



**Amelia Dyer and Baby Killing**  
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This is the third of six talks on Evil Women. Eve was the original one, allegedly responsible for introducing sin into the world, resulting in the banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden. We then turned to the much-maligned Evil Witch in the popular fairy-tale, Snow White. But today, we turn our gaze towards a very different woman who has been branded evil. Unlike Eve and the Wicked Witch, this woman was a material, flesh-and-blood presence. She is Amelia Dyer, serial killer of babies and infants. She was the most prolific mass murderer (at least on British soil) in modern British history.

With the mythical Eve, I pointed to the misogyny of the Christian Church. The story of the Evil Witch in Snow White was told as a tale about fears of aging, active women. But Dyer was no myth or phantasm within a folktale. She was a real woman who, over a thirty-year period in late nineteenth century Britain, murdered around 300 infants.

She has been dubbed a 'baby butcher' and 'angel maker'. She was a 'ghoul'. Until 1979, her monstrous deeds earned her a prominent place in the Chamber of Horrors section of Madame Tussauds. Journalist and 'true crime' biographers have branded her as 'one of Victorian Britain's most evil murderers', 'fiendish', 'diabolical', one of the 'terrible monsters' of Victorian Britain, and a 'mother super devil' who 'slithered her way... to baby farming'. As late as 2019, one popular author even adopted a physiognomic approach, claiming that Dyer's 'malevolence' could be seen in 'her fearsome features', which 'reflected the horrific crime with which she was charged'. She was a monstrous Victorian woman – the ultimate perversion of motherhood and the nursing profession. No woman could be further removed from the Victorian idea of the 'Angel of the House', as described by poet Coventry Patmore in his 1854 classic. Surely Dyer warrants the label 'evil woman'? Or does she?

Amelia Dyer (nee Hobley) – who also went by the names of Annie Dyer, Anne Harding, and Mrs. Thomas, Stanfield, Watham, and Smith – was born in the 1830s in the village Pile Marsh, to the east of Bristol. Nothing is known about her mother, except that she was rendered insane through typhus, attempted suicide, and died in an asylum. Her father, however, was a master shoemaker (and so economically comfortable) and the young Dyer was given a good education – not common for girls of her class at the time. She was reportedly intelligent, a voracious reader, and a lover of poetry. She worked as a corset-maker, then trained as a nurse. She married George Thomas (who was 35 years her senior) and, when he died, William Dyer, an illiterate man who worked at a vinegar factory.

Like many nurses at that time, Dyer set up a 'house of confinement' in Totterdown (Bristol) to look after pregnant, unmarried women who, since the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, could no longer appeal to the fathers of their children for financial support. Fairly quickly, Dyer began offering to foster and adopt the unwanted infants – a fairly unregulated business that came to be known as 'baby farming'. She plied her trade in Bristol, Reading, Cardiff, and London. Like many other 'baby

farmers', she would drug her young charges with laudanum, also known as 'Mother's Friend', 'Godfrey's Cordial', and 'the quietness'. It was an open secret that many 'farmed' babies were too drugged to either cry or feed. They simply wasted away and died.

Dyer accelerated this process. Instead of letting the infants weaken slowly over many weeks, she killed them soon after their mothers handed them over. It is impossible to know how many babies Dyer murdered during her thirty years in business. Even if the number was only ten every year, this represents 300 infants. But this statistic is obviously an underestimate. After all, in the two months prior to her arrest, Dyer had been given twenty children; some witnesses at her trial claimed that she collected as many as six babies a day.

One mother who surrendered her infant to Dyer was Evelina Edith Marmon, 25-year-old, unmarried, and pious Christian woman. Marmon had been raised in the countryside but, desperate to earn a living, migrated to Cheltenham where she worked as a barmaid in the saloon of the Plough Hotel. Her precarious existence became much worse when, having been 'led astray' by an unnamed man, she gave birth to a daughter named Doris in November 1895. Incapable of raising a child on her own, she published an advertisement in the *Bristol Times and Mirror* which read: 'Wanted. Respectable woman to take young child'. By coincidence, the ad appeared next to another, stating 'Married couple with no family would adopt healthy child, nice country home. Terms, £10', signed 'Mrs. Harding'. In subsequent correspondence, Mrs. Harding claimed that

"We are plain, homely people, in fairly good circumstances. We live in our own house. I have a good and comfortable home. We are out in the country, and sometimes I am alone a great deal. I do not want a child for money's sake, but for company and home comfort. Myself and husband are dearly fond of children. I have no child of my own. A child with me will have a good home and a mother's love and care. We belong to the Church of England."

After signing a contract, Marmon handed over her baby, some clothes, and £10 (at a time when the average general servant was paid £14 annually). Mrs. Harding promised Marmon that she could visit at any time, adding that 'there is an orchard opposite our front door', making it 'lovely... in the summer'. However, when Marmon wrote a letter to Mrs. Harding, she never received a reply. Mrs. Harding was Amelia Dyer, and Doris was already dead.

A bargeman on the Thames at Reading was the first to uncover evidence of murder. He fished a brown paper bag out of the water. In it, was a female infant with a white tape tied firmly around her neck. The infant had been strangled. Bricks had been used to weigh down the body. A railway label and the address of a Mrs. Thomas led the police to a rented two-up-two-down terrace house on Kensington Road. Inside, there were children's possessions, tickets pawning baby clothes, and newspaper advertisements arranging adoptions. Mrs. Thomas was another one of Mrs. Dyer's pseudonyms. The murdered child was Helena, daughter of Mary Fry, an unmarried servant who had been impregnated by a well-off local merchant. When the river was searched other bodies were discovered, including those of Harry Simmons and Doris Marmon, who had been given to Dyer only 11 days earlier. The deaths were traced to Dyer. In April 1896, she was placed in remand in Reading Prison (where, five months earlier, Oscar Wilde had been transferred to, serving a sentence for gross indecency).

This was by no means the first time that Dyer's baby farming activities had come to the attention of the authorities. In 1879, she had been convicted of child neglect under the Infant Life Protection Act of 1872, and sentenced to six months in prison with hard labour. There is some speculation that her prison experience encouraged her to abandon the practice of receiving *weekly* or *monthly* payments from the mothers of unwanted children, demanding instead a one-off payment. She could then pocket the money, strangle the infants with white tape or suffocate them by stuffing handkerchiefs

in their mouths, then dump them in shallow graves or the river. It was later quipped that, by 1896, 'Father Thames himself refused to conceal any more of these foster children'.

There was no question that Dyer was the murderer. She even confessed, although many believed this was simply to shield her son-in-law and daughter from being prosecuted as accomplices. In a letter addressed to the Chief Superintendent of Police, Dyer acknowledged that she would 'have to answer before my Maker in heaven for the awful crimes I have committed'. But she swore that 'as God Almighty is my Judge in Heaven as on Earth, neither my daughter, Mary Ann Palmer, nor her husband, Arthur Ernest Palmer... had anything to do with it.... I myself and I alone must stand before my Maker in Heaven to give a [sic] answer for it all'.

The question for the jury was whether Dyer was insane, and therefore should be spared execution. Lyttelton Stewart Forbes Winslow had no doubt that Dyer was suffering from a terrible mental abnormality. Forbes Winslow was a distinguished, albeit controversial psychiatrist in Victorian Britain. His involvement in the 1888 Jack the Ripper case, including his theories about the identity of the murderer, were provocative and even elicited suspicion that he was the Ripper. However, in 1896, he took his responsibilities towards Dyer very seriously. After examining and interviewing her in prison, he concluded that she was 'a good old carefully attired monthly nurse, but not of the murderess type'. He was equally convinced that Dyer was mentally disturbed. Insanity ran in the family. Dyer herself had attempted suicide at least twice – once by drowning and another time by cutting her throat. She told him that 'I do not know that I ever hurt anyone but myself, and I often hear voices telling me to go and do certain things, and I go and do it'. She frequently looked 'very terrified', claiming that the 'sounds I hear and the sights I see' were so 'dreadful' that '[I] can't tell you'. During one interview, she spoke to Forbes Winslow about her mother and son, both of whom were dead. She could

"hear them talking and telling me to come to them. The spirit of my poor boy, Willie, seems to be with me all night. I fancy I could handle his bones, and that I was picking them out of the ground. When my poor boy enlisted and went away[,] I was very ill for three weeks, and when I came to myself I was beating the rats off, who were all gnawing on my body, and the worms were eating me up."

She experienced distressing 'visions of animals and worms all crawling over her, eating her very vitals'. When this description was read out in court, Forbes Winslow overheard a juror whisper loudly to his neighbour, 'She may perhaps have dreamt this, but it will soon be a reality'. He knew at that stage that there was no point protesting about prejudiced jurors to the judge Henry Hawkins: 'I knew at once it was a foregone conclusion[:] they meant to hang the woman', he later recalled.

Forbes Winslow's account of Dyer's mental anguish had been confirmed by other alienists (the term used for psychiatrists), who had previously diagnosed her as suffering from delusions, hallucinations, depression, and melancholy. At her trial, *The Illustrated Police News* reported that she 'rocked herself backwards and forwards as though mentally distressed'. Other newspapers reported that she believed 'the birds talked to her'. She was frequently heard talking to herself. All this evidence led Dyer's defence lawyer to argue that she was suffering from 'homicidal mania'. In his view, it was common for people suffering from this mental condition to feel

"impelled by their mania to kill and injure those nearest and dearest to them. In this case it was established that she had been kind and affectionate to the infants she had adopted, and that their deaths at her hands meant a loss of income to her. There was no sane motive for her conduct, but everything was consistent with the homicidal mania."

The prosecution was led by Horace Avory, a famous criminal lawyer who was to gain a reputation later in his life as an emotionally cold, merciless 'hanging judge'. He would not accept any diagnosis

of insanity. Dyer's motive was clear, he insisted: money. He told the jury that 'her actions had been of the most wicked and diabolical nature'. More important, he accused her of feigning insanity, both in the past and during her trial. Avory contended that 'If such a defence [of insanity] were allowed to prevail[,] no murderer would ever again be convicted, and lunatic asylums would have to be substituted for gaols'. The psychiatric expert called by the government also claimed that Dyer

"is of defective power of self-control, and might be induced to do wrong more readily than the majority as a consequence of such hereditary taint.... Yet there is not sufficient evidence of defect of memory to make me think the prisoner is in any way irresponsible for her acts."

According to the M'Naughton Rules, the defence of insanity required that the person had to be 'labouring under such a defect of reason or such a condition of the mind' that she 'did not know the nature and quality of the act' or, if she did, she 'did not know it was wrong'. Neither the jurors nor the judge were convinced that these applied to Dyer. The jury took five minutes to find her guilty.

When passing sentence, Hawkins made it clear that he believed Dyer to be evil. In just one short paragraph, he referred to her 'barbarous and wicked act'.... 'wrong, wicked, and cruel act'.... 'wicked and cunningly devised plan'.... 'base and wilful act of treachery...' 'guilty and wicked an act of barbarity'... 'barbarous'...'cruelty and wickedness'.... 'cruel and wicked system of crime'. Hawkins contended that

"the prisoner had been treacherous to more than one mother, barbarous to more than one child, and in every case for the same sordid motive – to obtain possession of the £10."

Newspapers echoed Hawkins' sentiments, claiming that 'words fail us' to describe the 'revelations of a depth of wickedness scarcely conceivable before'.

After hearing the death sentence, Dyer reportedly 'continued to maintain the phlegmatic demeanour which she exhibited at her trial'. Her last letter to her daughter, which was written the evening before her execution, ended with the first two lines of Edward Mote's 1830s hymn:

"My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

Dyer was executed at Newgate Gaol on 10 June 1896. Earlier that day, three men preceded her to the noose but, by the time Dyer was hanged, their bodies had already been buried under the same flagstones that she walked over to her own death. James Billington was the executioner, a job that he had accepted only two years earlier, although, within four years, he was Chief Executioner of Great Britain and Ireland. Dyer was pinioned, then a procession was formed that led her to the scaffold, where she was hanged. She weighed 15 stone so required a drop of just over 152 centimetres. The executioner's report stated that 'on the fall of the drop[,] death was instantaneous' while her Prison Commission file contended that 'On account of her weight and the softness of the textures, rather a short drop was given. It proved to be quite sufficient'. Outside Newgate, crowds waited until a black flag was hoisted before returning to their homes. Popular ballads described her gruesome end, asking

"What did she think as she stood on the gallers,  
Poor little victims in front of 'er eyes?  
'Er 'eart if she 'ad one must have been callous,  
The rope round 'er neck – 'Ow quickly times flies!"

But this sad tale does not end with the execution of Dyer. Her 1896 trial exposed the extent and the horrors of baby farming in Victorian Britain. According to the Metropolitan Police's Divisional returns,

in the year to the end of April 1896, the police discovered the corpses of 225 infants. Over 60 per cent of murder cases that came before coroner courts were of infants under the age of one year. Yet, no-one doubted that most murders of infants never came before the coroners and they agreed also that the death rate of *illegitimate* children was three times higher than those of legitimate ones. As one detective explained, Dyer was one of *many* 'unscrupulous women' and 'ghouls' who, because of 'secrecy on the part of their clients' can act in ways that 'are by no means easy to detect'.

Many commentators compared Dyer's actions with those of other baby farmers. They commended Dyer for killing her infants quickly, unlike most women in the business. As the author of an article entitled 'The Woman's Signal' noted just a day after Dyer's execution,

"people hand over their 'unwanted' children to the baby farmer to be done to death; perhaps quickly and cynically, as Mrs. Dyer did with her 'adopted' children; or, perhaps, by the really infinitely more cruel method of slow starvation."

Similarly, a reporter for *The Times* reported that Dyer was far from being the worse of baby farmers since 'year by year other children are done to death by methods less speedy and by so much the more brutal than those which Mrs. Dyer employed'. This journalist observed that each infant's life 'hangs by a very slender thread' and a mother or baby farmer who wished to be rid of a child could achieve this end by 'neglect, exposure, improper food', none of which would leave a 'trace on which a verdict of murder can be brought in'. The child would simply 'pine and fade away and die by inches, after some weeks or months of torture'.

Journalistic interest in Dyer's murders occurred at a time when the rights of children were receiving unprecedented attention: revelations of Dyer's activities served as an accelerant to these debates. In 1884, only twelve years before Dyer's trial, the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children had been established. It became the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1889 and then in 1895, just a year before Dyer's trial, the NSPCC was granted its Royal Charter, when Queen Victoria became its first Royal Patron.

It was the NSPCC's campaign to eradicate cruelty to children that set the scene for the furore over Dyer's murders. The Society's chief argument was that cruelty to infants and children was morally wrong, yet *common*. They were shocked that Britons seemed much more concerned about pain inflicted on *nonhuman* animals than they were about the most vulnerable of *human* lives. After all, leading spokesmen pointed out, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to *Animals* had been founded as early as 1823 but it took more than sixty years for there to be enough support for an organisation seeking to prevent similar cruelty to children. The NSPCC explicitly drew on the rhetoric of *animal* rights to argue against cruelty towards *children*. By employing racist metaphors of 'savagery' and 'evil', they also contributed to debates about the 'great chain of being', that positioned some humans (that is, white ones) as hierarchically superior to others (specifically, Black ones).

This can be illustrated by looking at an influential 1886 article co-written by Catholic Archbishop Henry Edward Manning and Benjamin Waugh (the founder of the NSPCC). It was published in *The Contemporary Review* and was provocatively titled 'The Child of the English Savage'. Its chief message was that 'the child of the [English] savage' was placed 'on the same level as his dog'. They noted that

"the English savage has learnt that it is not safe nor decent to knock his cattle about, but he has all sorts of maxims as to parental rights – his house being his castle, and the like – which make it both safe and decent and altogether as it ought to be, to knock his child about.... At present the law explicitly forbids 'ill-treating, abusing, torturing and insufficient feeding' of dogs.... What the Society [for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] will submit to Parliament is a proposal to do the same for children."

Writing in *The Child's Guardian* four years later, Waugh returned to this theme. He lamented that 'Christians' (that is, he was distinguishing Christians from 'pagans' and 'savages') should be 'as interested in the prevention of cruelty to children as they are in the prevention of cruelty to animals'. This broadening of focus was necessary if reformers were to tackle 'the vilest, blackest shame of our land', which was 'the famine and the pain of tiny staggerers to the grave'.

Today, the rights of infants and children not to be mistreated is taken for granted (although child abuse remains widespread). But this was not the case in Victorian Britain. The rights of (some) animals not to be treated cruelly was enshrined in Victorian law, but similar rights were withheld from children. The NSPCC's campaign faced three obstacles. The first was the rights of parents – particularly fathers – to exert unlimited governance over their 'property – that is, wives and children. This was part of the reason Dyer took up baby farming in the first place: as a married woman, her father's inheritance belonged to her cruel, greedy husband. Infants, too, were a kind of private property, which meant that there was resistance to their treatment being regulated by the state. The second obstacle focused on the value of the lives of infants born to impoverished, unmarried girls and women. Were such offspring truly innocent? Did they possess that 'divine spark' of humanity or were they more like animals? At the very least, might they be 'tainted' from conception by their mothers' immorality, even moral degeneracy? Finally, were infants truly sentient? Did the infants killed by Dyer and other baby farmers really feel pain?

As I argue in greater detail in my book *The Story of Pain* (Oxford University Press), most respected scientists and philosophers in nineteenth century Britain believed that infants were not fully sentient. This was not always the case. Earlier scholars had believed that infants were exquisitely sensitive. But from the 1870s, experimental embryology (such as the work of Paul Emil Flechsig) purported to show that nerve fibres of fetuses, infants, and children developed at different rates. Infants were not fully sentient. There was a 'great chain of *feeling*' (which ran parallel to the 'great chain of *being*'), which placed adult male Europeans at one end and infants, slaves, and animals at the other.

This profoundly racist science was used to justify the subjugation of humans judged to be 'lesser beings', as well as nonhuman animals. It was defended by prominent social commentators such as philosopher James Sully in his *Studies of Childhood*, published the year before Dyer's trial. Sully argued that children belonged 'to the animal community', having 'more in common with the dog and cat, the pet rabbit or dormouse, than with that grown-up human community'. This was not surprising, he went on, if evolutionary principles were understood. Sully was a believer in recapitulation theory, in which the infant 'recapitulated' or 'repeated' the history of the species. As he explained, if

"the order of development of the individual follows and summarises that of the race, we should expect the child to show a germ at least of the passionateness [sic], the quarrelsomeness of the brute and of the savage before he shows the moral qualities distinctive of civilised man. That he often shows so close a resemblance to the savage and to the brute suggests how little ages of civilised life with its suppression of these furious impulses have done to tone down the ancient and carefully transmitted instincts. The child at birth, and for a long while after, may then be said to be the representative of wild untamed nature."

Children needed educating in order to evolve higher than animals and 'savages', finally becoming a full, sentient, and moral member of 'mankind'.

This was the context in which the debate about the cruelties of baby farming emerged. I am not suggesting that Dyer and other commentators were *au fait* with these scientific and philosophical debates. They weren't. But it is to suggest that they were immersed in a culture that had a different understanding of the nature of infancy than we do today. Of course, mothers loved their infants; they laughed with their infants' first smile, they wept when they cried, and they deeply mourned their

death. But difficult choices had to be made. And the people who were making these decisions were predominantly male. When the (all-male) framers of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act removed the responsibilities of fathers to provide financial support to infants they had sired, they were making a decision about the value of maternal and infant lives. When the (all-male) MPs refused to give women the vote, property rights, access to divorce, or equal pay, they were consigning millions of women and their offspring to poverty and penury. When societies were established in 1823 (by prominent men) to regulate cruelty towards animals, but not cruelty towards infants (until 1884), hierarchies of care and compassion were being established.

So, when public horror was expressed about the mass murderer Dyer and the cruelty of other baby farmers, the NSPCC saw an opportunity to intensify its campaign. In 1897, Rev. Benjamin Waugh, the Founder and Director of the NSPCC, was called to give evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Infant Life Protection Bill and Safety of Nurse Children Bill, which had been established (in part) as a response to the horror of the revelations over baby farming and Dyer's murders. His testimony shocked many listeners. Waugh reminded the commissioners that, in the UK, 50,000 children were born to unmarried women every year, and baby farmers were responsible for the slow starvation of thousands of these infants. He noted that it was

“impossible for their mothers to maintain the children whilst the children are at their breasts or in their arms; they must be nursed for them if the mothers are to provide for them.”

Waugh stated that it was not uncommon for mothers to continue to make payments long after the infant had already died. When asked why the mothers ‘do not take the trouble before making the payment to inquire whether the child is alive or not’, he responded,

“I do not say that they do not take the trouble; they would like, many of them, to do it, but they dare not risk the exposure of their connection with the sad story.”

He controversially contended that Mrs. Dyer was actually ‘the most saintly of baby farmers I have come across’. Why? It was because

“she gives six seconds of pain and the others give six weeks of it. England is wrong altogether about this giving sudden pain and sudden death, and we hang those who do it; but six weeks of pain, six weeks of faintness and dizziness, and finally a collapse, all that is legally little.”

And there was little risk of being prosecuted for starving an infant since medical men ‘cannot tell whether a child had died from insufficient food or from inability to assimilate food’. Waugh pleaded to the government to instigate a system of certification so that mothers could be confident that their children would be safe.

However, regulating adoption and strengthening laws aimed at protecting infants were no easy task. The 1872 Infant Life Protection Act required people who took in infants under one year of age to be registered, but it was ineffectual. The public attention generated by Dyer's murders persuaded the Home Secretary that improvements were imperative. The following year, an amendment was passed that required local authorities to register and supervise people who cared for other women's children who were aged up to five years. Visitors could be appointed to check up on baby farmers, removing infants they believed were at risk. Unfortunately, exemptions were made for baby farmers who charged more than £20, giving so-called more ‘respectable’ carers immunity.

The chief limitation, though, was pointed out by *The Times*. They reported that ‘Mrs. Dyer's profession can be put down by law, or carried on under adequate supervision and control’, but ‘will be no such easy matter to deal with parents who have no need to call in outside help from anyone’. In other words, the *professionalisation* of baby murder (either by slow starvation or the hasty

tightening of a cord) could be regulated but that would not eliminate the underlying, systemic *causes* that made unmarried mothers desperate enough to allow their own children to simply ‘waste away’.

What about Amelia Dyer herself? It is not my aim to absolve her of guilt. She murdered hundreds of infants. But it is to suggest that emotional pain is not reserved for those pure of heart: even people who do very bad things, suffer.

It is also not my aim to retrospectively diagnose Dyer with a mental illness, and therefore suggest that she should have been imprisoned rather than hanged. What are labelled ‘sane’ and ‘insane’ are historically mutable. What is ‘bad’ in one era, can become ‘mad’ in another (just think of diagnoses such as postpartum mania, schizophrenia, and sadism). But her life had been one of ‘hard knocks’. Her husband was violent. In her words, he was ‘cruel to me, and I worried over his treatment very much.... I left him three times’. She had inherited ‘a good deal of money’ from her father. But this was before the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882, so the money belonged to her husband. He spent it on himself. Today, Dyer would be called a ‘battered wife’.

Dyer was clearly a deeply disturbed woman, with a history of mental illness. Her mother had attempted suicide and died in a lunatic asylum. In November 1891, Dyer had attempted to cut her own throat and so was admitted to the Gloucester Asylum. She accused the asylum of having abused her, pulling her knuckle out of joint: ‘they beat and cruelly ill-treated me, and put me in a padded room’, she recalled, adding ‘and I felt it would be no sin to destroy myself’. In a letter to her daughter, Dyer confessed that ‘I have no soul: my soul was hammered out of me at Gloucester Asylum’. In December 1893, she was admitted to the County Asylum for Pauper Lunatics at Wells (Somerset) for attempting to drown herself. According to her admission report, Dyer was

“Suicidal and dangerous. Patient is very violent. Attempted to strike me with a poker, threatened to break my skull, swears at me. Says she has no peace in the world, only in Heaven.... says she will kill herself. Voices tell her to. Has attempted suicide. Patient is robust and stout looking with grey hair, suffused complexion, very few teeth.”

In August 1895, she was readmitted to the Gloucester Lunatic Asylum. While in custody for her crimes, she attempted suicide a third time, this time using her boot laces. She tied them around her neck using exactly the same position and knot that she had used when killing the infants.

It is also important to recognise that, while in no way excusing her actions, some commentators at the time were sympathetic because they understood the underlying *causes* of infant murder. Admittedly, most journalists refused to demonstrate compassion. After Dyer’s death sentence had been carried out, one newspaper reported that

“The utterly despicable character of Mrs. Dyer’s crime may be judged from the fact that not a single word has been raised by the public on behalf of a commutation of her sentence to penal servitude on the ground that she is a woman. She has gone to the gallows unpitied and hated. For Mrs. Dyer no one ever asked for mercy.”

But this was not strictly true. Sections of the women’s movement of the time were indeed understanding. On the day after Dyer was hanged, the *Women’s Penny Paper* published an article entitled ‘The Baby Farming Murders’. They were not pardoning Dyer for her actions – indeed, they called them ‘repulsive’ and admitted that they felt ‘horror’ when thinking about them. However, they drew attention to the reasons baby farmers existed in the first place. The unnamed author admitted that, in ‘ordinary circumstances’, a ‘little baby appeals irresistibly to the sympathies and protective instincts of the mother sex’. This sentiment was not an ‘unalterable ‘instinct’’, but the ‘development of a high order of conscience and emotion’ (an appeal to the ‘chain of being’ or the civilising process, with all its xenophobic associations). Indeed, the author contended, the



“really awful circumstance in this and all other baby farming cases, is less the callous cruelty of the baby farmer than the more cruel and callous-heartedness of the parents, who fling away their offspring to endure any fate that may await at a mercenary stranger’s hands.”

Parents obviously knew that £10 would not be sufficient to care for their child. But it was equally obvious that mothers would experience ‘physical and moral agony’ when handing over their children to strangers. Although the ‘natural instinct’ of motherhood was certainly

“weaker than the poets have sung, yet they are not extinguished without an anguish that is no less terrible to bear than it is damaging to the moral nature of the unhappy girls who either themselves kill their infants or hand them over to the baby farmer, knowing well that this means their cruel death.”

In other words, ‘unhappy girls’ who had been seduced by men were not without moral blame but, nevertheless, they were not innately ‘evil’ and their capacity for suffering should be acknowledged.

The crucial point for the author of this article in the *Women’s Penny Paper* was to remember that *two* people were responsible for bringing a life into the world. The ‘only correct principle’, therefore, was ‘to require the *two parents* of every child to be jointly responsible for supplying its needs’. The ‘great defect of our present arrangement’ was that men were not regarded as responsible for the care and nurturance of their infants. Why? Because the male sex had ‘made the laws and institutions’ that absolved themselves of liability. The author concluded that

“It is poverty and disgrace that make the mother neglect her child, the little baby she naturally loves, and leave it to the tender mercies of the baby farmer.... So long as fathers may shirk their duties, Mrs Dyers will be sought, and will, alas!, too surely be found.”

It was a powerful call for female empowerment in Victorian Britain.

What can we conclude? Amelia Dyer committed acts of extreme cruelty towards the babies in her charge. She also abused the impoverished, desperate, unmarried mothers who she tricked into believing they were giving their loved infants a better life – a life, as she promised Evelina Edith Marmon, in the countryside with ‘an orchard opposite our front door’.

But are we to agree with the writers who say she was ‘fiendish’, ‘diabolical’, one of the most ‘terrible monsters’, and a ‘mother super devil’? I cannot bring myself to call Amelia Dyer ‘evil’. She was a battered wife, deprived of her inheritance by a cruel husband, and suffering such emotional pain that she attempted suicide at least three times. It is so much easier to point our fingers at individual wrongdoers like Dyer, than at man-made and deliberately constructed systems of morality (religious dicta), law (women’s lack of rights over their own bodies and property), and finance (discriminatory employment practices), that made women’s lives unliveable. Let me end, then, with a ballad about Dyer and the intolerable choices facing unmarried mothers in the nineteenth century. The first stanza shows pity for young women like barmaid Evelina Marmon and servant Mary Fry, who had been ‘led astray’ by men unknown and indifferent to their responsibilities. It goes:

“Poor girls who fell down from the straight path of virtue,  
 What could they do with a child in their arms?  
 The fault they committed they could not undo,  
 So the baby was sent to the cruel baby farm.”

But the chorus exposes the other side to this tale – Mrs. Dyer as the scapegoat, the evil one, the witch, to be burnt at the stake for society’s sins:

“The old baby farmer, the wretched Mrs Dyer  
At the Old Bailey her wages is paid  
In times long ago we’d have made a big fire  
And roasted so nicely that wicked old jade.”

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Further Reading:

Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

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