



The Baby Farmers

Annie Cossins

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The most common murder victim in 19th century Australia was a baby, and the most common perpetrator was a woman. Annie Cossins pieces together the fascinating story of the most infamous legal trial in Australia to reveal an underworld of struggling mothers, unwanted babies, and a society that preferred to turn a blind eye.

In October 1892, a one-month-old baby boy was found buried in the backyard of Sarah and John Makin, two wretchedly poor baby farmers in inner Sydney. In the weeks that followed, 12 more babies were found buried in the backyards of other houses in which the Makins had lived. This resulted in the most infamous trial in Australian legal history, and exposed a shocking underworld of desperate mothers, drugged and starving babies, and a black market in the sale and murder of children.

Annie Cossins pieces together a dramatic and tragic tale with larger than life characters: theatrical Sarah Makin; her smooth-talking husband, John; her disloyal daughter, Clarice; diligent Constable James Joyce, with curious domestic arrangements of his own; and a network of baby farmers stretching across the city. It's a glimpse into a society that preferred to turn a blind eye to the fate of its most vulnerable members, only a century ago.

The Baby Farmers Details

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From Reader Review The Baby Farmers for online ebook

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘But what was baby farming?’

‘One of the best kept secrets of the nineteenth century was the trade in the life and death of children.’

This trade in the life and death of children was a consequence of the limited choices available to women who were pregnant and were either unmarried, or unable to afford a child. In the absence of effective contraception, safe abortion, social condemnation (if unmarried) and loss of employment with no welfare benefits or support, many women were desperate enough to abandon their babies. In New South Wales, the Children’s Protection Act was not enacted until August 1892.

‘Women who killed babies constituted the largest group of people, men or women, in the late nineteenth century who committed murder in New South Wales...’

And during this period, newspapers regularly ran advertisements like this one:

‘WANTED, Kind Lady to adopt little girl 2 months’ old, or to care for. Iran, Petersham post office.’

This advertisement received the following reply:

‘Dear Iran

I will take your little baby for life at a small sum of £3 or £3 10s, or whatever terms we may come to. It is not just for the sake of the money, but just to give the child an outfit. You need never trouble about your baby’s welfare. She will have every attention and the love of a kind mother. We are on the eve of going to the suburbs on a poultry farm to a fine healthy part, so if you will come down we will explain things and make arrangements.

Yours faithfully,

Mr Ray

109 George-street, Redfern, up the steps.’

‘Mr Ray’ was one of the aliases used by John Makin. He and his wife Sarah became known as two of the most notorious baby farmers in Sydney. The Makins were convicted of the murder of baby Horace Amber Murray in 1893. John Makin was hanged, while Sarah was sentenced to life imprisonment. In this book Annie Cossins (currently Professor of Law and Criminology in the Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales) tells their story.

What kind of people become baby farmers? Often a premium, usually a few pounds, was paid to the baby farmer. Sometimes the mother (and occasionally the father) would want to visit the child, and some paid ongoing stipends to cover their child’s care. But baby farmers generally took in far more babies than they could possible care for. The babies died usually from starvation or neglect.

Some thirteen baby corpses were recovered from where they were buried in the backyards of houses occupied by the Makins. I wonder how many more remained unfound?

While the Makins are central to this book, it is more than an examination of their crimes. Ms Cossins provides detailed background for each of the Makins and outlines the society in which they lived. Ultimately, the Makins’s convictions were due to the dogged investigations by Sergeant James Joyce of the Newtown

police. While it's possible that they may not have been guilty of the particular crime for which they were convicted (the murder of Horace Amber Murray), it's highly unlikely that they weren't guilty of the murder or manslaughter of a number of babies. As Ms Cossins writes:

'But how can a jury decide if a baby has been murdered if there is no evidence about how it died, such as starvation, poisoning or smothering? There was a gap and the gap was filled with assumptions.'

Certainly, as Ms Cossins demonstrates, the Makins did not receive a fair trial by today's standards. Which raises a worrying question: is it 'okay' for justice to be served in this way? For convictions to rely on prejudicial evidence, when neither coronial inquests nor the trial could determine how the babies died? To what extent were the Makins also victims of circumstances?

This is an absorbing and uncomfortable read. While it's difficult to find much (if any) sympathy for the Makins, it's hard not to think about the hypocrisy of a society that seemed not to care at all for illegitimate children, unless they fell victim to baby farmers. This is a side of Australian society that we'd prefer not to remember.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Stina says

Well researched into the history of each person who played a part in this moment in history; this case which set a precedent in law today; the ancestry and humble beginnings of all involved. Annie Cossins has left nothing out. The Baby Farmers is a brilliantly written account of one of the most horrific cases in time, detailing the events as they had unfolded as well as the lapse in judgement of our judicial system at the time.

John and Sarah Makin are no saints, but they did what they did to survive. That doesn't justify their actions to the extent in which they found themselves, by no means, but hard times call for hard measures...and the Makins were hard. I don't doubt that Sarah played a far bigger part in both the farming and the disposing of babies than the justice prevailed upon her. But as a woman in a time when women were the responsibility of their husbands and no more, she was seen to be under the upper hand of her husband. I, however, believe that while they were both as guilty as the other, Sarah was by no means under any man's thumb. She was tough. She was hard. And she was vicious. Her histrionics dramatised and played out in court, I believe, we're just that - dramatics. If her cries, flailing arms and fainting fits could see the court granting her mercy, then that's what she'd do. But Annie Cossins did bring up a fair and valid point of Sarah suffering tertiary syphilis (as outlined in greater detail in the book), causing erratic behaviour etc. which would also explain her behaviour during the inquests and trial. However, the question posed in the book is this - were the Makins given a fair trial and had indeed been guilty of the crime for which they were sentenced? Maybe, maybe not. But I believe the point is moot, because in a world that has lost its true sense of justice now, they were in fact guilty regardless. And whether Baby D was really Horace Amber Murray (for which they were found guilty of the death of and punished) and was buried in their house in George St or was in fact one of babies buried at Burren St - it doesn't matter. Horace Amber Murray was either Baby D or one of the other bodies - either murdered or starved to death. Either way, he died as many of the others did - at the hands of or under the hands/care of the Makins, making them responsible. They may not have received a fair trial, as many didn't then, but they were guilty. Those babies didn't bury themselves. And it wasn't one or two, but 13 at least! Who knows how many more nameless forgotten babies died under the neglectful care of the Makins? The evidence may have been circumstantial but 13 babies buried in the backyard of 4 of their "fly by night" residences was way too much of a coincidence.

At any rate, the book is a fantastic look into early Australian history and the justice system in its infancy whilst one policeman doggedly investigated the case to bring justice for the mothers whose babies were never seen or heard from again. And there is also a piece of interesting and slightly amusing bit of information regarding that policeman which made me chuckle a little at the slight hypocrisy of it all.

Overall - brilliant! Definitely recommend.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

In *The Baby Farmers*, Annie Cossins examines in detail the investigation and trial of Sarah and John Makin, who in 1892 stood accused of the murder of 13 infants found buried in their backyard.

A hundred years ago, women who fell pregnant out of wedlock had very few choices. Prevailing morality condemned them no matter their circumstances, and keeping the child with them was usually impossible. Some risked backyard abortion services but many simply concealed their pregnancies as best they could, gave birth alone in their rooms, or in stables or in nearby bush and then abandoned the infants to the elements. On average, 6000 children under the age of five died each year in the New South Wales colony and while some of those deaths can be attributed to the common disease that plagued the population, like Scarlet Fever, Syphilis and Measles, *"So frequent was infanticide that The Evening News carried a weekly column entitled 'How The Babies Go' which reported on the number of dead babies found in the city each week."* (p75) The bodies of many more babies were likely never discovered.

Mother's who were unable to discard their offspring, or perhaps hoped one day to be reunited with them, sought a 'kind mother to adopt [a] child for a life'. Some mothers placed their own advertisements while others responded to those placed by baby farmers, women and men, often couples, eager to 'adopt' a child in exchange for a weekly stipend or preferably a lump sum (premium) payment. Payments varied but they were rarely enough to raise a child, amounts £2-£5 being most common in order to be affordable for the servant and working class that most often utilised the service.

The case of Sarah and John Makin sheds light on what happened to these infants once left in the care of a baby farmer. While some of the mother's believed their child would be loved and well cared for, others understood that the adoption payment was little more than a disposal fee. The Makin's, it is suggested, variously starved, overdosed, smothered or otherwise murdered the infants in their care, burying them in the backyards of the houses in which they lived at the time. Baby farming was a business where turnover was important to maximise profit so the Makin's, like other baby farmers, 'adopted' as many infants as they could.

As part of my degree in Early Childhood Education, we were required to study the history of child welfare in Australia so I was familiar with the basic facts of this sensational case and the changes in heralded in law. In *The Baby Farmer* is a detailed study of how the hypocrisy of religion, government and law encouraged the growth of baby farming as an industry, the backgrounds of Sarah and John Makin and the complex trial that followed the discovery of the wrapped and buried infants.

It seems the author found several errors in the prosecution of the Makin's, who were eventually sentenced to death for the murder of one of the infants discovered. Cossins details the trial, quoting and paraphrasing court records, news reports and other sources. Due to a number of factors, the deaths of the other 12 were dismissed as unproved but there can be no doubt that the Makin's systematically murdered children to profit from the premiums offered for their 'care'.

While the writing can be dry and dense at times, *The Baby Farmers* offers intriguing insight into the

socioeconomic period at the turn of the last century. I was fascinated and appalled by the chilling tale of the rise and fall the notorious couple, Sarah and John Makin but mostly I am left extremely thankful that today in Australia most of the stigma surrounding pregnancy out of wedlock has disappeared, that the government offers financial and practical assistance to single parents, that abortion is accessible and legal and that the life and welfare of babies and children are valued.

Anita says

Warning: Not suitable for people who will be disturbed by the true story of the murder of babies in 19th Century Australia. This researched history of the story of Sarah and John Makin, who were responsible for 13 babies found buried in their backyard, discusses the economic and moral situation which allow this. It quotes J Allen, "Sex and Secrets": "...newborn infants were less than 3% of the population, their murder occurred at 55 times the rate of the murder of adults." If you need to be reminded how much things have improved, you should read this book.

Melissa Crady says

This book is really well written and researched and easy to read and follow. But with that in mind it was also bit heavy on details that were not really important and detracted from the main focus of the book which is the Makins trial. It gave a lot of information about their ancestry, the start of Australia, and how the law and community was back in the late 19th century, and even gave a chapter about how their inaccurate forensics was used then.

Which as I said was well researched and easy to read and I did find it interesting as I find history fascinating. But the book felt more like a history lesson then the telling of the story of this couple who murdered countless babies for profit. The frequent shift to trying to educate us was a distraction and I didn't couldn't really get any connection to any of the people to properly feel the horror of what the crime should entail. I felt no hatred towards the Makins, or sympathy for the mothers, or sadness for the babies who had such tragic short lives.

Despite that it is a good read and I would recommend it to those who are interested in ancestry and history.

Tara Eagleton says

This was an interesting read. Of course, it is a historical interpretation of events in 19th C New South Wales and maintains a sense of storytelling yet the book is well referenced and researched.

Linda Funnell says

Sydney in the 1890s: shame, syphilis and infanticide.

If you were unmarried and pregnant, or married and unable to afford another child, you had very few choices

in Sydney in the late 1800s.

There was no contraception, no safe abortion, no support for poor families (much less single mothers), and no child welfare. In New South Wales the Children's Protection Act was only passed in 1892. Each week the corpses of babies abandoned by desperate mothers were recovered in public places.

In this environment baby farming thrived. Newspapers regularly ran advertisements such as this:

WANTED, Kind Lady to adopt little girl 2 months' old, or to care for. Iran, Petersham post office.

Often a 'premium', usually a few pounds, would be offered to whomever took the child. Sometimes the mother would want to visit the child after the 'adoption', sometimes she would provide baby clothes or even an ongoing stipend for the child's needs.

Baby farmers answered these advertisements and took in far more babies than they could possibly look after. The babies invariably died, most commonly of neglect and starvation. Their cries could be subdued with liberal amounts of the opiate-laced Godfrey's Cordial. At a time of high infant mortality, the death of a baby was not uncommon.

The advertisement above received this reply:

Dear Iran

I will take your little baby for life at a small sum of £3 or £3 10s, or whatever terms we may come to. It is not just for the sake of the money, but just to give the child an outfit. You need never trouble about your baby's welfare. She will have every attention and the love of a kind mother. We are on the eve of going to the suburbs on a poultry farm to a fine healthy part, so if you will come down we will explain things and make arrangements.

Yours faithfully,

Mr Ray

109 George-street, Redfern, up the steps.

'Mr Ray' was in fact one of the many aliases of John Makin. He and his wife Sarah were two of the most notorious baby farmers in Sydney, and it is their story that Annie Cossins tells here ...

Read the rest of this review at the Newtown Review of Books: <http://newtownreviewofbooks.com/2013/...>

Betsey Brannen says

Ahhh, Australia. The backdrop for such a titular event as Nemo's desire to return to the reef. A country that gave us Paul Hogan, Bryan Brown, Mel Gibson, and Nicole Kidman. The murder case that inspired a phrase about some ridiculous Dingo. How much do we really know (as Americans) about this

island/country/continent that is only a stones throw from the Antarctic? This former criminal wasteland? Apparently not enough to make a movie about this crazy family down under who adopted babies and then killed them for profit. What, you say? Is this a story of Planned Parenthood (what, too soon?)?

So basically, take a story of this crazy family who does exactly that. Adopt babies for a small price and then agree to raise them. When you adopt too many and no longer have the means to care for them, just off them and toss them in the backyard with last night's dinner. Don't worry though, cause you are going to go to the gallows for your crimes, because our knowledge of forensic medicine is crap. Not to mention the numerous "plot holes" in the crown's case against you. Honestly though, none of that really matters, because this is a crazy sensationalized murder trial, and like today, we will give the people what they want. Where were you in 1893 Nancy Grace?!

Cossins does a good job of attempting to examine all of the evidence, yet she misses one crucial fact. She acknowledges that the Makins were adopting too many babies for their means. Why then, did they continue to take on baby after baby with such small premiums offered by the mothers (in some cases, adopting children for less than 5 pounds)? Was it their sick, twisted desire to murder? Were they too dumb? Why not just adopt one or two children for larger premiums?!

To be honest, nothing about the story makes sense. It was a good try though.

Patricia says

One of the interesting things about reading true crime is recognising the locations where it took place. So it was for me reading *The Baby Farmers*, set in the inner west suburbs of Sydney albeit over 10 years ago. Little is known, or at least acknowledged, about baby farming in Australia's history and yet it was one of the few options available to women, often young and unmarried, who became pregnant. It also became a lucrative business for unscrupulous people such as the Makins, around whom this book revolves, who themselves were poor and unemployed. Anne Cossins has used her legal background to analyse the trial of the Makins and present the findings in an engaging way. While the crime of baby farming cannot be dismissed, it is understandable how the impoverished of the 19th century saw it as a panacea in much the same way that adoption was viewed in the mid-20th century.

It is extraordinary to discover that baby farming was not illegal until 1939 when it was outlawed under a revision of the Child Protection Act of 1923. I was unaware of the extent of the crime in Australia until I read Judith Allen's excellent book, *"Sex and Secrets"* (1990) based on her doctoral thesis. In the same year, the late Margaret Scott published a fictional account, *"The Baby Farmer"* set in London. Both works are commended for further reading on the topic.

Jennifer says

I liked this book, though parts dragged. I guess what annoys me most, ever, is our current society's supposed

lack of morals in many ways made this nightmarish reality our past. Fast-forward to present day, and sadly, I think this could become our present day reality again if access to contraceptives and women's healthcare is not widely accessible.

Cace says

Horrifying story of the investigation and trial of Sarah and John Makin, infamous baby farmers in 19th century Australia. I had never heard of this practice before, and was shocked to read about people starving babies and then burying them, all for a small amount of money.

Deborah Biancotti says

Exhaustively researched & written in a deliciously almost-purple prose (very 19th century, I thought), this book certainly gave me a clear impression of the slums & poverty of Sydney at the end of the 1800s. It starts with the sad story of unmarried teenage lovers forced by financial circumstance to surrender their baby daughter to 'baby farmers', where she shortly died. When you're a young man who can't afford to feed a family on one measly income, or you're a young woman who can't afford to declare your motherhood because if you do you'll lose your job, there's not a lot of options. But the idea that people would buy & sell babies in the classified sections of newspapers still shocked me, & also shocking was the fact many services offered up this option: "you will never be bothered by your child again".

I admit I skim-read the 'begatting' section at the front of the book that came after this brief intro. This is the bit that travels back a generation or two to explain how the key players all got to Australia (in short: they were mainly broke, & they usually stole some food, & then they were put on ships & sent to the penal colony, booyah), although even a brief read of that section does make it clear what a bunch of starving, sad white people we had in Sydney back then. But at that stage, I was more interested to understand what baby farming **was**. And it is simply this: the unpoliced trade of children for cash. I was surprised to hear how common it was -- apparently even Jane Austen was farmed out to a local village for a few years of her infancy (in Britain, not in Sydney).

Around 6000 babies died in NSW annually between 1880-1890. 7500 in Victoria during the same period. And tangentially, a neat way to kill a baby was to use opium-based 'mother's helper' tonics -- a byproduct of Britain's rather brutal imperialism in India & China. The baby would be so stoned it would starve silently.

Also, the effect looked a lot like syphilis--the most common, naturally-occurring baby killer of the time.

Isn't THAT disturbing?

#aww2013 no.16

Kirsti says

Very rarely does a crime book catch my eye, but this was another recent Kindle daily deal that i couldn't resist buying. I was sucked in from the beginning, drawn into a world where killing your newborn was

common practice for unwed women in Australian colonies. But what if you stayed your hand? No woman then could cart a baby around, unwed, and expect decent work or treatment. So Baby Farming was born, where by letters placed in newspapers could solve your problem, and potential families offered to adopt your illegitimate spawn (for a small fee) But when the money was gone, these criminals passed the children along, or in the Maken case, allegedly killed them.

I actually felt sorry almost for this destitute family, and the way the courts handled their case. Somehow the author generated this feeling from me, even though I felt that they probably did kill children, through neglect or outright murder I do not know. But in the end, they were convicted through false evidence and prejudice, and the father of the family hanged. I should add that I live in Bathurst, so now when I drive past the gaol I am going to think about this book.

I debated with myself over buying this book, but I'm glad I did. It was thought provoking and mind consuming. I highly recommend it.

Debbie Terranova says

This meticulously-researched account by law professor Annie Cossins is about the so-called adoption industry in the 1880s. The book focuses on the shocking case of Sarah and John Makin of Sydney, baby farmers who made their living from the misfortunes of young women who had babies out of wedlock. The Makins' sordid activities – the murder and burial of no less than 13 illegitimate babies in the backyards of the houses they rented – resulted in a death sentence for John and life imprisonment for Sarah.

Apart from the specifics of the Makin case, which includes the inquests, trials, appeals and petitions, the book provides enlightenment about the bad old days of the colony, when women had babies by the dozen (due to no means of contraception barring abstinence). There was never enough money or food for a growing family and infant mortality was so high that when a baby died, no-one even questioned.

Babies born out of wedlock were truly regarded as 'bastards'. In many cases, an unmarried mother had no choice but to offload the baby in whichever way she could. Among the newspaper ads for scrap metal, dogs, horses, and plumbing work were requests for a 'kind lady' to 'adopt' a baby. Sometimes there was also the offer of a 'premium', which meant a fee to dispose of the child.

Baby farmers took in more children than they could care for. When the babies inevitably died, the baby farmer could take on more, always of course for a premium.

At the end of the book, Annie Cossins sums up the sad state of affairs with the following words:

"Sarah's and John's crimes were also the crimes of a society that condoned infanticide while, paradoxically, stigmatising unmarried mothers. The legal status of an illegitimate child was described as 'filius nullius', child of no-one, which sums up the legal and social reality of those times. Since these children had no legal status, it is hardly surprising they had little or no social value. Life was cheap for illegitimate babies. Baby farmers provided an unsavoury but necessary service that filled the vacuum left wide open by government policies, the market economy and the limited assistance available through charitable organisations."

Sometimes we need to look back to see just how far we've come.

Frances Nielsen says

An okay read, opening a window on turn-of-the-century Sydney (that's late 19th - early 20th Century). Quite interesting. It's very detailed, and consequently seeming to take a long time to make a point in places.
