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Samantha Battams

The Secret Art of Poisoning (2019)

The nineteenth century is often characterised as the Age of Steam; it was also the Age of Poison, with substances such as arsenic, cyanide and strychnine readily available to aspiring murderers.

The Secret Art of Poisoning illustrates the case of arsenic poisoning by relating the story of Martha Needle, the Richmond Poisoner.

Samantha Battams has written an engrossing account of the Needle case and set it moreover in the context of a time when vulnerable children - and adults - had little support dealing with abuse and mental illness, with tragic effects.

Martha was born in South Australia in 1863, the daughter of an impoverished immigrant named Mary Charles. Mary had married Joseph Charles and bore him several children. He deserted her and she deserted her children, when already pregnant with Martha, and took up with Daniel Foran, an army deserter. Martha's early family life was itinerant, unstable, sometimes violent and poverty stricken, with Mary often drunk and in and out of gaol or the Destitute Asylum, and her stepfather committing sexual abuse on her at a young age.

When she was 16, Martha met and eventually married a Port Adelaide carpenter named Henry Needle. On a hunt for work, the Needles settled in Melbourne during harsh economic times, forcing them to take in lodgers. In this environment, Henry soon became jealous of his wife and was violent towards her. Then the deaths began: her daughter, husband and subsequently her remaining two children. At the time of these deaths, poisoning was not suspected. Around this time, Martha befriended the Juncken family - three brothers named Otto, Louis and Herman, and their mother. In time, Otto and Martha became engaged, but Louis and his mother opposed the marriage. Louis soon died, mother received threats and Herman became ill after visiting Martha. Herman went to the police, who laid a trap and arsenic poisoning was soon established.

Following exhumation and further testing, it was established that Henry Needle and at least two of the children had died of arsenic poisoning, and Martha was soon arraigned on a charge of attempting to murder Herman, with a charge of murdering Louis added later.

The central part of the book deals with Martha's committal proceedings, followed by her Supreme Court trial and execution. Her character and relationships with her family, friends and lodgers are examined in detail. A picture emerges of a disturbed and distressed woman. On the one hand, little doubt remained as to her guilt yet on the other hand her kindness and care towards others was established. She could be charming yet also exhibited aggression, difficulty controlling anger, antisocial behaviour, impulsivity, drug abuse, suicidal tendencies and mood swings. Increasingly we see her as a woman out of touch with reality, denying knowledge of people she knew well, including Otto Juncken, maintaining her innocence and suffering from hallucinations and strange fainting fits. Despite pleas from friends, she was executed in 1894.

The final part of the book consists of an examination of Martha's psychology and behaviour in the

context of her disturbed upbringing and the lack of support in Victorian times for children brought up in such circumstances, especially when subjected to sexual abuse by family members. Battams suggest that Martha's childhood experiences as well as an environment of domestic violence may have resulted in a depersonalisation disorder or dissociative identity disorder. Battams also links the circumstances of those times with our own and its continuing ability to effectively address issues such as child abuse and domestic violence.

Overall, I found this book enjoyable and interesting to read and it extended my knowledge not only of the Needle case itself but of social and judicial conditions in late Victorian society in Australia.