Chasing Shadows: A Journey in the Footsteps of a Woman Who Murdered Her Baby Daughter in 1877

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Ellen Harper killed her baby daughter on October 13, 1877 in the village of Langley Marsh, Somerset, England. 123 years later, on a visit to the public record office at London’s Kew Gardens, I found her in a box of testimonies collected for an indictment. Since then, for the last four years, I have been looking for her and writing her story.

My search for Ellen began while I was pregnant with twin daughters. During our annual visit to London my partner and I strolled into the British Library bookshop. Leafing through a book about women accused of murder in nineteenth-century England[1] I was struck by the chapter on infanticide. Standing there in the library bookshop, I vaguely realized that my next book would focus on mothers who had killed their babies. It seemed an odd decision to make at that point in life. Expecting mothers are assumed to be happy, fulfilled. They’re definitely not supposed to be contemplating dead babies or their murdering mothers.

But I was.

I recognized this as a clear reflection of the ambivalence I felt towards my prospective motherhood. I became a mother late in life. For many years I had questioned the common perception of motherhood as an instinct. I refused to embrace the institution of motherhood,” as Adrienne Rich called it in her classic Of Woman Born (1976), allowing mothers a circumscribed range of views and expectations, and ensuring male control over women’s relationship with their powers of reproduction and with children (Rich, 13). I rejected the main apparatus of this institution: the ideal of the ‘good mother’. I was reluctant to try to be this mother with her supposedly natural propensity for self-sacrifice, her automatic and unconditional love for her children, and her sense of total fulfillment in the tasks of mothering (Rich, 1997; Forma, 1999; Gillis, 1996). I resisted parting with my former identity, ambitions and plans for the future, for the sake of having children.

Rich, writing in the 70s, clearly described the impossibility of real women’s embodiment of the good mother myth, yet by the 90s, when motherhood became relevant to me, the image still showed no signs of significant change. Nevertheless, as I turned 38 I decided to have a child, more afraid, apparently, of missing the opportunity than of paying the price. So many people had warned me that I would regret it if I didn’t. At the same time, I continued to reject both the price and the idealized role. I didn’t want to be taken away from myself. And I didn’t want to suppress my ambivalence or my resistance.

Studying mothers who killed their babies has enabled me to sustain, and indeed express, my ambivalence towards the institution of motherhood while nevertheless becoming a mother. My engagement with Ellen who killed her baby 127 years ago has forced me to thoroughly and systematically re-examine my normative expectations of mothers. My attempts to understand her motives involved researching the conditions of working class women’s lives at the end of the nineteenth century in Somerset England. My concrete grasp of the poverty, abuse, oppression, lack of any chances that Ellen clearly faced inscribed her motherhood as an almost impossible task. I gained these insights while myself struggling to fill what seemed, and still seems to me at times, an almost impossible assignment - raising my twin daughters Naomi and Shira while living through sleepless nights and depressed days. Whenever I sense myself rebelling against the burden and responsibility of motherhood and find myself wishing my daughters would disappear, I think of Ellen. This woman who killed her offspring at another distant time and place has come, for me, to symbolize an extreme form of rebellion against the myth of maternal care. Through her I could go into the concrete details of ending my motherhood without actually doing it or even imagining the horror of it upon Naomi and Shira.

My encounters with Ellen always begin with the testimonies and the indictment. These depict her as the wife of George Harper, residing with him in Weston-super-Mare in Somerset, England. In September 1877 she went back to Langley Marsh, to the home of her grandmother Sarah Quick – where she had grown up – to bear her first baby girl. She gave birth between 7 and 8 a.m. on October 13th 1877. Twelve hours later her baby was dead. She stated in her confession:

I had the child Sir in my arms. Then Sir I took it up something came across me. It was a horrible thought. Then sir I wrapped the clothes around it quite tight and I laid it back in bed. I don’t know what made me do it and I turned round on my side sir. Then I turned round again and looked at the child and I saw its lips are purple and it’s unwrapped. Then it had something making a noise in its throat as if it was choked. Then I turned [on the bed]. Then she killed the baby with a stone. She was the only one. If someone wanted to cry and couldn’t cry sir. [2]

According to the indictment, Ellen Harper “falsely and of her malice aforethought killed and murder a certain infant female child” born of her own body merely 12 hours earlier. [3]

There were five witnesses at Ellen’s trial. Midwife Elizabeth Treble, Ellen’s grandmother Sarah Quick who had raised her, Elizabeth Quick, Ellen’s aunt (wife of her uncle George), Doctor John Watt Pratt who established the cause of death and heard Ellen’s confession, and Police Inspector John Ross. I could not find the sentence and have no idea how the trial ended. I know she was jailed for the testimony calls her “the prisoner.” I know she was not hanged. Twenty-two women were hanged for murder in England between 1869 and 1899. Ellen Harper wasn’t listed among them.

In Ellen’s first account, she presented the death as unintentional: “Perhaps I did it with my arms,” she conjectured to the women who gathered around the body.[4] Then she tried to stop the midwife from fetching a doctor, and on failing that, tried to convince her to powder the marks on the baby’s neck.

Ellen’s grandmother had been the only person present at the birth. She had wrapped the baby and gone off to get the midwife.[5] Elizabeth Treble had arrived, examined the baby, cleaned and dressed it. As she prepared to leave, Ellen asked: “Suppose the child would die?” The midwife replied, “it is not likely to die.” Ellen said: “George will say I killed it.” [6]

Every time I read this sentence, I sense her fear of George.

The daughter of Ariel Castro, a suspect in the abduction of three women about a decade ago, is reportedly serving 25 years in prison for slashing the thro... The baby survived the attack. Castro’s defense attorneys argued that she was mentally ill and paranoid that her family was trying to kill her, according to the Journal Gazette. Castro’s brother Anthony — who, in a strange turn of events, reportedly wrote a newspaper article about one of the missing girls soon after she disappeared in 2004 — gave a statement at his sister’s trial. She caught the attention of a neighbor who heard her screaming. Ariel Castro and two of his brothers have since been arrested. The three women were taken to local hospitals but were released and are in good condition. (Hat tip, Indiana’s NewsCenter).
Standing there looking at the hail I also by myself, by my internalized surveillance murdered no maintain a view of myself do, that I've once again messed attitude towards Ellen their windows figure I was drawn by the strangeness of Ellen's understand what it's like thought, how can I tell the story of there's are we going home? We parked. It was still raining. That's their windows are driving years ago. Why in the world would I be scared to ask strangers with my My spatial journey in Ellen Harper it; it would mean no family trip it was his idea to integrate the two. I have to give up the freedom of completely immersing myself in research. But I would gain a visit to Ellen's world. So we packed up and went to Somerset for a family vacation – myself, Yaron, and our daughters Naomi and Shira.

My search for Ellen has been a journey back in time through the testimonies, the indictment and history books. The story remains fragmented, difficult to decipher. To tell it, I need to cross cultural, historical, and class boundaries and meanwhile navigate the obstacles I face as a woman who can hardly make the time. Usually I write in between: when my days are filled with the demands of work and house duties, I am always behind schedule. Negotiating with my daughters, my partner, my colleagues, and myself for time to write is painful. I frequently give up in advance, feeling anger at the erasure of my needs. And yet I confessed. She took charge of her own fate. – Did she indeed? How do I know?

Yet it is through the prism of my daily constraints that I reconstruct Ellen's complex life. From the vantage point of my overcrowded oppressive reality I can imagine her extremely exploited and harsh existence and empathize with her. I am not suggesting strict similarities between the oppression and patriarchal domination experienced by each of us, or between our respective reactions. Unlike Ellen, I come from the privileged middle class of another era, and am able to struggle with more or less success for a room of my own. However despite the distance in time, place, and culture, I feel an intimacy between us (between myself and her imagined self) which enables me to write her narrative through mine, and vice versa.

However, Ellen of the documents – the testimonies, the indictment – is a faceless, vague figure. I keep seeing her differently: sometimes strong and persistent, sometimes cowering, sometimes crazed. These images intertwine producing in me complicated, conflicted feelings of compassion, understanding, and contempt.

If I followed her to where this all took place, maybe I would know her. I suspected I wouldn't.

Yaron, my partner, insisted it had to be important to visit the sites where her story had taken place. I said we couldn't afford it, it would mean no family trip over the Passover vacation. It was his idea to integrate the two. I have to give up the freedom of completely immersing myself in research. But I would gain a visit to Ellen's world.

My spatial journey in Ellen Harper's footsteps began on the main street of Langley Marsh. We stopped at the pub. Yaron said I had to go inside and ask about Ellen. Ask what? I said. I wasn't sure there was anything I wanted to know. I wanted to see the village. There it was. Yaron said. Maybe there's some family descendant who's still alive.

I was scared to ask strangers with my Israeli accent, with my questions about a woman who killed her baby daughter 127 years ago. Why in the world would I be interested in her? What does this make me? Normal people think a woman who killed her own baby must be crazy. "You won't forgive yourself," Yaron said, "if you don't go in there."

The bartender knew nothing of Ellen Harper or the Quicks. Two elderly men at the bar told me there was a Quick family in the village, but were convinced it had no connection to this case. There's Dennis Quick. He runs the village grocery store. But most probably he can't help. Then, one of them suggested the vicar at Wiveliscombe. He's a nice fellow, that vicar. Tom. If anyone would know, it's Tom.

Langley Marsh is really close to Wiveliscombe. Walking distance. As we drove, I could see Elizabeth Treble rushing to Dr. Pratt's house the evening the baby died. It took her an hour. The rough path in the dark must have slowed her down. We were driving along a paved road and it was daytime. It took us five minutes.

We parked. It was still raining. That's when we realized the thermos wasn't shut tight and Naomi's coat was soaked with coffee. I put it on her. It was far too big. And I wore Yaron's. We proceeded to the sounds of a wailing. (My feet hurt - Where are we going home? I'm cold. They really hurt. Daddy, take me on your shoulders. Mommy, I'm hungry. I'm thirsty, Mommy - there's a tuna sandwich - I don't like tuna - there's a banana.)

The rain turned into hail. We stood under an awning on the main street and watched bits of ice falling from the sky in April. I thought, how can I tell the story of an Englishwoman when the weather where I live is so different. How can I even begin to understand what it's like to give birth in autumn, or to live with a menacing husband?

I was drawn by the strangeness of Ellen's world. Immersed in the heat and humidity of my own middle-eastern country, I indulged my curiosity about her exotic everyday existence in the harsh, wet English weather. Studying her blurred estranged figure meant engaging myself with endless questions of child-like, world-learning importance: Did she have a toilet? Were their windows glazed? How did she bathe? What kind of furniture did her grandparents own? Merely posing these questions, learning to answer some of them and imagining answers to others enabled me to develop a complex, more benevolent attitude towards Ellen despite her brutal act.

From this standpoint I return to my own motherhood, to discern how I often fail to grant myself or to other women around me the kind of at least partial indulgence I allow Ellen. How relentless and judgmental I am with myself when I see, as I frequently do, that I've once again messed up and fallen short of the mother role. How hard I find it, in my daily, lived experience, to maintain a view of myself as placed within and determined by an historical context. What I'm trying to do now, I think, is follow myself through Ellen's eyes; ask myself similar questions about my life, so as to better understand why I, who have murdered no one, nevertheless feel incessantly accused by myriad institutions – aunts, doctors, nursery school teachers, but also myself, by my internalized surveillance system, despite my resistance and protest.
Standing there looking at the hall I realized that I had gained a lot from my encounter with Ellen.

When the hail stopped, leaving a light drizzle, we arrived at St. Andrew’s Church, in the middle of a graveyard, in search of the vicar. The church was empty, and the graveyard full and we couldn’t find a thing. Then Yaron discovered a dentist’s clinic inside the churchyard. The secretary directed us to home of the vicar, whose name may have been Tom. We didn’t ask. We knocked at the door. A grey-haired vicar, wearing glasses and a smile, opened it.

Tom (if he was Tom) didn’t know the story. He said he knew Mary Quick from Langley Marsh, but she had died a year ago. He happened to have a study of the graveyard documenting every single tombstone, which might be of help. I leafed through it; Ellen wasn’t in it, nor were Sarah or James. But Aunt Elizabeth was, and so were her husband George, the midwife Elizabeth Treble, Inspector Ross, and Dr. Pratt. Tom said that perhaps Sarah and James had had no money for tombstones and were buried without. And Ellen? Perhaps she was buried somewhere else, possibly Weston-super-Mare. He suggested we go to the public record office at Taunton. Maybe we’d find them all in the birth, marriage, and death registries.

We went back through the graveyard and found George and Elizabeth Quick’s grave: “In loving memory of our dear father George Quick. Died Dec 4th 1859 aged 77.” Also our dear mother Elizabeth Quick. At peace May 25th 1921 aged 78.”

Next, we made an appointment at the Taunton’s archives – Yaron, I, Naomi, and Shira. They all joined me since I don’t drive. Public transport is infrequent in Somerset. Getting around can take time and I didn’t want to waste the whole day. It was our family vacation after all.

I thought I’d stay half an hour at most, but I wanted to find out when Ellen had died. If it was soon after the trial maybe this meant she had died of a broken heart, I thought. If she had vanished from the district and the date of her death was unknown, maybe this meant she’d been committed to an insane asylum. If she was buried in Langley Marsh, maybe she had separated from her husband, gone back to her grandmother’s and died there. Or maybe not.

I had no idea how to go about this search. I wasn’t sure, for example, whether she had remained Ellen Harper after the murder. Perhaps she had gone back to Quick, her mother’s surname, or perhaps she had taken her father’s surname. If she had had one. Officially, that is. She may have been an illegitimate child. Or perhaps she was perfectly legitimate, but her father had left, like many other men who abandoned their wives for lack of work or of any binding sense of responsibility. (Rogers & Smith, 1991; Burnett, 1994). Perhaps her abandoned or unwed mother had died and left Ellen parentless at eight or nine as her grandmother’s testimony indicates - or perhaps she just left.

I had trouble reading the microfiche and Naomi and Shira wanted me to draw them the Little Mermaid. So I drew her on the back of some of the pages of testimonies from Ellen’s trial that I had brought along. While they coloured her in, I continued pointlessly to scrutinize the microfiche. Naomi wanted me to cut the Little Mermaid out, and I said I couldn’t, I needed the pages. She burst out crying, and I looked around self-consciously at the people walking around each among the births, marriages, and deaths. They didn’t seem to see or hear anything.

Yaron suggested I look for deaths and he took the girls out to the lawn. I asked for the death registry, and was handed two large hand-written books: 1875 to 1920. Charles Quick died March 16th 1878 in hospital at Wiveliscombe. He was 3 weeks old. Who was Charles? Maybe son of George and Elizabeth Quick? If he was Elizabeth’s son, she had to be pregnant with him when she learned that Ellen had murdered her baby. What had she thought?

James Quick, Ellen’s grandfather, died March 29th 1890 at age 77. Her grandmother, Sarah Matilda Quick, died December 12th 1902 at age 84. When Ellen came home pregnant, Grandmother Sarah was 59 years of age – an old woman in the nineteenth century when average life expectancy was between 40 and 48 (Fogel, 2004).

But I couldn’t find Ellen.

And that was what I had come for.

At first I thought that if Ellen had lived on and hadn’t been committed to an insane asylum, she must have stayed in Langley Marsh. I wouldn’t go back to a man whose daughter I had killed. But my circumstances aren’t Ellen’s. She may have gone back.

If she did, maybe that’s where she died and was buried? There was no death register for Weston-super-Mare. The archivist told me I’d find it at the town graveyard.

But there were Yaron and Naomi and Shira and I couldn’t make them come back in time with me any more without feeling guilty. Perhaps if they hadn’t come along with me everywhere I went, perhaps if I had been able to drive myself on my own, I would have found Ellen’s grave at Weston-super-Mare and found out at least something about her end.

If Naomi and Shira and Yaron hadn’t been there. If I hadn’t been a devoted mother. If I hadn’t been a mother.

Ellen had disappeared because I – because of my family – hadn’t searched thoroughly enough. Not that they wanted in any way to impede my search. Through their very presence, Naomi, Shira, and Yaron, determined – and sometimes I determined on their behalf, in what I saw as their interests – an end to the paths of searching at very arbitrary points, unrelated to the search itself. I could have gone on, but I didn’t. The fact that I was a mother and that I set out on this journey as a mother determined the journey, determined my frustrations, determined my actions and inactions.

Ellen, who relinquished motherhood by her act of murder, presents another option, though most of the time I see it as a horrible one. At times, not steadily, I feel that she killed her baby so as not to live an impossible reality of oppression, suffering, and frustrations, so as not to let this reality crush her. That she sacrificed her baby so as not to sacrifice herself. She escaped a much crueler fate than mine.

And the fact that she at some point disappeared from the historical records allows me to continue as I will, to fantasize her beginning a new life somewhere else. My knowledge of history, sociology, and gender leaves no real space for belief that she had any chance, in actuality, of making more money, of re-marrying someone who was not a tyrant, of experiencing a liberating motherhood beyond the dictates of the institution. Nevertheless, without a corpse, I can imagine her trying.

Some hours before we went back home to Israel I wanted to see what Weston-super-Mare looked like. While Ellen had lived there, the town had flourished. Now, it has a dark-brown sandy beach, pale white water, and flakey-grey houses. We stood on the trail leading to an island close to the shore. It was low tide and a father with his two boys. His wife sat sullen on the concrete and scolded one of the children from a distance. The father scolded the other. Somehow, the sea, the beach, this discontented family, the knowledge that Ellen may have escaped life with George to give birth to her daughter at a safer place and then murdered her, and maybe the fact that our vacation was over, filled me with sadness.

Notes


At the end of the 19th century, delivery of a child by a doctor was considered a safer, yet more expensive option and was thus inaccessible for rural lower class people such as the Quicks (Knibiehler, 1993; Donnison, 1977).

Such murders were fairly common at the time, serving as a means of family planning, for lack of birth control and abortion techniques. Rather than killing their offspring, some women used the services of baby farmers who took the infants for a fee, then adopting them out or, in some cases, killing the babies themselves. The discovery of some serial infanticide cases led to the Infant Life Protection Act of 1872, which required baby farmers to register with local authorities. This Act, which did not include a comprehensive plan for supervision of nurses, was a failure. (Knelman, 1998; Emsley, 1996) Thus infanticide continued at epidemic proportions until 1887 when the 1872 Infant Life protection Act was amended. The new Act empowered local authorities to actively seek out baby farms and to remove abused children to a place of safety (Knelman, 1998, 157; Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 620). Even then over 30 per cent of murder victims were under a month old (Knelman, 1998). Cruel as they might seem, many of these infanticide cases were desperate attempts of lower class mothers to avoid degenerative poverty and preserve some respectability. Law enforcement authorities were relatively lenient with such murders, preferring to either ignore them or mask them as accidents (Knelman, 1998, Ross, 1993, Emsley, 1987, Forma, 1998).

Illegitimacy was a common rural phenomenon at the time, though various regions differed markedly in illegitimacy rates. Average illegitimacy rates dropped from 15.1 out of 1000 in 1871 to 8.1 in 1911 (Perkin, 1989; Mason, 1994).

Works Cited
The daughter of Ariel Castro, a suspect in the abduction of three women about a decade ago, is reportedly serving 25 years in prison for slashing the thr... The baby survived the attack. Castro’s defense attorneys argued that she was mentally ill and paranoid that her family was trying to kill her, according to the Journal Gazette. Castro’s brother Anthony — who, in a strange turn of events, reportedly wrote a newspaper article about one of the missing girls soon after she disappeared in 2004 — gave a statement at his sister’s trial. She caught the attention of a neighbor who heard her screaming. Ariel Castro and two of his brothers have since been arrested. The three women were taken to local hospitals but were released and are in good condition. (Hat tip, Indiana’s NewsCenter )