The Hour of Death and The Last Women

This exhibition complements Triangle Theatre Company's project, The Last Women. The multi-faceted project culminates in April with a play at the Belgrade Theatre. Carran Waterfield, writer and director of The Last Women, explains her inspiration.

The Last Women is a response to the life stories of particular women associated with Coventry whose journeys have been full of tribulation.

In my play, my characters are drawn from material taken from the stories of Mary Ball, Mary Ann Higgins, Ruth Ellis, Mary Queen of Scots, Lady Godiva and the ancient Sumerian goddess, Inanna.

I was inspired by the artefacts and heritage sites associated with these women that are actually in Coventry. These all give some kind of magical power and meaning or "fact of the matter".

Mostly these last women are connected through the theme of execution.

I have wondered what it might have been like for those women to contemplate their impending deaths in that short time between sentencing and the final act. It is thinking the unthinkable and imagining the unimaginable that has become the artistic challenge for this work.

The world of The Last Women is not an historical re-enactment of these stories but an exploration of the minds and motives of seven "bad" women incarcerated in a fictitious condemned cell in the shadow of the gallows.

The project has its own website www.lastwomen.co.uk where you can explore material that inspired the play in more detail. To see the play you can book tickets at www.belgrade.co.uk or by phoning 024 7655 3055

Coventry, loss and remembrance

Mary Ann Higgins and Mary Ball lived, and died, in a community whose traditions were under strain. Their cases became part of the same legacy of traditions, as Coventry continued to transform itself.

As a historical researcher for The Last Women, and as a newcomer to Coventry, I have followed in the tracks of family members, and local historians, who have retold the stories of these women and passed them on to the next generation.

In layer upon layer of a city's past, the private experiences of individuals shade into the shared experiences of the local public. Occasionally, the existing remnants allow vivid, painful glimpses of what was felt, and thought, by people ever more distant from us in time.

We owe these remnants to our own families, and the surrounding community in which they have lived and died, and their choices about what should be remembered and how it can be saved.

Dr Norwood Andrews
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Norwood Andrews worked with Ali Wells, Keeper of History Collections at the Herbert to research and write this exhibition.

Coventry in 1831

Three church spires soared above narrow, crowded streets. A visitor to Coventry in 1814 called it “an important town but… not a beautiful one.” Unable to spread into surrounding common lands, builders filled back courts and gardens with dark, cramped cottages. Even 30 years later, the city was small enough for one man with a bell to walk its wards to summon weavers to a union meeting.

In a population of 27,000, no fewer than 5,000 were silk ribbon weavers. Watchmaking was the city’s second trade, although much smaller. A worker who served seven years as an apprentice could qualify as a freeman with voting rights. Coventry freemen held influence in town politics and were accustomed to defending their interests.

The market for silk ribbons was subject to drastic swings. During hard times weavers struggled to survive. They worked together to keep masters from reducing payment rates and keep factories from being built. In 1831, Josiah Beck built a workshop with nine steam-powered looms. A crowd accosted Beck, beat him, and burned down his mill. Three were convicted for rioting, and sentenced to hang, but the sentences were commuted to transportation for life.

Punishment in Coventry

For Coventry magistrates, keeping the peace could be difficult. The local constables could arrest individual lawbreakers, but could not prevent a riot. Calling out the troops might risk a massacre. The authorities chose to tolerate parades and assemblies of working men, and allowed them to voice their demands. In return, their leaders usually kept demonstrations from getting out of hand.

A long, narrow prison, called the Bridewell, stood by St John's Church from 1571. In 1776 a prison inspector found eight lodging rooms for better-off debtors and one free ward for poor debtors. There were two separate day rooms for men and women, and four dungeons, all dirty, offensive, unhealthy and dark. There was only one courtyard for all prisoners. In 1831 a new gaol was built next to the site of County Hall in Cuckoo Lane.

The traditional hanging ground was at Whitley Common, well beyond the existing city boundaries. In Coventry, as in other towns, the condemned prisoner was taken in a wagon from the gaol through the streets and out to the scaffold. The procession included the sheriff, clergymen, constables, and others representing law and order.

Poison in the household

The calm surface of the proper Victorian family sometimes hid private tensions. Most violent household crime involved the husbands, but the suspected actions of wives became a public obsession.

> Gwendolen said, “The more feminine a woman is, the more tragic it seems when she does desperate actions.”
>
> “There may be something in that,” said Mrs Davilow… “But if there is anything horrible to be done, I should like it to be left to the men.”
>
> “Oh, mamma, you are so dreadfully prosaic! As if all the great poetic criminals were not women! I think the men are poor cautious creatures.”
>
> George Eliot, Daniel Deronda

Arsenic was sold at chemist shops. Until 1851 there were no legal controls. It had common uses, in medicines, dyes, preservatives and in the control of pests.

> The atrocious crime of murder, by the administration of poison, is now fearfully on the increase in this country; and many of the cases attended with circumstances so unnatural and appalling as to defy any parallel…
>
> Poisonings are now become common… Before long, the employment of arsenic may become one of the habits or customs of English society.
>
> Leamington Spa Courier, 18 August 1849

Detecting poison

Poisoning cases occupied an entire field of medical expertise. In 1836, James Marsh developed a test for arsenic poisoning which mixed fluid from the stomach and intestines with sulphuric acid and zinc. If arsenic was present it would appear as whitish grains and crystals.

The test was complex and easily mishandled. It could pick up small amounts of arsenic from medicinal use. But it was far more precise and reliable than older, cruder methods of testing.

Toxicology became a recognised science. Further refinements and new procedures soon followed. Medical experts became credible witnesses in court. Alfred Swaine Taylor published a comprehensive Manual of Medical Jurisprudence in 1844 and testified in hundreds of cases. Surgeons and professors of chemistry studied Taylor's methods.

Symptoms of arsenic poisoning were very similar to natural causes of death, such as cholera, diarrhoea and dysentery. Many poisonings may have been mistaken for disease. The apparent surge in poisonings may reflect the improved methods of identifying poison.

Guilt and tears

Mary Ann Higgins, the 19 year old niece of William Higgins of Coventry, was tried at Warwick on 9 August 1831 for murdering her uncle. She had lived with him since her father's death.

Edward Clarke was also on trial. He was a watchmaking apprentice who had been courting Mary Ann. Clarke knew that William Higgins had saved up a large sum of money. In the weeks before William's death Clarke spent money freely and boasted that he could get more by going to the old man's house.

On 22 March, Mary Ann bought arsenic from the chemist, supposedly to kill rats. That night William fell ill, vomited repeatedly, and died. Surgeons found arsenic in his stomach and also in his pea soup. Mary Ann admitted to the poisoning but told the coroner

> that Clarke had instigated her to take her uncle's life; and that he (Clarke) had frequently beaten and ill used her when he did not have as much money from her as he wanted.

Mary Ann simply pleaded innocent, while Edward Clarke wrote a long statement in defence of himself. The jury convicted Mary Ann and acquitted Edward. As the judge sentenced Mary Ann to death, her weeping moved onlookers to tears.

The last execution on Whitley Common

Early on 11 August crowds surrounded the old gaol. Just before noon, Mary Ann was brought out with the under sheriff and Reverend S Paris. The scene was described in the Coventry Herald:

> A cart, containing a coffin, and surrounded by a body of constables, was then drawn up; the unfortunate girl stepped on a chair, and from thence into the cart, with much firmness; her eyes appeared swollen from the effects of crying; but her colour was ruddy.
>
> She sat on the coffin; the Rev Mr Paris placed himself beside her, and endeavoured to engage her attention in prayer. . .
>
> The officers on horseback, sheriff, and constables, formed themselves in processional order before the cart, and the whole moved slowly on, followed by the executioner on foot, and an immense mass of people.

Some 15,000 people were on Whitley Common. Standing on the platform by herself, Mary Ann dropped a white handkerchief as a signal. The hangman struggled with the bolts, but finally the fatal trapdoor opened.

Mary Ann's body hung for an hour. Some twenty women rubbed her right hand against their necks. This was believed to be a remedy for wens, or thick neck.

A murder in Nuneaton

Considerable excitement has been caused in the town of Nuneaton this week, by the discovery of a fatal case of poisoning there, the victim of which is, a man named Thomas Ball.

It would appear that for some time past, the deceased and his wife, Mary Ball, had led an unhappy life, in consequence of her alleged unfaithfulness to him; and this only can account for the atrocious act now imputed to her. On Friday last he went out fishing, and having caught cold… he was advised by his wife to take some gruel, which… she provided for him. After having taken this gruel, he was seized by violent sickness, vomiting, and thirst, and continued to get worse until Sunday… when he died.

A post mortem examination was made, the result of which was to prove more distinctly the presence of arsenic in the stomach; a fact which at once gave rise to suspicion against his wife, and stimulated further inquiry, when it was soon found out, that she… had purchased arsenic at the shop of Mr. Iliffe, a chemist in Nuneaton.

This is an extract from the Coventry Herald on 25 May 1849. Mary was later arrested and held in the Coventry gaol until her trial on 28 July.

Trial in Coventry

The trial of Mary Ball took more than ten hours. The courtroom was packed. Mary sat quietly as the witnesses testified.

When she bought the arsenic, she had asked her companion,

> Would such a bit as this poison anybody?

She first told the constable that she had used it all to kill bugs. Then she admitted that some was left over in a paper on the pantry shelf.

Thomas and Mary were married for 12 years and it was not a happy union. Five of their six children died at an early age. On one occasion Thomas accused her of infidelity and beat her. In the presence of neighbours Mary said that she wished he was dead.

Mary's attorney claimed that Thomas mistook the arsenic for salts, and that she then lied for fear of being blamed. The jury found Mary guilty, but recommended mercy. The judge instructed them to reconsider. They conferred briefly and returned a simple verdict. The judge put on the black cap and sentenced Mary to be hanged.

Against capital punishment

By the 1840s, reformers were pressing the case for full abolition of the death penalty. They referred to the degrading spectacle of the gallows and the unruliness of the crowd. Some merely sought to end hangings in public.

From 1836, murder convicts were allowed several days to petition for mercy, and to have the Home Secretary consider their case. Mary's attorney drafted such an appeal, describing the jury's doubts about her guilt and its initial recommendation of mercy.

The petition also stated that Mary was

> a Woman of mean Education, defective eyesight, imperfect memory, and subject to Epeleptic fits.

Others offered their own arguments. Reverend John Gordon was head minister of the Unitarian meeting house in Coventry. He sent a memorial pleading for Mary's life. Signatories included Joseph Cash, John Gulson, and other notable Coventry residents. They asked that

> the City in which they live may be saved from vicious temptation and excitement, which they cannot look forward to without disgust and dread.

Gordon also claimed that "a very strong feeling in favour" of Mary prevailed in Coventry. Nevertheless, her petitions were rejected.

A light of the Church

After her conviction, Mary was kept in Coventry gaol until her execution on 9 August 1849. Mary’s hanging was certain to draw a crowd.

A condemned prisoner was expected to confess and show remorse, though this did not always occur. For the authorities, the prisoner’s own acknowledgement of guilt would make the execution more legitimate.

The news of Mary’s confession was announced by the gaol's governor, Mr James Stanley, on the day of Mary’s execution, and also printed on a separate broadside.

This did not tell the whole story. Before Mary confessed to Mr Stanley she had spent time with the gaol chaplain, Reverend Richard Chapman. The chaplain was concerned that Mary was "of an obtuse intellect" and did not fully understand her situation. In desperation to force a confession Chapman held Mary's hand over a candle making it "very red and partially blistered".

Chapman soon resigned, but the story was not publicised until after Mary's execution.

Mary hanged in Coventry city centre

An account of Mary's hanging was published by the Coventry Herald on 10 August 1849. Mary maintained her self-possession and firmness in a remarkable degree to the last.

> Immediately after 10 o’clock yesterday morning… (Mary) proceeded up the steps with little assistance, and as far as we could observe, uttered no word whilst thus awaiting her end, but with closed eyes and saddened countenance, stood motionless whilst the rope was placed round her neck.

> In an instant afterwards the drop fell, and she passed from this life in the presence of from eighteen to twenty thousand persons, assembled not merely from Coventry, but from many miles around.

> A subdued thrill of horror appeared to pass over this immense multitude as the fatal bolt was drawn… The bulk of this mass of persons remained together till 11 o’clock, when the body was removed, and then gradually dispersed without any casualty or disaster having occurred.

The Reverend Chapman's actions were left out of the execution broadside. This undoubtedly had an effect on the public opinion of the spectacle.