

Law, No Order

*A true-crime history gives
the ugly side of
Victorian New Haven*

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Arsenic Under the Elms: Murder in Victorian New Haven

By Virginia McConnell, Praeger, 1999

Ah, crime in New Haven—the great bogeyman of anxious parents, irritated real estate agents and long-suffering public relations hacks. Even now, after a decade of declining crime rates, locals still lament a rosy-hued past, when the Elm City was as bucolic as its nickname. But the good old days were not always good, and readers seeking proof need look no further than *Arsenic Under the Elms*.

Arsenic Under the Elms is part of the flourishing “historical true crime” genre that includes books, programs, and websites that revisit real criminal cases from the past. Virginia McConnell, an attorney and English professor, investigates the gruesome unsolved murders of two young women in 1878 and 1882 that thrust New Haven into the national limelight. In television terms, imagine *CSI: New Haven* with a *Masterpiece Theater* sensibility.

But McConnell offers more than the prurient puzzle-solving pleasures of armchair forensics. Unlike many historical documents that focus on the elite and influential, criminal-trial transcripts usually capture the daily lives of ordinary people, often as they cope with extraordinary circumstances. These two murders, in McConnell’s words, “allow us to eavesdrop on the people of Victorian New Haven,” and their stories are full of surprises.

In the summer of 1878, Mary Standard was an illiterate servant girl from the hardscrabble hamlet of Rockland, now part of North Madison, Connecticut. Only 21, she already had a 2-year-old son born out of wedlock, and now she suspected that she was again pregnant from an affair with Madison’s married Methodist minister, Herbert Hayden. After telling her sister she planned to ask Hayden to help her abort the baby, she was discovered in what is now the Rockland Preserve, her throat slit and her body riddled with arsenic. Hayden’s arrest and salacious trial in New Haven County court drew newspaper reporters from around the country.

Sadly, few readers will be astonished by the murder of a poor,

promiscuous and inconveniently pregnant girl, or the hysterical reaction of the press, although they might be surprised by the easy talk of abortion and illegitimacy. What truly shocks is the unprofessional, even primitive, system of justice at the time. Police were mere watchmen, completely untrained in crime investigation. Curious citizens and reporters filled the vacuum, swarming the crime scene, searching for clues, interrogating witnesses, even performing time and distance experiments to check various alibis. There were no disinterested court reporters; instead, each team of attorneys transcribed the proceedings themselves, creating constant wrangling over what had been said. Perjury, evidence tampering, and bribery were used by both sides.

The only heroes among all this buffoonery were the remarkable scientific experts from Yale Medical College, whose painstaking testimony on arsenic poisoning “was the most forensically sophisticated that had ever been presented in a courtroom.” (This was yet another blow to Mary Standard’s dignity—four times her corpse was exhumed and dissected in search of evidence, including a foiled attempt to put her face back onto her skull in the courtroom so they could compare boot marks.) Unfortunately, the prosecution hadn’t learned the lesson of the mystery writer: Everybody likes the idea of scientific evidence but few jurors, or readers, have the patience or acuity to sit through the details without dozing. By the fifth week of the trial, joked one Pennsylvania newspaper, the jury was having “some trouble in deciding whether to hang Hayden or the medical experts who have prolonged the case.” In the end, Hayden walked free.

Three years later, in August 1881, 21-year-old Jennie Cramer was found washed up on a beach in West Haven, near the old Savin Rock Amusement Park. Medical examiners found traces of arsenic, as well as signs of rape and possible suffocation before her corpse was dumped into the Sound. The daughter of a German cigar-shop owner on Grand Avenue, Jenny’s creamy good looks, flirtatiousness, and obvious appetite for fun had earned her the nickname the Belle

of New Haven from the boys who loafed around the New Haven Green. Again the reporters descended in hordes.

The city was stunned when police arrested two of the last people to see Jennie alive: Jimmy and Walter Malley, the nephew and son of Edward Malley, the wealthy founder of the Malley Department-Store chain, whose flagship store stood at Chapel and Temple Streets. According to Walter’s girlfriend, an Irish prostitute from New York whom he’d kept secret from his father, two nights before Jennie died Jimmie had brought her to the Malleys’ mansion on Derby Avenue, where he’d gotten her drunk and forcibly seduced her. Mrs. Cramer was livid when Jennie returned home the next morning. After a brief argument, Jennie angrily flounced out of her parents’ house, never to return.

A true scoundrel, Edward Malley used every dollar at his disposal to derail the investigation, hiring top lawyers and private detectives and strong-arming witnesses and reporters. The trial hinged less on forensic science than on the competence of the prosecution, and the Malleys were found not guilty.

Arsenic Under the Elms reminds us how fine is the line between folly and tragedy. This book, like most in the true-crime genre, evokes contradictory responses by laying out the extremes of human behavior for our vicarious pleasure. In the experience of the victims we revel in our deepest fears, while in the deeds of the criminals we glimpse our most forbidden impulses—all while relishing what Sherlock Holmes called the power of ratiocination or logical deduction, and consoling ourselves with the myth that these evils, or at least these follies, can be quelled by human reason.