Criminal Conversations
Rowbothan, Judith, Stevenson, Kim

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Rowbothan, Judith and Kim Stevenson.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28295.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28295

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1152513
SECTION THREE

The Threat from Within

This section features the chapters examining the threats from within the boundaries of respectable society, threats from sources which were not expected to disturb the tranquility and stability of the Victorian domestic sphere because of the “normality” of their social position or expected instincts. Thus the strong emphasis here is on the conversations which highlighted how the law struggled to deal with challenges to conventionality from within and, consequently, has a strong focus on the feminine element within Victorian society, that domestic element seen as underpinning national greatness. What thus becomes apparent is the Victorian consciousness of the extent of contradictions and discontinuities between daily practice and the gender stereotypes invoked by the law, because of its inclination to view things in absolutes of positives and negatives, and their unhappiness with the consequent tensions. D’Cruze sets the scene for this section through her examination of the bewildered unhappiness caused by signs which were ambiguous and so threatening to social conventionalities, one which was eventually disposed of by identifying a form of external threat (providing a link with the previous section). This was a case which acquired national importance through the public debates over what actually took place, making it a quintessential newspaper-driven conversation. In essence, a small, even rather sordid, family tragedy, the Novelli case was poured over by readers across the nation and given a symbolic significance for wider issues of class, gender, and race. It only calmed down as it became “proved” that Mrs. Novelli’s “goodness” remained unassailed through the “eloquence” of her virtuous corpse, while her murderer was shown to be “other” in both his mental instability and his foreignness. There was therefore no “scandal.”

The remaining chapters, however, focus on issues less easily disposed of as threats coming from outside the British culture, as being the source of alien natures. Bentley examines the high profile surrounding baby-farming, when society’s expectations of maternal instincts were outraged, while the chapters
from Gleeson and Stevenson highlight the problems caused by women’s vocalization within the legal system of sexual issues affecting them: rape and husbandly duty. Edwards’s continues the discussion of the hollowness of the conventionality that a woman’s submission and her protection by the legal system were correlative, and despite some Irish involvement, the uncomfortable fact for most Victorians was that the “crimes” at the heart of these conversations were unequivocally homegrown.