A Murdering Mother

Frances Knorr

Lucy Sussex

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the city of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia, had its own version of Madame Tussaud’s Chamber of Horrors. Kreitmayer’s Waxworks contained such sensational artifacts as the Klatscheige (Scold’s Bridle) and the Stocks, as well as a gruesome array of wax murderers. Kreitmayer’s Waxworks Exhibition Catalogue (c. 1903) gives us a detailed listing of the cheap thrills on display. No. 142 in the catalogue was Frances Knorr, who was “found guilty of having murdered two infants on or about 11 April 1893, and buried the bodies in a garden. She was executed 15 January 1894” (14).

Frances Knorr was a mother of two daughters, one by her husband, and another conceived when he was in jail. This fact alone would have put her outside the Victorian category of “good woman,” without her having committed murder—in a monstrous inversion of the motherhood ideal, of two babies. They were not her children, but infants for whom she was caring in a private, lethal crèche. She is most commonly described as a baby-farmer, a term referring to women who took over the care of infants for a fee. The babies were illegitimate, often born to single mothers who could not afford to stop working, nor to lose their “reputation,” as Knorr had.

Until the twentieth century and the scientific development of milk formula, separating a child from its mother was to risk its health and life. In official orphanages, the mortality rate was high. With baby farming, the situation was worse: frequently there was a tacit agreement that, in handing over a child, a mother was paying for her baby’s quiet disposal.
Baby-farming cases occurred throughout the nineteenth century, and it was Knorr’s fate that in the 1890s they were being aggressively prosecuted. Thus she became a notorious woman, the worst of mothers, and a murderer whose image adorned a Chamber of Horrors.

Kreitmayer’s Waxworks no longer exists, but an approximation of its Chamber of Horrors can be found at the Old Melbourne Gaol museum, with its collection of death masks, taken from the freshly hanged. Here can be found the death mask of Frances Knorr, one of two women displayed, the other being the demented poisoner Martha Needle (also listed in the Kreitmayer’s catalogue). Until the 1990s, also exhibited was Knorr’s skull, together with that of Needle and the murderer Frederick Deeming (also in the Waxworks catalogue), explanatory plaques positioning the trio as examples of a major twentieth-century bogey, the serial killer.

This Melbourne Gaol reading was rendered dubious by misinformation in its labeling: Knorr was confused with Needle, and called “Martha.” It might seem pedantic to note the error, but it is not isolated: errors pervade the Knorr literature to varying degrees. It is predictable that mistakes would be found in pulp treatments of the case, such as James Holledge’s Australia’s Wickedest Women, whose very 1960s cover represents female evil by a beehived redhead doing a striptease for several James Bond lookalikes. Yet mistakes occur in serious studies. To cite just one instance: Michael Cannon’s The Woman as Murderer (1994) again conflates Knorr and Needle by applying an Age editorial of December 4, 1893 (126), specifically on Knorr, to Needle, who was hanged in October 1894.

Where fact can be doubted, so can interpretation. Even in the 1890s, as this essay will show, the received image of Knorr as monstrous mother was by no means universally accepted. A contextual reexamination of the Knorr case creates further ambiguity, even confusion. The monster image slips out of focus, blurs. Judging Knorr becomes by no means simple.

**Knorr’s Contexts**

Can we term Knorr a victim? Some would automatically say no. The most potent image in Christian iconography, Christ on the cross apart, is the babe in the manger, adored by mother Mary. The inverse of this image, the subsequent “Massacre of the Innocents,” is less commonly depicted; but the phrase recurs in nineteenth-century discussions of infanticide. Such “massacres” were not an isolated, historic, biblical instance but relatively common throughout the period. This article will concentrate on Knorr’s Australian, colonial context, but as Benjamin Disraeli commented in his
novel *Sybil*: “Infanticide is practised as extensively and legally in England, as it is on the banks of the Ganges; a circumstance which apparently has not yet engaged the attention of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts” (book II, 131).

Colonial discourse on female infanticide in India elided the many small skeletons found, in some cases, literally in the imperialists’ water closets. The corpses of infants were also unearthed in back gardens (as in the Knorr case), dredged from rivers, or simply stumbled across in public places. To glance, as I have, at the death registers of late-nineteenth-century Australia is to note an extraordinary proportion of anonymous corpses under the age of one. With a regularity approaching monotony, newspapers covered these cases, usually allotting only a paragraph to them, unless the details were particularly sensational.

Frances Knorr lived in two countries, England and colonial Australia, and in both infanticide was rife—for the latter, Judith Allen estimates that the murder rate of the newborn was fifty-five times that of adults (*Sex & Secrets* 31). It could hardly be anything but, given the unholy conjunction of medicine, public morality, and economics then prevalent. The lack of reliable, easily affordable contraception and safe abortion created a gross oversupply of babies that, when born out of wedlock or to poor families, were vulnerable. Allen argues that many child deaths in New South Wales, accepted at inquest as accidental, were nothing of the kind: the “accidents” included overlaying, when a mother rolled on her child during sleep and smothered it; “sudden delivery,” which meant giving birth over a lavatory or chamber pot and somehow drowning the infant or fracturing its skull in the process; and improper feeding (“Octavius Beale Re-considered” 116). All of the above appear frequently in inquest reports, and indicate infanticide functioned as a form of last-ditch, postnatal contraception.

Legally, infanticide could be a hanging offense. However, as Allen’s inquest evidence shows, there was a difference between legal principle and practice, a willingness on the part of authorities to give the benefit of the doubt. Infant mortality was still high, and inquests often could not determine cause of death. For instance, in 1893, out of nearly four hundred coroner’s inquests in Victoria, 101 were on infants; of these only 32 returned findings of infanticide (Laster, “Frances Knorr” 155). Reluctance to admit the degree to which women were killing babies may have been a mitigating factor here, as well as an uneasy if guarded recognition of sexual inequalities.

Of Australian defendants indicted in infanticide cases, Allen has found that 85 percent were unmarried women (*Sex & Secrets* 31). This figure is not surprising, given that the position of the unwed mother was particu-
larly invidious. It was well-nigh economically impossible for her to keep the child, even if she wanted a little “badge of shame” marking her as a “fallen woman.” Such was suicide, especially for domestic servants, working women who were dependent on their good names for employment. Who would hold the baby? In Melbourne there were some private charitable agencies, such as the Maternity Aid Society (founded 1883) and the Victorian Infant Asylum (1877). In addition, Donella Jaggs notes that de facto adoption was practiced informally or by “statutory or voluntary agencies which dealt with destitute children,” like the government Department for Neglected Children (119). However, the supply of care was quite unequal to the demand, particularly since Melbourne lacked an official foundling hospital. The most common options of the unwed mother were abandonment (called baby-dropping), infanticide, or baby farming.

Some baby-farmers were incompetent, being poor women, without training in nursing. Others found it all too profitable to cut costs and neglect the child. The high fees charged by child minders (10 shillings a week, plus deposit, was the usual rate in 1893–94) meant that the parent, who, if a servant, was lucky to earn that same amount per week, could not keep up the payments and work honestly. In such cases the unpaid minders often withdrew care or actively ensured the infant’s convenient death.

By the 1890s the colonial Australian governments had reluctantly begun to regulate the trade, requiring all baby farms to be registered and any deaths subject to inquest. Yet abuses were still common: in 1892, the year prior to Knorr’s trial, Sydney baby-farmers John and Sarah Makin were found guilty of murdering a dozen infants and burying them in their various rented backyards. The case was fresh in recent memory when, in Melbourne, similar “massacre” evidence emerged.

The Crime and Its Reportage

The scene of the crime was Brunswick, an inner suburb of a city gripped by depression. The Age of September 6, 1893, reported:

The locality is a very quiet one, and the vacant houses which crowd the vicinity, with their broken windows, ragged fences, defaced “To Let” boards and general appearance of dropping to pieces, make it seem a peculiarly suitable locality for the perpetuation of dark deeds of the class now brought to light. (5)

If the above sounds like a passage from a detective novel, it should be remembered that contemporaneously Sherlock Holmes stories were being
penned by Conan Doyle for the *Strand* magazine. More locally, Fergus Hume’s 1886 novel *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, set in Melbourne but a worldwide best seller, begins with a fictional murder report from the *Argus*, the other major morning newspaper in Melbourne. However, it should be noted that the emergent tropes of the detective genre tended not to be applied to the subject matter of baby killing. Despite the frequency of infanticide reports in colonial newspapers, the crime is largely absent from contemporary detective fiction. Pioneering woman crime writer Mary Fortune, who wrote under the pseudonym W. W. for the *Australian Journal* from 1865 to 1910, was unusual in writing about the subject thrice—but that was out of a total of over five hundred stories.

The colonies’ newspapers competed for circulation-boosting information on the case. It unfolded in their pages like a thriller, one in which they had no qualms about prejudging the accused as guilty, and even a monster. The *Argus* of September 5, 1893, reported:

Added to the long list of child murders on the records of the City Morgue is one which was discovered by Mr Clay, a commercial traveller, who has recently taken up his residence in Moreland-road, Brunswick. He was digging in the garden, when he came cross the body of a child. . . . [T]he state of decomposition indicated that the child had been buried for about three months. . . . An examination of the body clearly showed that its death had undoubtedly been caused by violence, and that murder had been committed. The skull was fractured, in fact almost broken to pieces. Other injuries were also visible on the body, which was perfectly nude. (5)

The *Argus* was premature here, as the inquest established this baby girl had died of causes unknown. The “injuries” had been caused by the police’s picks and shovels. The report then went on to detail how a woman occupying the house prior to Clay had borrowed a neighbor’s spade, shortly before removing to another Brunswick address:

This woman, while occupying the house in Davis-street, came under the notice of the police in connection with a baby-farming case, and soon afterwards she most mysteriously disappeared from the district. Since her removal she has been most anxiously required by the police, owing to her connection with nearly all the recent cases of trafficking in babies which have been reported in *The Argus* [but discovering] the woman’s identity, owing to her innumerable *aliases*, has almost become an impossibility.

One infant had been found, scarcely grounds for stating the wanted woman was single-handedly responsible for the baby traffic of Melbourne.
Already the public was being prepared for a “holocaust of infants”—to use the September 6 *Age*’s phrase—sacrificed à la Makin (5). When the police arrived at Davis Street carrying spades, a crowd collected, sitting on the fence or watching from carts, as the back garden was given a good dig. This time the tally was two tiny corpses.

Both the *Argus* and the *Age*, by September 6, were able to report more about the suspect, Frances Knorr alias and neé Minnie Thwaites. A house agent had found her “respectability to be beyond question,” but her evenings “were given to conviviality with friends . . . marked by a free use of intoxicants.” She had stolen away from Davis Street “in a manner which of itself was sufficient to excite suspicion,” leaving unpaid rent. Furthermore, she and her husband were stated to be jailbirds. It was certainly clear from the witnesses quoted that Knorr was involved in the baby trade, but murder was not proved. Nonetheless, the *Age*, from which the aforementioned is taken, referred to her as “a female Herod” and a “wholesale butcher” (5). Somewhat hopefully, the paper further suggested that the missing woman would excel the Makins, victim-wise.

The September 6 *Argus* was less judgmental. It even contradicted the *Age*, by stating that Knorr was of “temperate habits,” also noting that an inquest on a child who had died after leaving Knorr’s care “came out all right,” because death was from natural causes (5). Both papers quoted a police description: “Aged 32 [she was actually 24]; height, 5 feet 3 or four inches; stout build, sallow complexion, brown hair, heavy lower jaw, usually wears a black dress, black jacket trimmed with astrachan [sic] and a black gem hat.”

Of the Davis Street bodies, one had also died of causes unknown, but the other revealed evidence of foul play, shocking the editorial writer of the *Argus* (September 1).

To many people the most impressive and horrifying incident in the baby-farming tragedy just now being explored is the discovery . . . of a bit of string tightly knotted round the neck of infant “No. 2” and as effective for strangling purposes as the *roomal* of any Thug. (9)

To return to the *Argus* editorial of September 6:

The loop of that fatal bit of string was narrowed to the circumference of a half-crown piece, and so careless were the unknown fingers that drew it tight, or so habituated to the infernal operation, that the cruel noose was left knotted round the tender little throat when the tiny body was buried. . . . If that miniature and tragical noose were exhibited thousands would rush to gaze at it. Mothers would weep at it and men would swear.
The editor then—almost obsessively—harp on India again: “But the whole story draws aside for a moment the curtain which hides a chamber of cruelty black as the Subada Khotee at Cawnpore, where the butchers of NANA SAHIB slew such a multitude of English women and children, and the healthy imagination does not willingly cross its dreadful threshold.”

The editorial continues, with nods at Makin and the English Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, before concluding:

It is clear that in too many cases even the sweet wine of a mother’s love can ferment into the gall of a cruelty hideous enough to satisfy even the ferocity of NANA SAHIB’s sepoys at Cawnpore. The “straying cherub” we call a child who “strays” into a baby-farmer’s den somehow evokes a worse cruelty than anything which inhabits a tiger’s den. Behind the baby-farmer and her—or his—victims stands the baby-farmer’s employers; who do not commit murder with their own hands, but hire it. And the whole group forms a sort of human fresco, which the grim and cruel irony of SWIFT might delight to place high on the facade of the great Temple of Modern Civilisation.

The message was clear: baby farming was an embarrassment to a culture priding itself on “higher” civilization, as is indicated by the allusions to the Black Hole of Calcutta and Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal.” However, the Argus did not go as far as a contemporary cartoon showing “Baby Farming—The Real Murderer”: Mrs. Grundy, that icon of Victorian respectability, throwing a naked infant to a crocodile (repr. in Laster, “Frances Knorr” 159).

Meanwhile the case continued sensationaly: Knorr and her husband, Rudolf, were detained in Sydney. The Argus again: “The arrest . . . was one of those lucky incidents which import elements of romance into the dry detail of police duty” (September 7, 5). The use of the words “romance” and “police” is a clear reference to the roman policier, a genre originated by the French writer Émile Gaboriau, which might be regarded as the original police procedural novels. Fergus Hume cited them as inspiration for The Mystery of a Hansom Cab. The narrative of Knorr thus resembled briefly, thanks to a coincidence, the narratives of fiction: a Sydney constable who had previously dealt with Knorr recognized her when visiting a boardinghouse and, when he heard shortly afterward that she was wanted again, simply returned and arrested her.

The account states:

Thwaites had been on the wanted list of the Sydney police in times past.
Prior to 1888 she was a prominent figure in Sydney, being rendered conspicuous by constantly wearing a long ulster [which] did not conceal an extremely well-proportioned figure. She left after serving a term of imprisonment for misappropriating a sewing machine.

The first visit of the constable might have caused Knorr to flee, but she was restricted by the fact of her motherhood. When arrested, she had recently given birth to her second baby, Reita Daisy. This reportage for the first time identified Knorr as a mother, a category that had almost sacred status in the Victorian era. However, Knorr as mother was rendered ambiguous by her crime. She was alleged to have committed infanticide while pregnant herself with Reita Daisy and with her firstborn Gladys in tow. The dead children were other people’s, but as several witnesses asserted, Knorr was passionately devoted to her own children and very fond of others.

Also ambiguous was Knorr’s class. She married and consorted with petty crooks, worked as a domestic, and had what were commonly regarded as working-class morals: the September 9 Age gleefully reported that her husband, Rudolph, disputed the paternity of her new baby (5). Yet, two days earlier the same paper noted that she had put adoption advertisements in the paper, in which she claimed to be a “lady” and was “said to be well-connected . . . the daughter of a hat manufacturer in King’s Road, Chelsea” in London (5). If this background was true, to have come from a good bourgeois home would have made her even more of a “terrible woman,” as the Herald of January 15, 1894, described her (5). Others used stronger language: in the words of investigating detective John Nixon, Knorr was of “very loose habits, immoral character and hardened nature” (Report, VPRS series 264, file 22).

In newspaper illustrations Knorr was also mutable, with all her portraits different. Two sketches were run in the Weekly Times of January 20, 1894 (21), as evidence of how Knorr had changed during the course of her trial. Interestingly the second of these, of Knorr in her prison uniform, has a photographic counterpart. They significantly differ: in the drawing Knorr has been made to look lined and haggard, while the original photograph is serene. In toto, she appears ordinary, even nondescript—in sharp contrast to the stereotypical evil baby-killer represented in a Bulletin caricature of November 1892. This cartoon appeared at the height of the Makin case, and shows the baby-farmer as a witch, or crone, complete with missing teeth and warty nose (repr. in Palmer 1170).

The witch may have been the stereotype, but by the close of Knorr’s trial, a different, even pitiable image had emerged. To begin with, Knorr was less of a baby-farmer, with a household of neglected and dying infants, than what was known as a baby-sweater: a broker of infants, the interme-
diary between the parent and the actual caretaker, usually a needy woman. Such was profitable for Knorr—she would pocket the substantial difference between the parent’s deposit and what was paid the minder. Very often the latter would find no money, after the initial payment, forthcoming; she would indignantly return the child, not always easy since Knorr frequently moved house. Testimony revealed that Knorr received a continual stream of apparently interchangeable babies, passing them on from one carer to another. Her business was disorganized—from the evidence it seems she barely kept track of these transactions, let alone which child was which. Far more than the three dead babies passed through her hands, but though every property she had rented was dug over, no more bodies were found. The court never made sense of it and even Knorr appeared confused.

Moreover, her baby farming was the direct result of poverty and misfortune. The life of Frances Knorr was almost too much of a moral tale to be true, for it followed the narrative trajectory of a Harlot’s Progress: initial fall, petty crime, prostitution (which was how her common-law relationship with another man while her husband was in jail would have been regarded by the middle-class jurors), and finally murder.

I have not been able to verify the truth of Knorr’s early life, nor when it entered the public record, but the following is gospel in nearly all accounts. Like the subject of an evangelical tract, she was a willful and passionate girl: when she returned home after a failed elopement with a soldier, her god-fearing family first sent her to the local house for fallen women, then packed her off to Australia, that useful dumping ground for English misfits. On arrival in Sydney in 1887, she apparently had little money, for within a month she was arrested for larceny. Two more petty charges followed and a year’s jail. She appeared to be going straight when she married Rudolph Knorr, but it was his eighteen-month sentence for theft that forced her into the baby trade. She had Gladys to care for, no means of support, and though the September 8 Age sneered that she found baby farming “more congenial” (6) than other work, her testimony, as recorded in the Trial Transcript, was simply that she could not make a living otherwise. At the time of the murders, her relationship with a shady young man called Ted Thompson, a fishmonger, had broken down, leaving her pregnant again and destitute.

The following comes from the transcript of evidence and is Knorr’s account of what happened the night of the first baby’s death. The scene is a rented room with a double bed in it, in which slept the pregnant Knorr; her daughter Gladys, eleven months; and a baby-farmed illegitimate infant, known as the child Crichton, who was less than a month old:
I slept very well until about 2 o’clock when they woke up for a drink. I had a foot warmer [for heating milk] and when I got up and got the bottles rinsed out I found the milk was turned completely thick, quite sour, and it was impossible to give it to either of the children. I had no barley in the house and could not make barley water. I tried a little bread beaten up in hot water to make a sop. The two children continued screaming until morning and about a quarter to four the child Crichton died. It went black in the face and was working all over. I got vinegar and applied it to the head and put it on the lips but it never came to. It died from convulsions and not from any ill treatment on my part. I swear that I did everything in my power to resuscitate it. . . . I thought of going to the police first but got frightened. Then I thought “I will bury it.” (Transcript R. v. Knorr, VPRS Series 264, File 22)

Either the baby died of natural causes—an autopsy failed to establish the cause of death—or else Knorr, at the end of her tether, killed it. Had she been simply tried for this case alone, infanticide could not have been proven. Therefore, the prosecution admitted similar fact evidence, namely, the other two bodies, which included the child found with its murder weapon. Still, the case against her was circumstantial until Ted Thompson produced a letter, written to him by Knorr. It provided instructions for manufacturing defense evidence:

She must say she answered an advertisement for a kind person to look after a baby. We meet on a Monday and I arranged to give her the child on the next evening (send her address to me), and she can say I brought the child to her house on the 11th April, Tuesday, and she kept it a little over three weeks, and she wrote to me saying that her husband would not let her keep it any longer, and she wrote to 25 Davis St, Bruns and I fetched it . . . . Now that is all she will have to say and that will clear me. (Australian Law Times, XV, 1894, 445)

Knorr would claim Thompson suggested she write the letter after the inquest at the City Morgue, where Thompson had, suspiciously, been permitted by the Crown Prosecutor to have “interviews” with Knorr (Age, November 29, 6). Was he part of a police entrapment? It seems incredible that this piece of evidence, so useful to the prosecution, should be spontaneously generated.

The December 1 Argus (7) reported that Thompson admitted in court that he had obtained a baby from a Mrs. Brett early that year and passed it on to Knorr. Its fate is unknown. Such evidence should have been sufficient to charge him with being an accessory, as was Rudolph Knorr. Yet
Thompson was never charged. Knorr claimed he told her: “Don’t mention about the Brett case [in the letter], because I have seen Detective Nixon, and been down to Brett’s, and that is all squared. Nixon is a customer of mine, and will believe me where he would not believe you” (Argus, December 1, 7). What was Thompson selling to Nixon? It seems an extraordinary coincidence that a detective investigating the Knorr case should happen to buy fish from the chief prosecution witness. Rather more likely was that Thompson was a “fizzgig,” selling information to the police. The use of informers by Melbourne detectives was endemic, as was revealed in evidence given to a Royal Commission of 1881–83. The commission heard that an informer had conspired with detectives to entrap a man they wanted behind bars to the extent of setting up a bank robbery. Detectives would go to great lengths to protect their sources, even condoning felonies by fizzgigs: in one instance of art theft, a suspect threatened to implicate his accomplice, who was an alleged informer, and the charges were dropped. Nixon was involved in both cases; small wonder he was one of three detectives found “untrustworthy” although he kept his job (Lahey 154, 264–65). In the second half of the letter, Knorr addressed Thompson intimately, and from it she emerges as muddled, incoherent, and truly sad:

[obliterated] really think for one moment I will live with my husband again, no never Ted, I know you will forgive me for the past and let bygones be bygones, I would never go home to my parents again. Even if my father wanted me to go. I have my two little ones to look after and if I am spared to take care of them I will. I do wish you could see my dear baby Ted if I am parted from you I have your living image. . . . (Australian Law Times, 1894, 445)

Knorr’s pathetic faith in Thompson is showed by her concluding the letter with a request for him to collect some hat feathers she was having cleaned, so that she should be smart in court. When found guilty, she sobbed hysterically and cried: “God help your sins, Ted.” Before being hustled out of the court, she added: “God help my poor mother! God help my poor baby!” “Altogether,” the December 2 Argus reported, for once understating the case, “it was a most painful scene” (10).

That Knorr was sentenced to death for infanticide was highly unusual. As stated earlier, the rates for indictment of women following inquests on babies were low; lower still were convictions, and when they occurred, the sentence usually was commuted—although John Makin was executed, his wife, Sarah, got fourteen years’ hard labor, for instance. The Age, which had earlier represented Knorr as unredeemedly wicked, did not swerve from its stance:
We are asked by the spurious humanitarianism of the day to feel some thrill of pity for the stricken monster who left the dock on Friday crying, “Oh, my poor babies”... this is a very false and jarring note of philanthropy. If there is anything to distinguish the woman Knorr from the crowd of child murderers who have gone before, it is her utter abandonment in depravity. (December 4, 1894, 2)

Yet women and men were disturbed by the severity of Knorr’s sentence: they marched, appealed, and petitioned against the capital punishment, recognizing the crime was motivated by poverty rather than by immorality. However, the strongest protest was made by William Walker, the colony’s hangman. In perhaps the most dramatic event of the case, this man, who had earlier hanged Deeming with no qualms, but who was now unbalanced by alcoholism, an unhappy marriage, and his neighbor’s hostility to a woman’s execution, cut his throat.

Knorr never knew of his death, but the speed and fervency of her conversion to religion, once all avenues of appeal had been exhausted, indicates that she was now as mentally unstable as Walker, if she had not been so all along. Representing Knorr as mad rather than bad is an alternative view that appeared even before her death, with Rudolph Knorr seeking clemency for his wife on the grounds that Frances was an epileptic and given to irrational behavior. Laster has also argued that she was disturbed (“Frances Knorr” 151). While reading Knorr for insanity has some credence, it should not obscure the desperate economics behind her actions. She was alone, thousands of miles from an unforgiving family, and with children to support.

Rudolph had been encouraging Frances to confess, but she, probably wary after her letter to Thompson, did nothing initially. In early 1894, Rudolph passed a document to the jail governor, in which Frances denied responsibility for her crimes but implicated another person, charging him with three more infanticides. Almost certainly this individual was Thompson, although Knorr had associated with another man, a racetrack spiller, whom police could not trace. As she could not supply any details of the deaths beyond what had been published in newspapers, the confession was discounted as fantasy. Then came Knorr’s violent attack of repentance, manifested in strident hymn singing and yet another confession. Only the gist of this document and its postscript were released. In it, she confessed to smothering the first two babies, though still denying any involvement with the strangled child. Because of the different modus operandi, and the fact that the murder weapon was buried with the infant, this claim may well be true. Smothering a child, though abominable, lacks the sadistic violence
of strangulation. “A man’s crime,” commented crime writer Kerry Greenwood to me, “hanging a baby like hanging a puppy.”

The confession’s postscript, as reported in the January 6 Argus, read:

As I feel that I have not expressed myself clearly, I now desire to state that upon the two charges known in evidence as No. 1 and 2 babies I confess to be guilty.

Placed as I am now, within a few hours of my death, I express a strong desire that this statement be made public, with the hope that my fate will not only be a warning for others, but also act as a deterrent to those who are perhaps carrying on the same practice. (5)

Laster describes this last wish as “manufactured” (“Arbitrary Chivalry” 175). The complete text, reportedly in Knorr’s autograph, is currently missing from her Victorian Public Record Office file. However, to judge from the postscript alone, I concur with Laster. The formal, even legal, language of this extract, so unlike the expressions used in her letter and her reported speech, suggests words were being put into Frances’s mouth or that she was even taking dictation. But she was probably past caring about anything except the manner of her dying. Here, contemporary narrative apparently influenced the life, for Knorr’s ending was pure theater, the final scene of a Victorian melodrama or the pious tracts supplied by her prison visitors. She arguably thus exerted some control over her representation, confounding all expectations that she would have hysterics or have to be dragged to the gallows. The following is drawn from the January 20 Weekly Times, which provided the best coverage of the execution.

On the morning of her execution, the strains of “Abide with Me” and “Safe in the Arms of Jesus” were heard coming from the condemned cell. When Knorr emerged, in brown prison dress, she looked composed and walked steadily to the scaffold. When asked if she had anything to say, she replied: “Yes; the Lord is with me. I do not have fear what men may do with me, for I have peace, perfect peace.” Her skirt was drawn tight around her ankles with a cord, weird chivalry intended to prevent any immodesty during the hanging. Then the noose was placed around her neck and Knorr positioned on the trapdoor. Next moment she, to use a phrase of the time, stepped into eternity. Death was instantaneous. While Knorr’s small weighty body dangled for the required amount of time before being cut down, the prison matron went into a hysterical faint, sobbing and moaning. The Chief Warder commented on Knorr: “No mistake, she was plucky, she was as brave as Ned Kelly” (21), the iconic Australian
outlaw. Such was high praise—something of which there had been little in Knorr’s life.

To conclude this representation of the very complex (though possibly a bit simple) Frances Knorr, I want to return to the Melbourne Gaol again. Following a revamp of the exhibition, the skulls are no longer displayed. Knorr’s death mask does remain on view, together with her prison photograph, and an account of the crime that expresses more sympathy for her case. It states: “Jobs were scarce, there was no state welfare and it was difficult to avoid being involved in petty crime”—let alone the major crime of infanticide.

**Knorr’s Babies**

Gladys Knorr last saw her mother two days before the execution. The January 20 *Weekly Times* described the scene: “[T]he sight of the mother clinging to the baby was particularly painful. . . . She heaped kisses on the poor little mite, and prayed that she should never know” her mother was hanged (21). There is no mention of any contact with Reita Daisy, the baby born shortly before her mother’s arrest. The following paragraph appeared in the January 4 *Argus*:

The Case of Mrs Knorr
The Infant Before the City Court

The infant Reita Daisy Knorr, which had been frequently before the City Police Court as a neglected child, was formally handed over to the custody of the department for neglected children. The child was born at Sydney shortly before Mrs Knorr was arrested on the charge of child murder (for which she is now under sentence of death). Since her arrival in Victoria the child has been in the custody of the police. An order was made by the Bench at the City Police Court for its commitment to the department for neglected children. (7)

This item appears, significantly, immediately above a report on an inquest into the death of May Kennedy, a baby-farmed child. Nobody was committed for trial in this case, although it is highly suspicious that the infant died soon after the child-care money ran out, from improper nourishment. The juxtaposition, which is ironic and also unpleasant, implies that Knorr’s judicial murder was no deterrent.

However, Reita Daisy Knorr did not share Kennedy’s fate, although her putative father (Thompson) disowned her. As she was in police custody,
the authorities were thus responsible for her welfare. Reita Daisy was fostered out from October 25, 1893, and in 1898 was formally adopted by her carers. The final entry on her file in the *Children’s Register of State Wards* is as follows: “No information having reference to this child’s parentage is to be given, as the adopting parents have been promised that such shall not on any account be disclosed” (v. 15, 298). Renamed Doris May Gladstone, she likely lived and died with no knowledge of her notorious mother.

**Postscript:**

**A Modern Knorr Relative’s Reaction**

At the May 4, 2007, launch of the book *Meaner Than Fiction*, a study of legal injustices, I met Kathy Laster, now CEO of the Victorian Law Foundation, whose work on Knorr is cited in this article. We discussed the case, and she said:

> “Did you hear what happened at the Public Record Office? Someone screamed out loud.”
> “A Knorr descendant?” I asked.
> “No, a Thwaites, researching the family history. They’d never heard about Frances Knorr before.”
> “They screamed from horror?”
> “No, the surprise—at having such a famous and well-documented relative.”

**Works Cited**


*Kreitmayer’s Waxworks Exhibition Catalogue*. Melbourne, c. 1903.


Victorian Public Records Office, series 264, file 22.