

BOOK REVIEWS

**MURDERING HOLINESS: THE TRIALS OF FRANZ CREFFIELD AND
GEORGE MITCHELL**

JIM PHILLIPS AND ROSEMARY GARTNER. UBC PRESS, 2003

Murdering Holiness tells the extraordinary story of religious fundamentalism in Oregon and Washington at the turn of the last century, and the killing that was conducted in its name. It is a meticulous work of social history that follows the career of Franz Creffield, a Holy Roller with aspirations to godship, and his small band of devoted followers. *Murdering Holiness* examines with a fine eye for detail the lives, legal proceedings and crimes conducted by and against Creffield and his sect.

At the centre of the book is Creffield's death – he was killed in the street by George Mitchell, whose two sisters were devoted to Creffield – and Mitchell's strange trial that followed. But many other fascinating episodes precede the killing, and only a churlish reviewer would give away the astonishing series of events that followed Creffield's death. (Readers who prefer to maintain the suspense are advised not to flick through the last pages of the illustrated plates until the twist is revealed).

At the peak of his influence, Creffield and one of his followers were tarred and feathered by a vigilante group, and told to leave town under threat of public hanging from a tree. Later, the entire group was found to be suffering from religious 'mania' and confined for a time to the asylum. Creffield committed adultery with one of his disciples, for which he was tried, convicted and imprisoned. *Murdering Holiness* is a book about law, justice and vigilantism, explored through this saga of religious fervour, madness and sex.

The authors practice in the disciplines of criminology, law, history and sociology. They state that one of the aims of the book is to use this case study to explore broader themes. Citing Natalie Zemon Davis, who wrote the story of Martin Guerre's disappearance and return, they see an unusual story as having the power to 'uncover motivations and values that are lost in the welter of the everyday'.¹ The

¹ Jim Phillips and Rosemary Gartner, *Murdering Holiness: The Trials of Franz Creffield and George Mitchell* (2003) 241.

book is also about the rule of law, 'often referred to as the American religion', and its manipulation and suspension in the service of 'the greater social good', even where that greater good includes the suppression of religious difference.² Furthermore, the book is about 'ordinary people', 'people who strove both to remake or repair, according to their own visions, the world in which they lived'.³

Murdering Holiness is, at its heart, about strong belief. It studies the people who hold tightly to their beliefs, and the people who – clutching their own beliefs – wish to loosen the grip. The book examines religion and its repression. The authors write, 'the Creffield story exemplifies both the relative ease with which those who stand outside the mainstream of religious belief could be attacked, literally and figuratively, and the fragility of the constitutional protection of religious conscience'.⁴ This story has powerful resonance today, where religious zeal is conflated with anti-social behaviour, arousing an all-consuming panic about the improper extremes to which belief might lead its adherents.

Necessary to this study is an analysis of gender; in particular, the relationship between femininity and 'religious excitement'. This story notes that religion was, at the time, one of the few public activities in which women could legitimately participate. It draws a distinction that was observed in newspaper accounts between two kinds of women: 'weak women', who could be induced by religion into 'delusion and folly', or led into a 'state of mind where there is more frenzy than reason'; and 'Seattle womanhood', which was bearer of much of the community's hostility to Creffield's followers.⁵

The women who followed Creffield were marked by 'madness', and the book explores the history of mental illness as a medical, legal and communal instrument of social control. Particularly fascinating is the material about insanity as a community-based responsibility, requiring communal decisions and invoking communal status, sanction and care. Proceedings were instituted against members of the sect when they were found to have burned their clothes, killed animals and destroyed property. They were found to be suffering from 'mania', 'chronic mania' and 'religious excitement' and committed to an insane asylum. The asylum was the institution through which the community managed deviance. This was despite the otherwise 'calm' and 'rational' behaviour of Creffield's group on subjects other than religion. At the time, other individuals were sent to asylums for religious mania, but Creffield's was the only group that was targetted in its entirety. The authors speculate that one reason for the group being targetted was that its members were predominantly women, those women defied male authority, and they refused to conform to established gender roles.

² Ibid 242.

³ Ibid 242-3.

⁴ Ibid 241-2.

⁵ Ibid 117.

Much was made of the clothing, hair and appearance of his followers. They went about the streets 'barefoot, with the women also bare-headed and wearing their hair unkempt and unbraided'.⁶ One 16 year old girl, during proceedings under which she would be taken into institutional care and protection, explained the sect's manner of dress:

When the world is restored to its original condition of innocence we will be as were Adam and Eve, and there will be no use of clothing or raiment of any kind. Then the world will once more be innocent and God will dwell with us here on earth and we shall be like him.⁷

The authors write that the women 'committed gross violations of codes of moral and economic behaviour, acting far outside the bounds of convention and decency'.⁸ They destroyed property, they refused to work, and had 'strange attitudes to material goods'.⁹

The book constitutes a compelling meditation on law and morality. Creffield was the subject of a complaint from the husband of one of his followers, alleging 'improper relations of a most revolting kind'.¹⁰ He was tried for adultery and convicted. The local press was delighted. One described the defendant as 'the lecher Creffield, self-styled Elijah II, bogus prophet of God, religious hypnotist, imposter and all round dangerous individual'; another stated that 'in vileness, diabolism and all-round deviltry, Creffield is unmatched'.¹¹

At George Mitchell's trial for the murder of Creffield, his defence was based on what the author's term 'unwritten law', under which masculine violence was justified in the defence of the sexual morality of women. Mitchell argued that Creffield had destroyed his sisters' reputations and innocence, and would only be stopped in death. In this part of the book, the authors critique law's relationship with – and reliance upon – morality. They acknowledge law's power as theatre, spectacle and genre, recognising that law sets limits on how legal stories can be told.

For Mitchell's defence to succeed, he had to demonstrate that vigilantism, or law's suspension, must itself be lawful if justice is to prevail. Where law fails, family and virtue must be protected through extra-legal means. Mitchell exhibited a kind of Victorian manhood, a form of 'proper' masculinity that punished the seducers of women. Contemporary media representations of Mitchell's masculinity were bound up in arguments about the protection of the working classes from predators like Creffield. The prosecution relied on the rule of law. It took a firm stand against vigilantism, taking a position that was cast as middle-class and respectable. The

⁶ Ibid 77.

⁷ Ibid 78.

⁸ Ibid 83.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid 58.

¹¹ Ibid 65.

media had the most powerful role in creating the language in which the crime was talked about, and sustained a discourse in which law only acquired its status as law when it acted in the name of popular morality.

The book contains a fascinating history of various vigilante practices, from 'crime control' vigilantes, who operated in a parallel system of law enforcement, to 'white cap' vigilantes, who purported to enforce moral codes that were not entrenched within legal institutions. 'White caps' targeted moral transgressors: wife and child beaters, adulterers, the lazy and the religiously aberrant. They engaged in whipping, tarring and feathering, beatings and mock hangings. Creffield and another man were tarred and feathered, and the whole group was expelled from the town. The vigilantes were not masked, they acted in public places, and behaved with 'solemnity and restraint, and no excessive force was used'.¹² They claimed that their actions were not violation but 'discipline'.¹³ Against such compelling demonstrations of public outrage, the legal positivists were fighting a long-lost cause.

Murdering Holiness is an impressive work of painstaking research. It combs local newspapers, court records, photographs and archives. The authors draw together many characters, weaving a complex web of stories, relationships and episodes. Throughout, they locate their narrative in a wider socio-cultural context, explaining broader trends and practices. Where the archives run out, they engage in measured speculation, taking care to establish the grounds for their conclusions. At the end, they place this story in a wider picture still, writing 'Immigrant Franz Creffield's version of the American dream was an unusual one, but he pursued it with passion, great fortitude, and some success'.¹⁴ It is a credit to the passion of the authors that they conclude what is often a study of repression, fear and misery by remembering the humanity at the heart of this book.

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¹² Ibid 53.

¹³ Ibid 54.

¹⁴ Ibid 243.