

The Secret Art of Poisoning: The true crimes of Martha Needle, the Richmond Poisoner.

By Samantha Battams.

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The Secret Art of Poisoning: The true crimes of Martha Needle, the Richmond Poisoner begins with the complex familial relationship between Martha Needle, and her nephew, Alexander Lee. The two were charged, convicted, and executed for their respective crimes separated by a span of twenty-six years. Martha was tried and executed for poisoning her brother-in-law with arsenic in 1894. Alexander poisoned his wife and three of his children with strychnine in 1920. Both Aunt and nephew were thirty-one years old.

Author Samantha Battams highlights the astonishing similarities in the two cases but *The Secret Art of Poisoning* is Martha Needles story. The account of the ‘*The Black Widow*’ as Martha became known, foregrounds a lifetime of deplorable poverty, cruelty, and social, emotional, and psychological deprivation in the lead-up to the tragic consequences which ensued.

Battams re-examines Martha’s case and her particular art of poisoning and constructs a defence denied her at the time. Martha was only ever convicted for the poisoning murder of Louis Juncken, and not her husband and children. Nonetheless, the morbid details of the poisoning deaths and subsequent exhumations of her children and husband were discussed at great length during the trial. The grotesque descriptions were presented to the jury, published in the press, and prejudiced her case.

Battams poignant beautifully crafted narrative is underpinned by a critical understanding of the psychological and sociological intricacies of the period. She explores the complexities of the case to make sense of an otherwise incomprehensible tragedy, simultaneously placing Martha’s personal and family predicament in the context of the communities in which they lived.

Martha’s convoluted and contradictory character and motivations in carrying out the murders are scrutinized. An account of her traumatic childhood illuminates the gradual deterioration of her mental state. Her alcoholic parents abused and neglected her in equal measure. She was a victim of sexual and physical abuse, experiencing years of severe headaches and delirium as a result of typhoid fever.

Some close to Martha regarded her as an attentive mother and wife. During the trial one witness claimed, ‘The children were nicely, cleanly and tenderly kept. I could not say I ever

saw children kept more nicely. I never saw any unkindness.' And yet, Martha slowly poisoned those she loved.

An examination of Martha's behaviour reveals a woman with a volatile and unpredictable temper, prone to fits, auditory and visual hallucinations, and lengthy periods of confusion. Symptoms which Battams discusses in light of modern psychiatric medical analyses. Martha's psychiatric instability was further intensified by an addiction to a readily available concoction of laudanum, morphine hydrochloride, cannabis and chloroform in common use. Unfortunately, for Martha, it is a retrospective analysis given little credence at the time.

The detailed police investigations and court trials are extensively researched and presented. The question of Martha's guilt seems conclusive. The challenges examined by Battams revolve around sociological influences and whether the convicted killer was of sound mind.

Battams accurately recreates a period in Australian social and legal history when women and children's legal rights were questionable at best. Martha was convicted by an all-male jury, with women first appearing on juries in the 1920s.

The story of the life and crimes of Martha Needle sheds light on a nineteenth century justice system adversely influenced by public opinion, where evidence was discussed in the local press prior to going to trial, and the inclusion of evidence much of which today would be disallowed. While, in many instances, the extenuating circumstances of poverty, domestic and family violence, psychiatric and emotional ill-health, pertinent to the case was disregarded. 'The lack of appreciation for the depth of her suffering was astounding,' writes Battams.

The murders of the innocent remain deplorable and tragic. However, this case was steeped in prejudice from the beginning, resulting in the dubious trial, conviction, and execution of Martha Needle. It is a poignant and heart-breaking tale. The alternative judgements put forward in retrospect by Battams creates a picture of Martha Needle as both victim and perpetrator of her crimes.

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