials were frequently revealing about private lives.

This domestic focus was particularly apposite following the disruption of the First World War when social structures needed to be re-established.⁴¹

The press employed the literary device of melodrama to portray May's case. Melodrama focuses on the domestic sphere and the bourgeois family in particular making it a highly suitable mode of representation. It foregrounds 'female trials and tribulations' and pays close attention to mother/child relationships – especially to the power of the mother/son bond. Discourses of motherhood are therefore central to this convention, with maternal sacrifice figuring as a recurrent theme and the idealisation of the sacrificial mother as an 'angel mother'.⁴² The 'maternal sacrifice paradigm' was characteristic of nineteenth-century melodramatic literature but also featured in Hollywood films of the 1930s. As Janet Fink and Katherine Holden argue, the British cinema audience preferred American films to British ones and would have been familiar with these portrayals.⁴³

Newspaper readerships in Britain were very high during the interwar period and crime stories were key to newspaper circulation wars in the era.⁴⁴ News values were characterised by human interest stories, with an emphasis on reporting first-hand experience. Murder was the staple of crime news, with extensive coverage given to sensational cases.⁴⁵ May Brownhill's story was not sensational – it involved no mystery, sex or violence. However, the attention given to her case in the press showed that it was not only sensations that had the power to resonate with the newspaper reading audience, but also sentimental stories which raised social issues.

Domesticity and the middlebrow were not necessarily the predominant means of representing female criminality in the press at this time. Charlotte Wildman has explored how there was anxiety over women's roles as 'active, entrepreneurial agents of crime'.⁴⁶ Due to greater freedoms, women could engage in a wider range of crimes than previously, such as fraud, blackmail and drug dealing, and could become successful in doing so. These new female criminals were perceived as young, fashionable and glamorous, connoting modern femininity. They generated fearful reactions but also signalled new possibilities by unsettling boundaries between categories of gender.

This relates to wider historiographical debates on womanhood in the era, including its representation in the press. Adrian Bingham argues that the interwar period was a 'modern era' of changing expectations in relation to young women's leisure and sexuality. The premium placed on feminine glamour established new standards of beauty and increased the sexualisation of women's bodies. The popular press embraced modernity and depicted assertive, active women who achieved success in public life as thoroughly modern.⁴⁷ Lucy Bland, in her study of sensational trials of young women in the 1920s, argues that Bingham underplays the negative commentary on women's growing

independence and sexuality that also appeared in the interwar press. Women who transgressed boundaries of gender, class, race and sexuality generated considerable cultural anxiety.⁴⁸

May Brownhill was a very different figure from the glamorous young women who appeared in the interwar press, whether in relation to crime or anything else. Her portrayal drew on recognisable conservative stereotypes of femininity as exemplified by motherhood and duty, in a story that shored up conventional morality in terms of gender but enabled discussion of euthanasia. Bingham acknowledges that shifts towards modernity in gender relations and standards of femininity were most relevant to young, single women.⁴⁹ It is also important to pay attention to the cultural place of older women in the 1930s to gain a fuller picture of gender identities at this time.

May Brownhill as a Sacrificial Mother

The theme of maternal devotion appeared consistently in reports of May's case, from the committal hearing to her release from prison, and emphasised the importance of sacrifice. Reporting on the committal hearing, the *Daily Mirror* referred to 'Poignant evidence of a mother's devotion to her imbecile son'.⁵⁰ The outline of the case for the Department of Public Prosecutions at this hearing revealed that Dennis was a 'helpless invalid', which 'made it necessary for Mrs Brownhill, as his mother, to be constantly devoted to him. In fact, so devoted was she that they shared the same bedroom in order that she could administer to his wants during the night'.⁵¹ The sentimental language employed by both the prosecution and defence during the trial enhanced the melodrama of the case. Harold Sutcliffe, counsel for the prosecution (and Conservative MP for Royton), averred that 'seldom have more tragic facts been revealed' and Norman Birkett KC for the defence contended that 'Seldom had human love and devotion been shown in a higher light'.⁵²

The *Daily Mail* reported an interview with May's husband, Walter Brownhill, in a sentimental register, describing him as 'A lonely, sad-eyed, grey-haired man' and quoted his assertion that May's 'devotion to our boy was pathetic yet beautiful [...] for he did not even know who it was who cared for him'.⁵³ He explained how May 'sat up night after night attending to him and wore herself out'.⁵⁴ In the *Daily Express*, Walter was quoted as stating 'Like an angel she kept on living and working for him'.⁵⁵ Reporting May's return home, the *News of the World* informed readers 'a tragic little woman is walking round the rooms wonderingly touching furniture and looking at pictures she thought she would never see again'.⁵⁶ Emphasis on the tragedy of the case further underlined its melodrama and established grief as an important theme. This mobilised the potent interwar symbol of the grieving mother and detracted from May's culpability; the emphasis was on the loss of her son, not the fact that she killed him.

The killing of Dennis was itself portrayed as emblematic of May's maternal devotion. Her response to being charged with murder – 'I did not do it feloniously or maliciously. I mercifully put him to sleep' – was consistent with the only interpretation of her actions to emerge.⁵⁷ That May had killed for altruistic rather than selfish reasons was essential to the portrayal of her self-sacrificial motherhood. During her trial, prosecuting counsel explained that May needed an operation or she would die, noting 'She did not mind for herself. Denis [sic] was the problem'.⁵⁸ Upon receiving her death sentence, May proclaimed 'I did it in mercy', supporting the perception that she acted on behalf of Dennis.⁵⁹

An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* entitled 'A Pitiable Case' stated of May, 'The woman acted out of pity and love; not out of hatred or fear' and the *News of the World* similarly asserted 'She killed not from hate, but from love'.⁶⁰ It was perceived that only the best motives lay behind May's actions. Following her release from prison, she was quoted as stating 'The eleven years of devotional nursing my son's affliction needed were to me a loving duty and not a sacrifice'.⁶¹ This signalled the alliance between motherhood and citizenship in use of the word 'duty', but also the continued resonance of sentimental understandings of maternal love. Mercy killing for love was significant to the popular leniency evinced by May's case.

The centrality and sacredness given to the mother/son relationship was consistent with the melodramatic narration of the case and with contemporary understandings of motherhood, which constructed children's interests as taking precedence over their mothers.⁶² This did present an ambivalence in relation to May's case, which was the question of whether an 'invalid' who would never outgrow his mother's care should really take precedence. May's years of sacrifice were appreciated, but her decision to kill Dennis and prevent him becoming a burden to others was presented as culturally acceptable.

May's own suffering due to her illness was another significant element of the sentimental register used to tell her story, which fulfilled the melodramatic convention of attention to 'female trials and tribulations'.⁶³ Following her trial, the *Daily Mail* enhanced the drama of May's situation by informing its readers 'Even up to a few days ago it was uncertain whether she would be able to face her trial'.⁶⁴ The *Mirror* quoted Mr Agar-Hutton, May's solicitor, as stating 'Every time she had to stand up in court she was in agony'.⁶⁵ May's moral superiority was underlined by the fact that, according to Agar-Hutton, she bore 'pain like a Stoic'.⁶⁶ This description evoked stoicism and self-restraint as important elements of normative British middle class womanhood. In the interwar period middle class women were seen as leading the way in resisting enervating sentimentality and promoting self-

discipline.⁶⁷ The press coverage of May's case demonstrates how, in popular discourse, approval for restraint was mixed with the enduring appeal of a sentimental story.

May's poor health was understood to be a compelling reason to show leniency and release her from prison. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* reported in February 1935 that local MP Major J W Hills was to ask John Gilmour 'whether he will take the necessary steps to enable Mrs Brownhill [...] to be out at liberty'.⁶⁸ May was driven home to Burn Bridge on 1 March, accompanied by a nurse. She 'looked extremely pale' and was 'stated [...] to be weak and suffering from strain'.⁶⁹ For the *News of the World*, May's suffering had been compounded by a Christmas spent in prison but "'the quality of mercy" was shown in its fullest in a stricken mother's release'. The Brownhill home was reportedly 'guarded night and day by police' to ensure that there would be no disturbances from the (well meaning) public.⁷⁰ A letter in May's prison file from a surgeon at Salford Royal Hospital where her surgery was performed states that her condition was not life threatening and could be managed with a drainage tube.⁷¹ These finer points in relation to May's health were not reported in the press and may have been unknown to them; that she had suffered from a kidney infection resulting from a large kidney stone and not a tumour as originally thought did not appear in news stories.

The press reported the '[s]trong efforts by notable people' to secure May's early release from prison, which included her own MP Major Hills and the leader of the Labour Party George Lansbury who wrote to John Gilmour about her case.⁷² The *Mirror* explained that 'Several Members of Parliament who have followed this tragic case closely were ready to advance an appeal for clemency on her behalf'.⁷³ This proved unnecessary due to the swift commutation of May's death sentence only two days after her conviction. This had 'no parallel in recent years' and was 'probably the speediest commutation of a death sentence on record'.⁷⁴ Whether this was in fact true was beside the point; it served to emphasise the portrayal of May's case as an exceptional one that had deserved special consideration.⁷⁵

In addition to the support of 'notable people', May's case had 'aroused the sympathy of the whole country'.⁷⁶ The *Mirror* argued that '[t]he common sense (or the human sympathy) of the public realises that Mrs Brownhill has suffered enough for retribution'.⁷⁷ Upon returning home in March 1935, May had received '[m]essages of sympathy [...] from all parts of the country', and in Burn Bridge 'several of the villagers sent flowers'.⁷⁸ A few weeks' later, May 'expressed [...] her "heartfelt gratitude" to everyone who had taken an interest in her case', reportedly stating "It is impossible for me to answer the very many letters of loving sympathy and condolence from known and unknown friends".⁷⁹ Both the local and wider national community was constructed as supportive of May.

The reporting of the public's interest and concern meant that the press enabled their readers to participate in a national emotional community created around May's case.⁸⁰ In the 1930s, the press coverage of certain capital cases in particular appealed to readers' emotions, emphasising the traumatic nature of the death sentence and its impact on the relatives of the condemned.⁸¹ The emotional community that formed around May's case was not specifically death penalty related as she was quickly reprieved. However, it demonstrated the competing currents in norms of publicly expressed sentiment in the interwar period. The ability of individuals to exhibit restraint and self-discipline was important, but so was the notion of a community bound together by shared feeling.

Mercy Killing and the Question of Euthanasia

The morality of May's actions could be easily resolved – she was not blameworthy and was seen as undeserving of punishment. Even the prosecution was at pains to stress her motherly devotion and concern to end her son's suffering, and her fast reprieve and early release from prison showed the case to be one of popular leniency. This was significant because the broader issue that it raised – euthanasia – was ethically and emotionally contentious.

The phrase 'Right to Kill' was frequently employed in press discussions of the case, including labelling May the 'Right-to-Kill' Mother.⁸² Local newspapers often evoked rather than explicitly addressed the debate in relation to her actions, although national newspapers did engage in this discussion. The portrayal of Dennis was important to the construction of the case as a 'mercy killing' and to the representation of May as morally unproblematic. Dennis was largely notable by his absence from the press narrative as a subject in his own right. He was 'hopelessly incapacitated' and according to family doctor Dr Holroyd his life was 'a veritable living death'.⁸³ The *Daily Mail's* interview with Walter Brownhill informed readers that Dennis could have been 'brilliant', but then aged nineteen, 'something seemed to snap in his brain'.⁸⁴

Dennis's assumed lack of subjectivity was in keeping with contemporary perception of the 'mentally deficient' as incapable of responsible citizenship and helps to explain why he was not granted high status victimhood. He was variously described in news stories as an 'invalid' or an 'imbecile', with no distinction made between these designations; both were used to convey that he was dependent and unable to support himself. The 'imbecile' description came from Justice Goddard's summing up of the trial, in which he stated: 'The time may come when it may be the law of this country that an imbecile, an idiot, may be sent to a merciful death' but explained that as this was not the law, 'No person in this country has the right to take the life of another human being because he or she thinks it would be better for them to die'.⁸⁵ The judge's choice of words implied two things – one, that

euthanasia was progressive ('the time may come') and, two, that it was 'merciful' and by implication morally acceptable for 'imbeciles' and 'idiots' to be killed – although it was not currently legally acceptable. These words were frequently quoted in news articles and gave at least partial support to involuntary euthanasia for those deemed mentally incapacitated.

The *Daily Mail* stated that due to May's case the controversy surrounding euthanasia 'has been renewed as the result of a moving human story' and questioned 'Should it be made lawful for a suffering human being to be given a merciful death?'⁸⁶ This recognised Dennis as someone who could suffer, which appears to have been interpreted as his only capacity. The *Daily Mirror's* sympathetic editorial on May explained that it did not advocate the 'right to kill', but rather supported popular leniency in her case.⁸⁷ The fullest expression of the euthanasia debate in relation to May's case was published in a *Manchester Guardian* article entitled 'Pleas for Condemned Mother' and, via quotations from prominent figures, this cautiously addressed the issue of involuntary euthanasia.⁸⁸ It quoted George Lansbury in reference to 'the controversy as to whether euthanasia should be practised in the cases of persons suffering from incurable diseases, which has been revived by the verdict'. Lansbury was rather equivocal, stating 'People differ as to who should be killed', although his phrasing suggested that there was at least some role for euthanasia. Battersea Coroner Dr Edwin Smith argued that sufferers of disease usually did not want euthanasia but '[i]n the case of an imbecile, of course, the matter is even more complicated and difficult'. Charles Killick Millard explained that his draft bill concerned voluntary euthanasia 'and therefore the question of imbeciles and idiots would not arise. It might, however, be extended to include these sufferers. But in such a matter it would be wise, I think, to go step by step'. George Bernard Shaw was prepared to be a shade blunter, arguing 'this unfortunate woman did something which should have been taken off her hands by some public authority. When it comes to killing an individual you cannot leave that to a private person. If the thing has to be done it should be done quite carefully'.⁸⁹

Shaw's comment demonstrated that May's murder of Dennis could be interpreted through the lenses of two movements for social progress – euthanasia and eugenics. As Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall argue 'Eugenics was sufficiently protean to be harnessed to different ideological debates'.⁹⁰ Self-proclaimed eugenicists ranged from those who advocated the elimination of the 'unfit' to those who believed in the need to improve the lived environment of the poor. In the 1930s, the Eugenics Society approved of Germany's compulsory sterilisation laws of 1933, and the Brock Report 1934 advocated the adoption of voluntary sterilisation of mental defectives in Britain.⁹¹ At this time the progressive section of the Society, which advocated eugenics as part of the scientific management of society, was ascendant.⁹² Ian Dowbiggin and Nick Kemp have highlighted overlaps in membership between the

Eugenics Society and the Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Society; Millard and Shaw belonged to both. Clive Seale's statistical analysis of newspaper debates on assisted dying over time demonstrates that a eugenicist argument for euthanasia was prominent in the 1930s.⁹³ May's unambiguous construction in the press as deserving of popular leniency, and the deployment of conservative discourses of womanhood consistent with the gender order, enabled some consideration of euthanasia as a social issue. This remained tentative but highlights how microhistory enables attention to the emergence and testing out of social norms. In the case of euthanasia, clear norms did not emerge in the 1930s.⁹⁴

Letters from the Public

This section analyses letters about the case sent to John Gilmour, the Home Secretary. Newspaper stories were the means through which the public would have come to know May's case, meaning the letters can be understood as a form of reader response.⁹⁵ However, in addition to reflecting the newspapers' portrayals they also exhibit a broader range of understandings of May and her actions than the press narrative. John Carter Wood argues that letter writers' interpretation of murder cases suited 'their own experiences, needs and desires'.⁹⁶

The mix of letter writers in response to May's case was unusual, demonstrating the power of the case to resonate more widely than straightforward 'domestic' murders that were not perceived to relate to debates and controversies. Although capital case files from the 1930s usually contain pardon letters on behalf of the condemned, these were generally sent by family members, employers, religious leaders and other prominent members of the local community.⁹⁷ The letters in May's file were largely sent by people who did not know her personally, were not from Yorkshire and would only have known her case from the press. This included people from Italy and the United States. George Lansbury wrote on her behalf, as did Lord Cobham. The other letter writers were 'ordinary' citizens.

The letters exemplify how individuals both constructed and internalised contemporary social mores and provide access to their emotional reactions to the case.⁹⁸ Pardon letters are mixed genre texts, containing a plea for the condemned, an interpretation of the crime and frequently elements of the author's own life narrative.⁹⁹ Writing to the Home Secretary can be understood as an act of citizenship and the letters themselves as examples of 'public opinion' on issues such as state administered punishment, euthanasia and the duties of motherhood. In the 1930s, letters were the main medium for conveying 'personal and emotional thoughts and feelings'.¹⁰⁰ This more personal, autobiographical or even confessional role of the letter can also be discerned from some of the responses to May's case.

Some of the letters sent in relation to May requested a reprieve and expressed anger that she had been sentenced to death. A woman from Illinois found it 'impossible to understand' how May could be sentenced to hang after the jury had recommended mercy. She was 'so upset' by reading about May's case, she wished to make 'a plea for mercy for this devoted mother'.¹⁰¹ An American man exclaimed, 'You could not let this mother die this way!'¹⁰² An anonymous correspondent urged Gilmour to '[f]orgive this poor helpless soul, mortal, afflicted with grief and earthly pain, if you do not, you yourselves will be guilty of murder, Murder!!! see it'.¹⁰³ These responses suggest the resonance of May's story as melodrama – the 'devoted' and suffering mother described by the press. They also convey the significance of letter writers' emotional engagement and personal identification with the case.

Other correspondents assumed that May would be reprieved, their concern was rather to ask for a free pardon. No woman had been executed in Britain since Louie Calvert in 1926, and only four women had been hanged since 1908.¹⁰⁴ Especially in a heartrending case such as May's, letter writers could rightly assume that a reprieve would be given – which it was. The only letter not fully in support of May cautioned that letting her off too early would not be a deterrent to others. However, even this author was quick to state that 'of course no-one wants to hang her'.¹⁰⁵ Letters evinced popular leniency and writers accepted May as a moral agent. A woman from London stated that she knew May would not be hanged, but expressed her belief that prison was cruel, arguing 'she needs a nursing home, not a prison!!'.¹⁰⁶ She felt sure 'all thinking and humane people' would wish for a free pardon.¹⁰⁷

An author from Nottingham asked that May was released from prison as 'she has suffered enough without torturing her further' and included an exhortation to 'Think of your own mother'.¹⁰⁸ The reference to May's suffering replicated the portrayal in the press of her case as melodrama and demonstrates the construction of an emotional community in relation to the case. This correspondent's use of an emotional register shows how these letters were not necessarily formal, but could include direct and non-deferential addresses to the Home Secretary. The sense of the case as an emotional talking point was articulated by a man who asserted, '[t]he case has many extenuating features, and everyone I have talked to feels this way about it'.¹⁰⁹

Several letter writers mentioned the need to change the law around mercy-killing. A Reverend from Coventry requested a free pardon 'without delay' and wanted to 'earnestly plead for re-consideration of the law dealing with such cases'.¹¹⁰ A woman who professed herself a daughter of friends of the family knew 'full well that there was no criminal motive behind Mrs Brownhill's act' and asserted '[t]he crime to me is that she ever reached the position that she is now in'.¹¹¹ A male

correspondent had read about the case in the *Morning Post* and argued ‘the “crime” if it is one in God’s eyes, was done entirely and unequivocally out of love for her son’.¹¹²

The press theme of May’s actions as resulting from her love for Dennis was also one that appeared in the letters. May ‘with the deepest love destroyed her imbecile son’, according to a male writer.¹¹³ More direct support for euthanasia came from a correspondent who argued that the medical profession should be given powers to act, which ‘would then save a terrible but justifiable crime being permitted by a relation who alone knows the terrible suffering of her now dear departed’.¹¹⁴ A woman from Chester was the only letter writer to echo a more eugenics-based view, arguing ‘what Mrs Brownhill did was in the public interest as well as in mercy to the poor unfortunate lad she brought into the world’.¹¹⁵

Some letter writers acknowledged factors beyond those covered in the newspapers. The woman from Illinois noted that ‘[t]his poor woman did not kill her imbecile son even to be rid of caring for him’, rather she ‘saved him from the slow murder of a cruel world’.¹¹⁶ A nurse from Bournemouth speculated that ‘[v]ery probably Mrs Brownhill had heard of cruelties perpetrated in asylums, so with her great mother love could not bear to run the risk for her darling’.¹¹⁷ News reports on the case emphasised May’s unwillingness to countenance others looking after Dennis, but not issues related to the standard of institutional care. In 1929, public health and welfare provision that previously fell under the Poor Law was transferred to local authorities. This improved the standard of healthcare but was in the context of 1934 a recent development and one which was still undergoing implementation. Elderly, chronically sick and disabled patients were usually in the worst accommodation.¹¹⁸ The asylum in which Dennis spent time after he first became incapacitated was a private institution but the spectre of inadequate care was a concern for some letter writers, who would not have known the specific details of Dennis’s institutionalisation.¹¹⁹

The emotional register in which many authors wrote their letters indicated a level of personal investment in May’s case. Some writers explicitly identified with her and included elements of autobiography in their letters, especially as women with caring responsibilities. A woman from Dorset ‘as a mother fell for her as I have a son that I have had to care for since he was 3 years’. She fell ill and ‘so put him in the workhouse’. She explained ‘I love him and when I pass away you quite understand how I feel: I am 74’.¹²⁰ Recourse to the workhouse for her son indicates that this woman was from a less privileged social background than May, but felt an affinity in relation to the need to provide ongoing care for a grown child. A female writer had responsibility for caring for her brother. Her mother was elderly and this author claimed that when her mother died ‘I shall just slip quietly away’.¹²¹

Other correspondents had not necessarily experienced the same kind of situation as May but identified with her as a grieving mother in a way which suggested the significance of the First World War to understandings of shared sorrow. A woman from Brighton could 'deeply sympathize with her as no-one else would have had the patience and love for such an imbecile son and I willing [sic] offer to take her place'. She was prepared to do this because 'I gave my Husband too Sons [sic], a Daughter for England to take there [sic] part in the Great War and now I cannot live in a proper peaceful way'.¹²² This woman felt bound to May in grief. A male author also offered to stand in for May if she was not reprieved. He urged 'let me take her place as I am strong and will gladly give my life that she may end her days in the light of God'.¹²³ He compared how May must have felt to how he had felt in battle during the war, exemplifying Susan Grayzel's argument that the mother was constructed as the female equivalent of the soldier in the First World War.¹²⁴

Conclusion

Newspapers employed the generic conventions of melodrama in order to report May's case – which frequently replicated legal rhetoric from the committal hearing and trial. The ideological work of the portrayal of May as a devoted and long suffering idealised mother made her a subject of popular leniency. Even so, the cautious and ambivalent discussion of involuntary euthanasia in the press indicated the anxieties that the issue provoked. Letter writers to the Home Secretary expressed a wider range of meanings in relation to the case than those found in the press coverage.

As a respectable woman who was portrayed sympathetically, May's representation did not signal new possibilities in terms of gender, or the need to reinscribe her womanhood as it was not in doubt. The gender order was upheld rather than troubled by the reporting of her case. Age and class were important intersecting elements in May's case. As a sixty-two year old middle class woman, the changes in relation to leisure and sexuality that historians have identified as emerging in relation to young women in the 1930s were absent from May's story. This is an important consideration as the range of possibilities for the portrayal of older women at this time (or the lack thereof) also needs to be understood.

Modernity played a complicated role in May's case. Lucy Bland argues that it is important to appreciate how positive and negative reactions to young 'modern' women appeared alongside one another in the interwar press, demonstrating the ambivalence that existed in relation to shifting boundaries of class, sexuality and gender. In keeping with Bland's point about the need to understand the multiplicity of representations of femininity, it is also necessary to explore case studies of women who were not young or perceived as 'modern' and how their stories were narrated. May Brownhill's

case demonstrated that a sentimental, melodramatic portrayal of sacrificial motherhood remained powerful. Post First World War association between motherhood and grief can be read from the press representations of May's case, and from the letters that some individuals wrote about it. The domestic travails of the grieving, sorrowful mother and the sacrificial mother were cultural portrayals that could be activated, depending on the story and its actors, and existed in the news alongside the pioneering women who represented 'a more assertive and active generation'.¹²⁵

May was not portrayed as a 'modern' woman but her case did raise questions about understandings of social progress. These related to considerations of who was deemed worthy of citizenship in a modern society, and what should happen to those who were not. Eugenics-based arguments were insinuated in relation to the case, most notably by the judge, but were not prominent. There was a consensus that May was not deserving of punishment and that she had killed her son out of love for him. His dependency on her meant that he did not meet a threshold level of responsible citizenship, whereas May had fulfilled contemporary norms of citizenship as they pertained to middle class women.

Whether involuntary euthanasia should be officially adopted was a knottier question, one which was raised in some responses to the case but not fully addressed by them in terms of what this could or should mean. The emergent movement for voluntary euthanasia was also divided and ambivalent about the desirability of the 'right to kill'. A Voluntary Euthanasia (Legalisation) Bill was read in the House of Lords in November 1936, and was rejected thirty-five to fourteen.¹²⁶ After the Second World War, the movement was damaged by revelations of the Nazi regime's compulsory killing of disabled people and arguments that voluntary euthanasia would be a 'slippery slope' towards compulsion.¹²⁷ This microhistory of a case of mercy killing in the 1930s enables a glimpse of emergent moral and emotional meanings in relation to euthanasia prior to this transformed context.

Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to John Carter Wood, Daniel Grey, Dean Wilson and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

Funding:

This work was supported by the British Academy [SG090019] and the Socio-Legal Studies Association [Small Grant 2009-10]

Notes on Contributor:

Lizzie Seal is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at University of Sussex. Her publications include *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill* (Palgrave, 2010), (with Maggie

O'Neill) *Transgressive Imaginations: Crime, Deviance and Culture* (Palgrave, 2012) and *Capital Punishment in Twentieth Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory* (Routledge, 2014).

¹ Report on May Brownhill's case for Home Secretary, John Gilmour, 3 December 1934, TNA/HO144/19885.

² Resume of the case, Rex v. Brownhill, West Riding of Yorkshire Constabulary, DPP2/233. The key individuals in the case – May, her son and her husband, were all Brownhills so for clarity will be identified by their first names.

³ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 1 October 1934, p. 12.

⁴ Memorandum on May Brownhill, S S H Shannon, Medical Officer, HMP Manchester, 11 November 1934, PCOM9/335.

⁵ *Western Gazette*, 21 September 1934, p. 16.

⁶ The conditional pardon, which was not publicly available, noted, 'It is clearly a case in which an immediate reprieve is desirable and the question how long the woman shall be detained in prison will be considered later', John Gilmour, 3 December 1934, HO144/19885.

⁷ The report advising Gilmour suggested that 'a very short period of detention will be regarded as sufficient' 4 December 1934, HO144/19885.

⁸ Richard Jones (2010) Populist Leniency, Crime Control and Due Process, *Theoretical Criminology*, 14(3), pp. 331-47, p. 335; p. 336.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 333. For example, Henry Jacoby, an eighteen year old hanged in 1922. Perception that Ronald True, who was reprieved two days after Jacoby's hanging, escaped execution due to being well connected led to controversy over the apparent disparity, see XXXX pp. 79-80.

¹⁰ This is the total number of the letters in the file. There were 11 male authors (one wrote twice), 10 female and 14 gender unknown (one letter was signed by four).

¹¹ Kyra Pearson (2007) The Trouble with Aileen Wuornos, Feminism's First Serial Killer, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4(3), pp. 256-275, pp. 259-260.

¹² John Carter Wood (2016) Crime News and the Press in Paul Knepper and Anja Johansen (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 301-319, p. 311.

¹³ Carolyn Strange (1999) Murder and Meanings in US Historiography, *Feminist Studies*, 25(3), pp. 679-97, p. 693.

¹⁴ See Amy Gilman Srebnick and Rene Levy (Eds) (2005) *Crime and Culture: An Historical Perspective*, (Aldershot, Ashgate); Victoria M Nagy (2015) *Nineteenth-Century Female Poisoners: Three English Women Who Used Arsenic to Kill*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave), pp. 50-55 and David Nash and Anne-Marie Kilday (2017), Introduction, David Nash and Anne-Marie Kilday (Eds) *Law, Crime and Deviance since 1700: Micro-studies in the History of Crime* (London, Bloomsbury) Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ See Nash and Kilday, Introduction and Anne-Marie Kilday (2017) Constructing the Cult of the Criminal: Kate Webster – Victorian Murderess and Media Sensation, in Nash and Kilday, Chapter 6, Kindle Edition.

¹⁶ See Peter Arnade and Elizabeth Colwill (2017) Crime Testimony: Life Narratives, Pardon Letters and Microhistory, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 47(1), pp. 147-166, pp. 147-152 and Lindsey Earner-Byrne (2015) The Rape of Mary M: A Microhistory of Sexual Violence and Moral Redemption in 1920s Ireland, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 24(1), pp. 75-98, p. 97.

¹⁷ See Ann-Louise Shapiro (1996) *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press), p. 4, Lucy Bland (2013) *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press), p. 2 and Lizzie Seal (2010) *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill* (Basingstoke, Palgrave), p. 11.

¹⁸ See Tamar Hager (2016) 'Justice, Morality or Politics: Why Did the British Legal System Execute Selina Wadge', *Women's History Review*, 2016: DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2015.1131051 and Nagy, *Nineteenth-Century Female Poisoners*, p. 55.

¹⁹ See Ginger Frost (2004) "She is but a Woman": Kitty Byron and the English Edwardian Criminal Justice System, *Gender and History*, 16(3), pp. 538-60 and Bland on Mme Fahmy, *Modern Women*, pp 132-75.

²⁰ XXXX, p. 63.

-
- ²¹ Anne-Marie Kilday (2013) *A History of Infanticide in Britain, c.1600 to the Present* (Basingstoke, Palgrave), pp. 120-135.
- ²² Daniel J R Grey (2015) "Agonised Weeping": Representing Femininity, Emotion and Infanticide in Edwardian Newspapers, *Media History*, 21(4), pp. 468-80.
- ²³ Ian Dowbiggin (2001) "A Prey on Normal People": C. Killick Millard and the Euthanasia Movement, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2001, 36(1), pp. 59-85, p. 70 and Sheldon Ekland-Olson and Elyshia Asetline (2012) *How Ethical Systems Change: Tolerable Suffering and Assisted Dying* (London, Routledge), p. 6.
- ²⁴ Resume of the case, Rex vs Brownhill, West Riding of Yorkshire Constabulary, TNA/DPP2/233.
- ²⁵ From what can be known of his symptoms, it is likely that they could have been caused by a stroke or an aneurysm.
- ²⁶ Statement of Walter Brownhill, DPP2/233.
- ²⁷ Dowbiggin, "A Prey on Normal People", p. 61.
- ²⁸ Dowbiggin, "A Prey on Normal People", pp. 61-69. N D A Kemp (2002) *Merciful Release: The History of the British Euthanasia Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 83-89. Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee (1929) (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office). Full text accessible at: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/wood/wood1929.html> Accessed 24.3.17.
- ²⁹ Dowbiggin, p. 66-7.
- ³⁰ Mathew Thomson (1998) *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy in Britain, c. 1870-1959* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p. 37, p. 54.
- ³¹ Andrew Forrester, Serab Ozdural, Anandamurugan Muthukumaraswamy and Andrew Carroll (2008) The Evolution of Mental Disorder as a Legal Category in England and Wales, *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 19(4), pp. 543-560, p. 546.
- ³² Mathew Thomson (2010) Disability, Psychiatry and Eugenics, Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 116-133, pp 118-119.
- ³³ Jane Garrity (2003) *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press), p.2
- ³⁴ See Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2011) The Making of a Modern Female Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Interwar Britain, *Women's History Review*, 20(2), pp. 299-317, p. 301, Xiantian Jin (2015) Battle of Femininity: Romantic Heroines and Modern Sexuality in the Interwar Middlebrow Women's Novel, *Women's History Review*, 24(2), pp. 252-270, pp. 256-259 and Garrity, pp. 66-75.
- ³⁵ Stephen Brooke (2001) "A New World for Women"? Abortion Law Reform in Britain During the 1930s, *American History Review*, 106(20), pp. 431-459, p. 448.
- ³⁶ On maternalism and relevant social policy see Brooke, Caitriona Beaumont (2007) 'Moral Dilemmas and Women's Rights: the Attitudes of the Mother's Union and Catholic Women's League to Divorce, Birth Control and Abortion in England, 1928-1939', *Women's History Review*, 16(4), pp. 463-485 and Lisa Regan (2010) 'Winifred Holtby and "The Long Bred Inferiority Complex": Motherhood, Nation, and Empire', L Regan (ed.) *Winifred Holtby "A Woman in Her Time": Critical Essays*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 194-218. On Holtby see Regan and Garrity, p. 68.
- ³⁷ E Ann Kaplan (1992) *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, (Abingdon, Routledge), pp. 76-77.
- ³⁸ Susan R Grayzel (1999) *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press).
- ³⁹ Lucy Noakes (2015) Gender, Grief, and Bereavement in Second World War Britain, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 8(1), pp. 72-85, pp. 74-77.
- ⁴⁰ Shani D'Cruze (2004) "Dad's Back": Mapping Masculinities, Moralities and the Law in the Novels of Margery Allingham, *Cultural and Social History*, 1(3), pp. 256-279, p. 265.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Marcia Landy (1991) *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-60*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press), p. 192; Kaplan (1992), p. 77.
- ⁴³ Janet Fink and Katherine Holden (1999) 'Pictures from the Margins of Marriage: Representations of Spinsters and Single Mothers in the Mid-Victorian Novel, Inter-war Hollywood Melodrama and British Film of the 1950s and 1960s', *Gender and History*, 11(2), pp. 233-55, p. 239.
- ⁴⁴ Matt Houlbrook (2013) Fashioning an Ex-crook Self: Citizenship and Criminality in the Work of Netley Lucas, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24(1), pp. 1-30, p. 3 and Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson and Samantha Pegg (2013) *Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility, 1820-2010* (Basingstoke, Palgrave), pp. 116-133.

-
- ⁴⁵ For example, Buck Ruxton, a doctor born in India, murdered his common-law wife and the family maid. He was hanged in 1936. In June and July 1934, two trunks at Brighton station were found to contain the remains of murdered women. One case remained unsolved, the other ended in acquittal.
- ⁴⁶ Charlotte Wildman (2016) Miss Moriarty, the Adventuress and the Crime Queen: The Rise of the Modern Female Criminal in Britain, 1918-1939, *Contemporary British History*, 30(1), pp. 73-98, p. 73.
- ⁴⁷ Adrian Bingham (2004a) "An Era of Domesticity"?: Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain, *Cultural and Social History*, 1(2), pp. 225-233 and (2004b) *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp 79-81.
- ⁴⁸ Bland *Modern Women on Trial*, p. 7.
- ⁴⁹ Bingham "An Era of Domesticity", p. 231.
- ⁵⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 2 October 1934, p. 6.
- ⁵¹ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 1 October 1934, p. 12.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*; *The Times*, 3 December 1934, p. 11.
- ⁵³ *Daily Mail*, 3 December 1934, p. 13.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *Daily Express*, 4 December 1934, TNA/HO144/19885.
- ⁵⁶ *News of the World*, 3 March 1935, TNA/HO144/19885.
- ⁵⁷ *Western Gazette*, 21 September 1934, p. 16.
- ⁵⁸ *Gloucester Citizen*, 1 December 1934, p. 1.
- ⁵⁹ *The Observer*, 2 December 1934, p. 33.
- ⁶⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1934, p. 13; *News of the World*, 3 March 1935, TNA/HO144/19885.
- ⁶¹ *Dundee Courier*, 30 March 1935, p. 7.
- ⁶² Regan, Winifred Holtby, p. 200.
- ⁶³ Landy, *British Genres*, p. 192.
- ⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 3 December 1934, p. 7.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁶ *Daily Express*, 5 December 1934, TNA/HO144/19885.
- ⁶⁷ Noakes, Gender, Grief, and Bereavement', pp. 76-7.
- ⁶⁸ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 22 February 1935, p. 4.
- ⁶⁹ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 4 March 1935, p. 7.
- ⁷⁰ *Dundee Courier*, 4 March 1935, p. 7.
- ⁷¹ Letter, J A S Macapline, 13 December 1934, TNA/PCOM 9/335.
- ⁷² *Daily Mail*, 3 December 1934, p. 7. Lansbury wrote to Gilmour as a private citizen and requested that May be granted a free pardon: Letter George Lansbury MP, 2 December 1934, TNA/HO144/19885.
- ⁷³ *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1934, p. 1.
- ⁷⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 4 December 1934, p. 1; *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1934, p. 1.
- ⁷⁵ Rapid reprieves for women were not unusual. See Ballinger, Masculinity in the Dock, p.476 and Grey, "Agonised Weeping", p. 473.
- ⁷⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 4 December 1934, p. 1.
- ⁷⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1934, p. 13.
- ⁷⁸ *Dundee Courier*, 4 March 1935, p. 7; *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 6 March 1935, p. 5.
- ⁷⁹ *Dundee Courier*, 30 March 1935, p. 7.
- ⁸⁰ See Eliza Earle Ferguson (2014) *Emotion, Gender and Honour in a Fin-de-Siecle Crime of Passion: The Case of Marie Biere*, Carolyn Strange, Robert Cribb and Christopher E Forth (Eds.) *Honour, Violence and Emotions in History* (London: Bloomsbury), pp. 145-162 on the formation of an emotional community through press reporting of a murder case.
- ⁸¹ Lizzie Seal (2014) *Capital Punishment in Twentieth-Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory* (London, Routledge), pp. 41-49.
- ⁸² For example, *Hull Daily Mail*, 3 January 1935, p. 7; *Daily Mail*, 3 December 1934, p. 7; *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1934, p. 1.
- ⁸³ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 2 March 1935; p. 9; *Gloucester Citizen*, 1 December 1934, p. 1.
- ⁸⁴ *Daily Mail*, 3 December 1934, p. 7.
- ⁸⁵ *Gloucester Citizen*, 1 December 1934, p. 1; *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 1 December 1934, p. 5; *The Observer*, 2 December 1934, p. 33.
- ⁸⁶ *Daily Mail*, 3 December 1934, p. 7.
- ⁸⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1934, p. 13.

-
- ⁸⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 3 December 1934, p. 9.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁰ Lucy Bland and Lesley A Hall (2010) Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Eds), (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 213-227, p. 216.
- ⁹¹ See Bradley W Hart and Richard Carr (2015) Sterilization and the British Conservative Party: Rethinking the Failure of the Eugenics Society's Political Strategy in the Nineteen-Thirties, *Historical Research*, 88(242), pp. 716-39.
- ⁹² Bland and Hall, Eugenics in Britain, p. 218.
- ⁹³ Clive Seale (2016) Analysis of Health Communication Texts: UK Press Coverage of Debates About Assisted Dying, *Metode Science Studies Journal*, 6, pp. 235-40.
- ⁹⁴ The legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, or doctor-assisted suicide as it is now commonly termed, has received high levels of public support since at least the 1980s, see Andrij Danyliv and Ciaran O'Neill (2015) Attitudes Towards Legalising Physician Provided Euthanasia in Britain: The Role of Religion Over Time, *Social Science and Medicine*, 128, pp. 52-56. Nevertheless, (voluntary and non-voluntary) euthanasia and assisted suicide remain illegal in the UK.
- ⁹⁵ John Carter Wood (2012) "The Most Remarkable Woman in England": Poison, Celebrity and the Trials of Beatrice Pace, (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 175.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ⁹⁷ See Seal, *Capital Punishment*, pp. 102-103.
- ⁹⁸ See Frank Mort (2013) Love in a Cold Climate: Letters, Public Opinion and Monarchy in the 1936 Abdication Crisis, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25(1), pp. 30-62, p. 37.
- ⁹⁹ Nathalie Zemon Davies (1987) *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press), p. 5.
- ¹⁰⁰ Mort, Love in a Cold Climate, p. 40.
- ¹⁰¹ Letter Alice Perdew, Peoria, IL, USA, 2 December 1934, TNA/HO144/19885.
- ¹⁰² Letter Keville Glennan, Norfolk, VA, USA, 1 December 1934.
- ¹⁰³ Anonymous, undated, unaddressed letter.
- ¹⁰⁴ See Anette Ballinger (2000) *Dead Woman Walking: Executed Women in England and Wales 1900-1955*, (Aldershot, Ashgate). On Louie Calvert see also Anette Ballinger (2016) *Gender, Truth and State Power: Capitalising on Punishment*, (London, Routledge), pp. 34-52.
- ¹⁰⁵ Letter John Sanders, Manchester, 3 December 1934.
- ¹⁰⁶ Letter Mrs E R Bowman, London, 2 December 1934.
- ¹⁰⁷ Letter Mrs E R Bowman.
- ¹⁰⁸ Letter A Woods, Nottingham, 3 December 1934.
- ¹⁰⁹ Letter James E Watson, Chelsea, 1 December 1934.
- ¹¹⁰ Letter Reverend G W Clitheroe, Coventry, 4 December 1934.
- ¹¹¹ Letter Margaret Wheatley Jones, Cheshire, 3 December 1934.
- ¹¹² Letter Francis J Rhodes, Lewes, 3 December 1934.
- ¹¹³ Letter George Corral, Enfield, 2 December 1934.
- ¹¹⁴ Letter A S Kitchin, Bournemouth, 3 December 1934.
- ¹¹⁵ Letter from woman, name illegible, Chester, 3 December 1934.
- ¹¹⁶ Letter Alice Perdew.
- ¹¹⁷ Letter Nurse E M Ferrall, Bournemouth, 3 December 1934.
- ¹¹⁸ See Alysa Levene (2009) 'Between Less Eligibility and the NHS: The Changing Place of Poor Law Hospitals in England and Wales, 1929-39', *20th Century British History*, 20(3), pp. 322-345.
- ¹¹⁹ 'Scalebor Park', County Asylums: <http://www.countyasylums.co.uk/scalebor-park-burley-in-wharfedale/> Accessed 9 March 2017.
- ¹²⁰ Letter Mrs Mallett, Dorset, 30 November 1934.
- ¹²¹ Letter Esther Aslett, Cambridgeshire, unaddressed.
- ¹²² Letter Rose Hickey, Brighton, 5 December 1934.
- ¹²³ Letter Dennis Connor, Woolwich, 3 December 1934.
- ¹²⁴ Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War*, p. 239.
- ¹²⁵ Bingham, "An Era of Domesticity", p. 232.
- ¹²⁶ Kemp, *Merciful Release*, p. 89.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 211. Kemp discusses the prominence of the Nazi programme of non-voluntary euthanasia in the House of Lords debate of a (defeated) Voluntary Euthanasia Legislation Bill in 1950, p.118. The Nuremberg Medical Trial brought the Nazi euthanasia programme to global attention in 1946-7, although Emmeline Burdett argues that the British and American press focused largely on medical experimentation rather than euthanasia, (2011) *The Continent of Murder: Disability and the Nazi "Euthanasia" Programme in the Euthanasia Debates of Britain and the United States, 1945-Present*, unpublished PhD thesis, University College London: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1332887/1/1332887.pdf> p. 121.