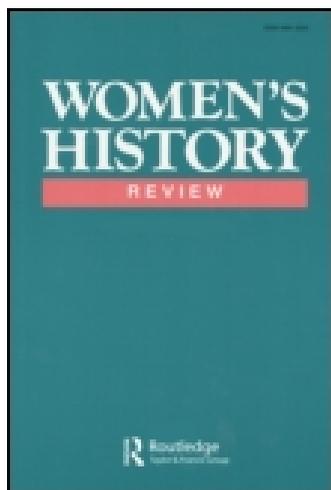


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# The Representation of 'Baby-Farmers' in the Scottish City, 1867–1908

Jim Hinks

*This article explores the manner in which women who provided paid childcare in Scotland were represented and collectively labelled with the pejorative term 'baby-farmer' across a forty-year period. It seeks to link the figure of the 'baby-farmer' to a wider sphere of discourses and moral frameworks than previously attempted, drawing parallels with other women engaged in processes of semi-public exchange. In so doing the article suggests a more complex articulation of gendered and spatial identity. In particular it asserts that the portrayal of these women was inextricably linked to wider conceptions of the Scottish city and that these pre-existing notions of urban space were integral to the representation of gender.*

## Introduction

At the conclusion of Gilbert and Sullivan's 1878 operetta *HMS Pinafore*, the character 'Buttercup' declares that 'A many years ago, when I was young and charming, as some of you may know, I practised baby-farming'.<sup>1</sup> The term 'baby-farming' is largely redundant today, but its use without qualification as a crucial plot point in *HMS Pinafore* is testament to the extraordinary cultural resonance it possessed. Whilst in widespread circulation in the second half of the nineteenth century, the term 'baby-farming' cannot be understood in a straightforward manner and, for Victorian commentators, its meaning was fluid and ill defined. It did not relate directly to a single criminal offence or practice, but to a series of

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interlinked behaviours centred on the exchange of childcare in return for financial reward. This might range from something as benign as child-minding to the systematic murder of infants by those other than their birth-parents. The label 'baby-farmer' was not something a woman would aspire to; its own application served as 'an accusation, not a profession'.<sup>2</sup> At the extreme of this continuum were women such as Margaret Waters, the so-called 'Brixton Baby-Farmer', executed in 1870. Waters was believed to have run a sophisticated operation, advertising her services in newspapers before methodically disposing of her charges, often the offspring of unmarried parents, for a one-off fee. The 'Brixton Baby-Farming' case sparked considerable interest within the London press and Margaret Waters was vilified, labelled by *The Times* as a 'woman divested of all the kindly nature of her sex ... [all] for some miserable gain'.<sup>3</sup>

The Waters case captivated the popular press, but the use of the term 'baby-farmer' was already widespread. A series of articles condemning the practice had appeared in the *British Medical Journal* from October 1867 onwards.<sup>4</sup> However, knowledge of this term was not confined to the readership of the *British Medical Journal* for long and it soon found much wider application outside the confines of the medical community. The years 1867–72 saw a flurry of activity that shaped legal and medical reactions to 'baby-farming'. It included the first published mention of the term, the sustained campaigning efforts of the *British Medical Journal*, the Waters trial and the subsequent parliamentary report on the Protection of Infant Life in 1871. This half-decade of intense scrutiny was concluded by the passage of the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act, which forced paid childcare providers receiving more than one infant into their care to register with local authorities. Local authorities could refuse to register houses thought to be unsuitable and breaches of the act could be punished by a fine of up to £5 or six months' imprisonment.<sup>5</sup> The 1872 Act has been dismissed as a 'resounding failure' that was easily evaded and failed to protect infants in paid childcare.<sup>6</sup>

The agitation in the *British Medical Journal* may be understood as part of a wider attempt by medical elites to police the boundaries of childcare practice, and to demonstrate what Ann Higginbotham described as the 'social benefits of their technical expertise'.<sup>7</sup> Margaret Arnot asserted that the selection of the term 'baby-farmer' was not arbitrary and that it possessed considerable allegorical power.<sup>8</sup> Farming is an economic activity and an unsentimental one at that; it requires farmers to acquire, raise and slaughter their stock and, in doing so, maximise their return. The motif of finance and exchange appeared in the *British Medical Journal* throughout the period 1867–72, describing the 'regular trade in infants' and baby-farming as a 'line of business'.<sup>9</sup> This also manifested itself in a belief that 'wholesale destruction of infant life has become a regular trade' and infants were being dispatched by starvation or by outright murder.<sup>10</sup> This attempt by the medical profession to frame the debate around paid childcare and equate 'baby-farming' with infant murder has had two important outcomes for scholarship in this area. Firstly, it has obscured the fact that a vast range of behaviours was described by the umbrella term 'baby-farming', and murderous 'baby-farmers' formed a very small proportion of those to whom the label was

applied.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, throughout the period in question, accepting a child into one's care along with payment was not in itself a criminal offence, and in Scotland—the focus of this article—the business of adoption did not fall under the aegis of the state until 1930.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the manner in which a series of established paid-child-care practices were linked and labelled as problematic powerfully illustrates the difficulties of treating baby-farming as a category of analysis, forcing recognition that 'baby-farming' cannot be studied independently from its representation in the media.

In the only full-length study of baby-farming in England, Ruth Homrighaus highlighted a lack of analytical sophistication in earlier attempts to explore the subject.<sup>13</sup> She asserted that the earliest attempts to analyse baby-farming did not consider the way in which the phrase 'baby-farmer' was deployed deliberately by the *British Medical Journal* and other campaigning groups to link the labour of honest childcarers with that of cold-blooded murderesses.<sup>14</sup> By taking the term at face-value, Homrighaus asserted that 'historians commonly characterize baby farming as a form of infanticide-for-hire that flourished briefly in urban England in the 1860s and 1870s.'<sup>15</sup> This approach is apparent in Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt's otherwise exhaustive two-volume work on the history of child welfare in England, which dismissed 'baby-farming' as an obscure subcategory of infanticide, 'in which the infant soon languished and died'.<sup>16</sup> Homrighaus's own work emphasised that 'honest' baby-farmers performed a useful function to 'single mothers who lacked the support of family and friends and would have found it difficult to keep themselves and their infants out of the workhouse'.<sup>17</sup>

Writing in the mid 1980s, Lionel Rose attempted to establish 'baby-farming' as an autonomous cultural practice. Rose suggested discontinuities between the treatment of women who had murdered their own infants and 'baby-farmers' convicted of causing the death of an infant in their care. Nineteenth-century juries had a 'notorious aversion to convicting mothers' of the murder of their own infants and such women could often rely on a sympathetic hearing.<sup>18</sup> The contrast between this and the reception afforded to paid childcare providers could not be greater; so-called 'baby-farmers' were usually left to face the full force of judicial and journalistic ire. Annette Ballinger has indicated that the 'baby-farmer' was amongst the most 'despised and stigmatised' figures in legal, medical and journalistic circles.<sup>19</sup> She claims that of the five women hanged in England and Wales in the earliest years of the twentieth century, four of them made their livings as 'baby-farmers'. Homrighaus has developed this theme and attributed the deviant status accorded to 'baby-farmers' to be a product of the fact that they had killed an infant that was not their own, sullyng their 'natural' feminine role of child-rearing with pecuniary considerations.<sup>20</sup> Margaret Arnot has also attempted to deconstruct the 'baby-farming' scandal with remarkable subtlety. Focusing her attention on the period 1867–72, she unravelled the often complex legal, medical and political processes in relation to the passage of the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act. Arnot's analysis has been immensely useful in contextualising 'baby-farming' and has shed new light on the deliberations surrounding it.<sup>21</sup> Meta-level analysis, however sophisticated, needs to be complemented by regional-level studies that

emphasise that the label of 'baby-farmer' was applied to specific women located in highly specific places. Tentative work in this direction has been undertaken by Shurlee Swain, who mapped the distribution of 'baby-farmers' in Melbourne. Swain discovered that 'baby-farmers' in Australia's largest city were based within a tight cluster around the Women's Hospital. Swain asserted that the lodging houses in which 'baby-farmers' resided were interspersed with other informal maternity and childcare providers, such as those providing accommodation for single women in confinement or midwives offering abortions, in a 'mutually beneficial and enduring' relationship with the hospital and each other.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, the focus on Scotland in this article is essential for a series of related reasons. Within an already under-researched field the overwhelming majority of scholarship on baby-farming has been orientated towards England.<sup>23</sup> This is particularly problematic as Scotland had, and continues to have, a separate legal system and child welfare provision, and different population distributions which may fundamentally alter the manner in which 'baby-farming' was discursively constructed. In particular there are two key cultural trends that point to the necessity of treating Scottish reactions to 'baby-farming' as distinct from those in England. Firstly, Scotland and England displayed different patterns of childbirth and infant mortality. Infants born in Scottish cities were less likely to survive into adulthood than those born in England. Glasgow in particular had horrifically high infant mortality rates, recorded at 153 per 1000 births in 1900.<sup>24</sup> Whilst it is impossible to comment authoritatively on the mortality rate of infants in paid childcare due to the widespread evasion of birth and death registration, Glasgow's Medical Officer of Health estimated in 1874 that an unregistered child born outside of marriage only had a 45% chance of surviving beyond its first birthday.<sup>25</sup> The 1871 Infant Life Protection Committee explicitly linked childbirth outside marriage, 'baby-farming' and the city, by asserting that the conditions of urban life and the 'promiscuous mingling of the sexes in that environment' had created the perfect conditions for the 'baby-farmer' to flourish.<sup>26</sup> However, this construction in no way reflects the perception or the reality of Scottish birth patterns. Throughout the period in question Scotland had higher levels of 'illegitimate' childbirth than England.<sup>27</sup> The birth of children outside of marriage in Scotland was perceived as a rural phenomenon, promoted by a system of labour that allowed farmworkers unsupervised contact with members of the opposite sex, rather than the product of morally dissolute and illiterate city dwellers.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary observers remained steadfast in their belief that 'baby-farming' was an exclusively urban phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> The 1871 Infant Life Protection Select Committee concluded that 'baby-farming in the great towns of Scotland' was prevalent and undertaken by people 'criminal in character'.<sup>30</sup> As a result, anxiety about 'baby-farming' in Scotland's cities cannot be wholly explained in terms of fears about illegitimacy and is likely to be linked to a wider set of cultural concerns. Secondly, Scotland's welfare professionals were more willing to countenance forms of pecuniary childcare than their English counterparts. This found official expression in the practice of 'boarding out' pauper children from Scotland's cities with paid childcarers in remote rural

districts. Whilst not confined to Scotland, 'boarding out' proved a remarkably durable and popular solution for Scottish welfare agencies until well into the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> This effectively created a set of state-sanctioned pecuniary childcarers, as in some marginal rural settlements 'the only money coming in would be what the children would bring'.<sup>32</sup> It may be asserted that the critical difference between these two types of pecuniary childcare was not practice, but location: 'boarding out' involved the transfer of children from Scotland's urban core to its romanticised rural periphery. Lynn Abrams has asserted that the alleged benefits of 'boarding out' were expressed in terms of removing children 'from the urban slums to the rural districts where they might flourish away from the harmful influences of the city'.<sup>33</sup>

Far from being a passive backdrop to events, place was seen by Victorian commentators as having a symbiotic relationship with behaviour. Contemporary commentators often claimed that the physical decay of the urban environment had a causal relationship with its moral decay.<sup>34</sup> This article shares Swain's interest in spatiality, but seeks to extend this work to consider the imaginative as well as the physical landscape the Scottish 'baby-farmer' occupied. It will explore how the character and behaviour of specific women labelled as 'baby-farmers' was linked to specific sites within the urban environment and the role that this process played in the creation and maintenance of their identities. This article will also build upon Homrighaus's attempt to deconstruct the category of the 'baby-farmer' and explore how journalistic, medical, political and legal practitioners operating in urban Scotland applied the term. By utilising newspaper coverage, published works of Scotland's moral reformers and Scottish evidence presented to the 1871 and 1908 Select Committees on the Protection of Infant Life, it will allow the figure of the 'baby-farmer' to be linked to a wider sphere of discourses and moral frameworks than has previously been attempted. The second key aim of this article is to compare the rhetoric of ruling-class narratives around 'baby-farmers' to the reality of their lived experience in urban Scotland. Particular attention will be devoted to the manner in which these women resisted such labelling and renegotiated their identity. It will allow the notion that the 'baby-farmer' was a uniquely despised and deviant figure on the urban scene to be critically interrogated, rather than merely assumed. This will be achieved by the examination of Court precognition papers in the cases of Barbara Gray (1881) and Jessie King (1888). Gray and King were the only two paid childcarers during this period to appear in the Scottish High Court after infants died in their charge. This approach will allow the voices of the women themselves, along with those of the wider community, to be heard. It will also recognise their capacity for agency within the strictures of nineteenth-century gender and class relations.

### **Scotland, 'Baby-farmers' and the Press**

The initial outbreak of anxiety about 'baby-farming' cases coincided with what Charles Donaldson characterised as the 'invasion of the printed word' into Scottish life.<sup>35</sup> Falling production costs, new technologies and increasing levels of

literacy allowed newspapers to acquire a significant readership in Scotland's major cities and it is likely that provincial newspapers played a crucial role in mediating ordinary people's experiences of 'baby-farming'. 'Baby-farming' stories began to appear in the Scottish press shortly after the *British Medical Journal* had forced the issue into the spotlight. Such accounts were rarely front-page news, but remained a staple of Scottish press coverage until the outbreak of the First World War. This was in sharp contrast to the *British Medical Journal* which, by 1896, had dismissed baby-farming as a 'relic of the sixties'.<sup>36</sup> Whilst the use of the term 'baby-farming' appears to be adopted wholesale from the *British Medical Journal* and underpinned by a broad understanding that it related to commercial childcare provision, distinct patterns in its usage were immediately apparent. Both the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman* appear to have adopted a broader use of the term, ranging from women providing illegal terminations to long-term institutional care provided by Catholic nuns.<sup>37</sup> It is also striking that regional variations in the use of the term emerged. In Dundee, for example, it appears to have been used to refer to practices of child abuse and neglect, regardless of who perpetrated them, rather than a class or category of women. The press in Dundee used the term to refer to neglectful kin-carers and, on one occasion, a mother who had 'baby-farmed' her child.<sup>38</sup> The plurality of the press in Scotland was also compounded by the use of syndication, so that within a single issue of a given newspaper, two contradictory views on baby-farming could be presented.<sup>39</sup> Despite these caveats, it is possible to detect certain broad themes within the coverage of these women, which prompt a reconsideration of how they were represented in journalistic discourses.

The Scottish press did not deny that the informal adoption of infants was undertaken in exchange for a fee, but it did contest the notion that the women receiving these infants had murderous intentions. If issues pertaining to 'baby-farming' in Scotland were acknowledged at all, they were limited to reporting minor breaches of the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act in the Sheriff Courts, which required those receiving more than one infant to notify local authorities. These short articles often went to great pains to stress that the offenders were 'people of good character who had acted in ignorance of the Act'.<sup>40</sup> This contradicted the findings of the 1871 Infant Life Protection Committee, which had been unambiguous in its assertion that 'baby-farming' in Scotland was largely 'criminal in character'.<sup>41</sup> There was a steadfast belief that the wilful neglect and outright murder of 'farmed' infants was not a problem in Scottish cities and that the real evils of the baby-farming system were perpetrated elsewhere. The *Glasgow Herald* aimed to reassure its readers that murderous 'baby-farming' was 'mercifully confined to the Metropolis'.<sup>42</sup> Particular scorn was heaped upon the London-based *Evening Standard's* 1874 allegation that a 'baby-farmer' had been sighted in Glasgow with a dead child. In a rebuttal that stopped just short of accusing the *Evening Standard* of fabrication, the *Glasgow Herald* commented with thinly-veiled sarcasm that they were 'sure that such a fantastic event could not have been made up'.<sup>43</sup> It is also striking that the portrayal of such women contrasts with the blanket condemnation meted out to them in the *British Medical*

*Journal*. Whilst the attitude shown to women labelled as ‘baby-farmers’ by the Scottish press could not be constituted as approving, there was a sense that they were considered ‘indispensable’ and an acceptance that the ‘baby-farmer’ would be a permanent fixture of urban life.<sup>44</sup> The *Glasgow Herald* appeared to be more attuned to the realities of city life than the *British Medical Journal* when it commented in 1870 that ‘baby-farming’ would continue ‘so long as there are men and there are women and there is sin’.<sup>45</sup> It is possible to contend that the picture that emerges from an examination of the Scottish press, particularly before the 1889 trial of Jessie King, is of a resigned acceptance. It is also striking that there was no sustained agitation for forcing these women into a framework of legislation or supervision. The sense that Scotland was relatively untroubled by murderous ‘baby-farmers’ was shared by some Scottish physicians. This was communicated to the *British Medical Journal* by Dr James Starke, who stated that two peculiarities of Scots law removed ‘inducement to the destruction of the child’.<sup>46</sup> The legitimisation of infants if their parents subsequently married and the legal responsibility of parents to register the birth or death of their child were thought to provide safeguards against the lurid practices alleged to have occurred in London.<sup>47</sup>

A less charitable interpretation of the Scottish press’s unwillingness to apply the template of the murderous ‘baby-farmer’ to Scotland is that classified advertisements were a popular medium for the exchange of infants. Both the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman* regularly carried advertisements for commercial child-carers. It would be an unusual classified column that did not include advertisements placed by those seeking or offering childcare, usually informal adoption, in exchange for a fee. These advertisements seem to encapsulate the ambiguous position of the ‘baby-farmer’: they were required to give enough information to make their purpose clear, yet at the same time present a veneer of respectability.

A typical example read: ‘**Party**, Superior home wishes to adopt infant child absolutely, state terms. *Scotsman* Office B89’.<sup>48</sup> The proliferation of these notices, each of which could expect to receive approximately thirty responses from parents seeking to place unwanted infants, gives an indication of how widespread ‘baby-farming’ was across both cities.<sup>49</sup>

It is only possible to speculate what parents imagined the fate of their offspring would be. Homrighaus suggested that parents may have been wilfully ignorant of the fate of their infants. This was facilitated by a legal system which granted parents ‘the best of both worlds ... they made use of criminal baby farmers’ services and then, when the baby farmers faced imprisonment, claimed that they had been hoodwinked’.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the representation of parents, particularly mothers, who surrendered their infants is a little-considered element in the development of narratives around ‘baby-farming’. As already asserted, the imaginative constructions around ‘baby-farmers’ were distinct from the treatment of women convicted of murdering their own infants. The sympathetic treatment afforded to the latter group by the courts and the press can also be detected in the representation of mothers who had surrendered their infant to ‘baby-farmers’ in Scotland, particularly during the 1860s and 1870s. The Glasgow-based *North British Daily Mail* in

particular extended considerable sympathy to them. In 1871 the paper documented the case of an Edinburgh servant-girl, 'seduced under promise of marriage by a man above her own station', abandoned by her seducer and then undertaking a dramatic rescue of her infant from the clutches of the 'baby-farmer'.<sup>51</sup> Whilst it is impossible to comment on the veracity of the account, its significance lies in the manner in which the story was presented and the selection of this case as representative. The article's focus on the mother's attempts to recover her 'darling babe' rather than her decision to surrender the child in the first place, emphasises her 'natural' maternal concern and self-sacrifice, in stark contrast to the greed of the 'baby-farmer'.<sup>52</sup> This sympathetic account of a young woman's seduction and abandonment by her social superior and her eventual redemption is clearly influenced by the older literary tradition of melodrama.<sup>53</sup>

The figure of the naive domestic servant seduced by her worldly-wise social superior was already an archetype known to Victorian readers, having 'embellished numerous charity appeals' and likely to attract compassion.<sup>54</sup> 'Baby-farming' lent itself well to such representations.<sup>55</sup> The advertisements in *The Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald* offering informal adoption ranged from £15 to £100, figures beyond the means of most working-class women, leading to suggestions that fees were met by a wealthier man. This view was endorsed by Scottish witnesses at the Infant Life Protection Committee of 1871; William Cameron asserted that birth mothers in Scotland were, in the majority of cases, servant-girls who were victims of 'seduction for the first time' at the hands of men of a higher social class.<sup>56</sup> The tolerance extended to those who gave their infants to 'baby-farmers' may also reflect the fact that their behaviour did little to upset social norms of motherhood and arguably served to reaffirm them. By giving birth to and disposing of their infants in secret, they tacitly acknowledged that they had internalised the norms of respectable motherhood and the shame of illegitimacy. Their actions also spoke of what the *Glasgow Herald* described in 1870 as the 'understandable desire of such women to restore their reputation in society'.<sup>57</sup> By contrast, the baby-farmer had less capacity to evoke narratives of seduction and abandonment.<sup>58</sup>

The unproblematic opposition of the virtuous birth mother and the avaricious 'baby-farmer' was beset with difficulties and could not survive the unique and specific circumstances generated by the execution of Jessie King in 1889. Jessie King was the only Scottish 'baby-farmer' to be convicted of murder and her trial marks the point at which the Scottish press was forced to halt assertions that murderous 'baby-farming' was not a problem in Scotland's cities. King was a twenty-seven-year-old laundress who had recently moved from Glasgow to Edinburgh. She came to the attention of the authorities after a dead infant was found near the lodging house in which she lived. King had lived in conditions of poverty and had only received one infant into her care at any one time. She appeared to have made little attempt to conceal the corpse of the dead infant. The King case was extensively covered and the press eagerly reported on her arrest, trial and execution. It is possible to argue that it was with King that the press collectively 'discovered' 'trade in other people's bairns ... more common in

Scotland than has yet been proclaimed' and declared it 'a thing most injurious to the state of society'.<sup>59</sup>

The constructions around King were far more complex than in earlier press representations of 'baby-farmers' in Scotland. Initially she was cast as a 'wretched woman ... without the slightest compunction of conscience', whose 'object of greed and gain is particularly base and cowardly'.<sup>60</sup> However, in the three weeks between her trial and execution, the constructions around her identity began to shift, seemingly inspired by her rediscovery of her religious identity and penitence.<sup>61</sup> King, who had a child of her own, was increasingly described in terms of her maternal role and her concern for the future welfare of her son, 'the work after her own salvation that she has most at heart'.<sup>62</sup> Running concurrently with this construction of Jessie King as a mother and penitent sinner was the assertion that her actions may have been motivated not by malice, but by mental illness.<sup>63</sup> *The Scotsman* in particular made considerable capital from the revelation that King 'had been an inmate of a hospital in Glasgow' and had reported 'defects of a mental nature'.<sup>64</sup> It is, therefore, apparent that King was not represented by the Scottish press in a straightforward manner. This is in contrast to Annette Ballinger's belief that 'baby-farmers' possessed a fixed identity as women who had stepped furthest 'beyond the boundary of acceptable [female] behaviour'.<sup>65</sup> Jessie King simultaneously occupied three separate roles within the paradigm of late-nineteenth-century gender relations and it is possible to see the figure of King as a 'floating signifier' in which the complexities and ambiguities of her identity could be applied to a number of functions. These multifaceted representations of King are particularly noteworthy, as her life story offered ample scope for the press to have constructed a full-scale demonology had they wished to do so. King was an unmarried mother who had given birth in a Magdalene Home and left her child in Glasgow to live out of wedlock with an older man in Edinburgh. Whilst condemnation was heaped upon her, it was also interwoven with equally powerful narratives of penitence, redemption and 'natural' maternal concern, which increasingly came to the fore as her execution approached.

The representation of the child's mother in the context of this trial also demonstrates that the rhetorical positions adopted by the newspapers were not sustained when faced with the reality of the King case. The *North British Daily Mail*, which had previously romanticised the plight of those who had handed their infants into commercial childcare, now campaigned with equal vigour to extend criminal sanction to those mothers who 'rid themselves of their responsibility by passing on children to the baby farmers for a consideration'.<sup>66</sup> They were joined in this by *The Scotsman*, which was pitiless in its attack on Catherine Gunn, the mother of the murdered infant. It accused her of selecting King 'solely on the basis of her cheapness'<sup>67</sup> and emphasised the economic relationship between the two women, describing them as 'partners in baby-farming'.<sup>68</sup> This representation of Gunn as equally responsible for the death of her infant may reflect the fact that as a mature woman of twenty-eight, it was more difficult to present her as an *ingénue*, wickedly seduced. Nevertheless, this growing willingness to

question the behaviour of mothers suggests a less absolute mapping of gender and maternal roles than previously articulated in this context.

### **The North British Daily Mail and 'Baby Farming in Scotland'**

A series of nine articles, published under the collective title 'Baby Farming in Scotland', which appeared from April 1871 in the *North British Daily Mail*, constitutes the most substantial single piece of journalism on the topic of 'baby-farming' in Scotland. These articles might be considered something of an anomaly; the paper adopted a far harder line on the topic of 'baby-farming' than any other Scottish newspaper. The 'Baby-farming in Scotland' pieces are too impressionistic and value-laden to shed much light on the realities of extra-parental care in Scottish cities, but remain an extremely rich source for exploring how paid childcare providers were linked to wider discourses and their environment. This in part can be attributed to the paper's editor, Charles Cameron, a prominent Glasgow physician and aspirant Liberal member of parliament who gave evidence to the Infant Life Protection Select Committee.<sup>69</sup> Spanning journalistic, political and medical discourses, Cameron would have been aware of the *British Medical Journal's* investigative approach and appears to have been directly influenced by it in a way other newspaper editors were not. Despite this medical background, this series of nine articles could not be described as either sedate or scholarly. Cameron's approach was simple yet effective; he placed a series of bogus advertisements in both the Glasgow and Edinburgh press and was thus able to make contact with a number of women offering pecuniary childcare. Posing as a relative wishing to place an infant with these women, he was able to observe their activities at first hand.

From these investigations, Cameron claimed to have located two distinct types of women practising 'baby-farming'. On the outskirts of Edinburgh, he located a large-scale 'baby-farmer', a woman whose wanton cruelty and scale of operation far exceeded even that of Margaret Waters. Cameron asserted that at these premises he saw numerous infants lying 'like drugged miniature aunt sallies' who were 'neither nursed nor fed', with the evident understanding that they would be allowed to die as quickly as possible.<sup>70</sup> The *North British Daily Mail* did not even name the place in which the practice was alleged to have occurred, content to describe it as 'a little seaside town in the view of Arthur's seat ... within easy distance of the Scottish metropolis'.<sup>71</sup> The actions of this woman with her 'neatly-stocked garden' and imposing house are a point of contrast to the malevolence of her actions, rather than being intimately linked to them. This middle-class practitioner is portrayed as innately 'wicked', taking a sadistic pleasure 'in whipping the babies until they went into a fit'.<sup>72</sup>

The significance of place plays out in very differently in Cameron's portrayal of 'baby-farming' in Glasgow. Here, Cameron identified a wholly different category of women offering extra-parental care. Cameron represented the women he encountered in Glasgow as being drunken and ignorant elderly women whose 'starving and beating' of their charges was the product of the brutality of the

Glasgow residuum rather than the borderline sadism displayed by the middle-class 'baby-famer'.<sup>73</sup> The association between the physical and moral degradation in Glasgow is both explicit and unquestioned in the *North British Daily Mail* articles. It is treated as axiomatic that the 'slatternly old woman' and the 'wild woman taken to liquor' who practised 'baby-farming' resided in 'the worst and most overcrowded areas' of the city.<sup>74</sup> Whilst it is unclear whether the authors imply that these women are the product of their environment, or their indolence and immorality has caused the physical decay around them, they are symbiotically linked in the authors' minds. It is when the alleged barbarous treatment of infants is placed in this setting that it becomes digestible for its intended audience.

The centrality of the urban environment to the *North British Daily Mail's* investigation into baby-farming in Glasgow was significant in its construction as an urban practice and the location of 'baby-farmers' within a highly specific locale. These articles are vividly sensuous, portraying 'the murky puddles and an odorous dunghill' which greet the author. The high level of topographical detail in these reports allow the reader to trace the author's progress street by street.<sup>75</sup> The Glasgow-based articles resemble a travelogue in which the author is compelled by grim fascination to grope 'through narrow dark closes where baleful odours are redolent of sickness and disease' in order to seek out 'baby-farmers' within their selected area of investigation—Glasgow's Central District.<sup>76</sup> Formerly the medieval core of the city, by the middle of the nineteenth century the Central District had been transformed into one of the most densely populated and squalid urban spaces in Western Europe. The route of Cameron's investigation was roughly triangular and encompassed the particularly densely populated quarter-mile between High Street, Trongate and Saltmarket.

Charles Cameron's decision to patrol this area appears to be shaped by an existing codification of the Central District as a suitable imaginative landscape onto which to graft such narratives. In her study of nineteenth-century London, Judith Walkowitz documented the activities of the metropolis's urban explorers. Drawing upon the nascent discipline of anthropology, these almost exclusively male, middle-class writers traversed the cityscape, subjecting the poor to their gaze.<sup>77</sup> Glasgow possessed its own literary tradition of urban exploration and in the decade before Cameron's investigation, 'Shadow' and J. Smith had traversed the same streets as Charles Cameron with the same assumed right of inspection and desire to make visible the hitherto unknowable.<sup>78</sup> Not only did Charles Cameron explore the same landscape, he appears to have adopted the rhetorical devices pioneered by the Glasgow urban explorers, particularly the device of casting the area as a 'labyrinth of horrors': the author expertly guides his reader 'safely through it, much like a forest jungle'.<sup>79</sup> The urban explorers also appear to make the same ready association between the physical environment and the moral condition of its residents, describing 'houses that are as revolting as their residents'.<sup>80</sup> Clear similarities can be detected in the manner in which Cameron and the earlier generation of urban explorers represented the women they encountered. Whilst women engaged in the exchange of childcare for money were not the target of the venom of these earlier accounts, it was the 'debased and shattered'

women engaged in the exchange of sexual intercourse for money who were.<sup>81</sup> It is striking to note that Cameron marshalled the vocabulary of prostitution to condemn the dehumanised and 'immoral and improper women' who engaged in 'baby-farming'.<sup>82</sup> Like the urban explorers who came before him, Cameron saw the presence of a group of women operating a 'trade' as contributing to, and symptomatic of, the 'deep darkness of the Central District'.<sup>83</sup>

In many senses the association of those selling sex with those selling childcare constitutes a logical extension of the assertion that the defining feature of 'baby-farming' was the process of economic exchange. This suggests that, within the context of Glasgow at least, there is a compelling case for drawing parallels to the representation of other women involved in semi-clandestine economic exchange. The buying and selling of childcare and the buying and selling of sex were not directly criminalised; the activities surrounding them were. The representation of these women as practitioners of a 'trade' is also significant as it serves to link concerns about these women to wider discourses around the moral and physical degradation of women in paid employment, which had been persistent concerns since the earliest days of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>84</sup> However, the 'trade' these women engaged in may be thought to be almost uniquely transgressive as they were offering for sale the very things that were held to define their femininity—their 'natural' reproductive and maternal roles.

### Contested Identity and Self-definition

The two distinct portrayals of 'baby-farmers' within the pages of the *North British Daily Mail* suggest that the paper was developing two separate constructions formulated on the class identity and spatial situation of the alleged practitioner. In a case such as this, where the subject's brutality could not be explained by the brutality of her surroundings, the only logical conclusion for the *North British Daily Mail* to reach was that she was innately evil. Neil Davie has described the early history of criminology as characterised by a conflict between advocates of 'Darwinian biology, racial anthropology and French psychiatry', who saw deviant behaviour as being caused by the perpetrator's genetic makeup, and sociologists such as Alexandre Lacassange and Gabriel Tarde, who posited cultural and social explanations of criminality.<sup>85</sup> It is possible to see this unresolved tension in the *North British Daily Mail's* formulation of two discrete types of 'baby-farmer'. The construction of two groups of women, one driven by innate evil and another by their social milieu, makes a crude attempt to draw upon both sides of the 'nurture/nature' debate in explaining 'baby-farming' to the paper's readership. However, these processes of definition did not go unchallenged, especially by women to whom the label 'baby-farmer' was applied. Within the context of late-nineteenth-century gender relations, women labelled as 'baby-farmers' had a capacity for self-definition and an ability to resist these labels. Precognition papers from the trials of Jessie King and Barbara Gray reveal that both women contested the label of 'baby-farmer', albeit in radically different ways. King attempted to present herself as a woman who had taken in infants out of a sense of misplaced affection

rather than malevolent intent: 'We were both very fond of infants, but found we could not keep it ... whilst Thomas Pearson [her partner] was away I strangled the child. I did this because I had no means of supporting the child'.<sup>86</sup> This approach is radically different from the one adopted by Barbara Gray. Gray received a ten-month sentence in 1881 for the culpable homicide of an infant she had received in exchange for £15. Gray was a well-established 'baby-farmer' and had lived in a number of addresses across the city. In this time Gray appears to have acquired a reputation for being a provider of pecuniary childcare within the medical community in Edinburgh and the scale of her operation seems to have been quite substantial. Like King, Barbara Gray was also a mother but did not draw upon maternal discourses in mounting her defence. She did not seek to fudge the issue of whether she derived her income from receiving other people's children, but presented herself as a competent and professional practitioner of pecuniary childcare. Gray asserted that as so many infants had passed through her hands, a number of them were likely to 'weaken in a way that infants at the bottle do'.<sup>87</sup> Gray asserted that she 'had the finest doctors to them' and mentioned she had successfully raised a number of children, 'one of the strangers is still with us now and is a fine, healthy boy'.<sup>88</sup>

Barbara Gray could marshal an impressive array of character witnesses to testify to her professional aptitude, including a local doctor, who attested to her competence, and the local vicar's wife who asserted that 'I found things in the house perfectly clean and tidy. I saw an infant she was nursing several times; it was often in her arms. It was cleanly kept'.<sup>89</sup> At the trial itself Gray's counsel invoked and inverted the dominant maternalist paradigm in her defence. He argued that whilst there were 'no more carefully bought up children of that class', even a competent 'baby-farmer' such as Gray could not reasonably be expected to 'have the same anxious solicitude over the children' as their own mothers.<sup>90</sup> It suggests that a lower threshold of care was applied to infants who had 'been deprived of a mother's care and mother's nourishment, confined to the care of a perfect stranger'.<sup>91</sup> Gray's ability to call upon a range of witnesses who were prepared to attest to her good character suggests that at the community level she was not seen as irredeemably deviant. It is also instructive to note that Gray had strong ties to the 'respectable' medical community. Mary Fraser, the Matron of the Royal Simpson Maternity Hospital, had handed a number of infants over to Gray, seemingly with the consent of the hospital hierarchy, even receiving payment from mothers of unwanted infants on behalf of Gray.<sup>92</sup> This powerfully suggests that urban communities in late-nineteenth-century Scotland were able to integrate 'baby-farmers' into more formal medical structures and that they displayed a degree of realism about the management of unwanted childbirth.

Nevertheless, there was anxiety concerning the semi-public networks of such women. King had been employed as a laundress. Trial precognition papers reveal that the laundry had been a key forum in which she had offered her services and had drawn upon the services of other colleagues engaged in pecuniary childcare. Margaret Lockhart, who worked alongside King, was approached to take an infant from King, in exchange for a regular weekly payment. Lockhart responded

that she could not accept the child: 'I was already engaged to attend to a woman in confinement, but I agreed to help when I was no [sic] engaged'.<sup>93</sup> This conversation would have occurred within weeks of King's arrival in Edinburgh and she appears to have rapidly plugged into an existing shadow economy. Indeed, before the murdered infant had arrived into King's possession, he had passed through the hands of four other paid childcare providers, who had collectively formed a network of personal contacts.<sup>94</sup> Concerns about this phenomenon had been articulated by Charles Cameron at the 1870 Infant Life Protection Committee. Cameron speculated that washerwomen could 'go amongst them, from house to house, working in wash houses common to half a dozen to a dozen families'.<sup>95</sup> It can be argued that the presence of these women in a state of partial visibility was a cause of acute anxiety in the context of the mid nineteenth century. It demonstrated that the male gaze over the urban environment, as exemplified by the figure of the *flâneur*, was far from complete.

### Conclusions

This article has made an attempt to deconstruct the complex meanings contained within the term 'baby-farming' across the period 1867–1908. The selective application of this term to largely working-class women in Scottish cities drew heavily on the vocabulary pioneered by the *British Medical Journal*. However, the meanings attached to it were profoundly different. The term 'baby-farmer' was contested between and within discourses and informed by a complex set of spatial, temporal, class and gender imperatives that often worked in contradictory ways. In the context of Scotland, it becomes important to stop thinking about 'baby-farmers' as unambiguously deviant women. Throughout the period in question, 'baby-farmers' retained a capacity, albeit a limited one, to frame their own identity and they were not universally condemned as 'deviant women'. This is most apparent in the representation of Jessie King, who embodied a number of roles within the spectrum of late-nineteenth-century gender and class relations. Abandoning the notion of 'baby-farmers' in Scotland as deviant outcast women allows for a richer and more nuanced consideration of their role within Scottish urban history. The liminality of these women led to a constant and complex negotiation of identity across a forty-year period, creating multiple and in some cases contradictory representations within the cityscape. Along with laundresses and women engaged in the sale of sex, the 'baby-farmer' occupied a curious space, accessing both public and private spheres, yet confined and reducible to neither of these categories.

### Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- [1] Arthur Seymour Sullivan & W. S. Gilbert (2002) *HMS Pinafore: Vocal Score* (New York: Dover Publishing), p. 209.
- [2] Ruth Ellen Homrighaus (2010) *Baby Farming: the care of illegitimate children in England 1860–1943*, revised edn (PhD, University of North Carolina), p. 4.
- [3] *The Times* (5 July 1870), p. 7.
- [4] *British Medical Journal* (19 October 1867), p. 343. (Hereafter *BMJ*.)
- [5] Harry Hendrick (1994) *Child Welfare: England 1872–1989* (London: Routledge), p. 47.
- [6] George K. Behlmer (1982) *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England 1870–1908* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 38.
- [7] Ann R. Higginbotham (1992) Sin of the Age: infanticide and illegitimacy in Victorian London, in Kristine Otteson Garrigan (Ed.) *Victorian Scandals: representations of gender and class* (Athens: Ohio University Press) p. 263.
- [8] Margaret Arnot (1994) Infant Death, Childcare and the State: the baby-farming scandal and the first infant protection legislation of 1872, *Continuity and Change*, 9, pp. 271–311.
- [9] *BMJ* (12 January 1871), p. 23.
- [10] *BMJ* (18 January 1868), p. 372.
- [11] Harry Hendrick (1997) *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 41.
- [12] Adoption was enshrined in law by The Adoption of Children (Scotland) Act, 1930.
- [13] Homrighaus, *Baby Farming*.
- [14] Homrighaus, *Baby Farming*, p. 10.
- [15] Homrighaus, *Baby Farming*, p. ii.
- [16] Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, (1973) *Children in English Society from the Eighteenth Century to the Children Act 1948*, Vol. II (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 597.
- [17] Homrighaus, *Baby Farming*, p. 10.
- [18] Lionel Rose (1986) *The Massacre of the Innocents: infanticide in Britain 1800–1939* (London: Routledge), p. 263.
- [19] Annette Ballinger (2000) *Dead Woman Walking: executed women in England and Wales 1900–1955* (Aldershot: Ashgate), p. 53.
- [20] Ruth Ellen Homrighaus (2001) Wolves in Women's Clothing: baby farming and the British Medical Journal 1860–1872, *Journal of Family History*, 26, pp. 350–372.
- [21] Margaret Arnot (1994) Infant Death, Childcare and the State: the baby-farming scandal and the first infant life protection legislation of 1872, *Continuity and Change*, 9(2), pp. 271–311.
- [22] Shurlee Swain (2005) Towards a Cultural Geography of Baby Farming, *History of the Family*, 10, pp. 151–159.
- [23] Lynn Abrams (1998) *The Orphan Country: children of Scotland's broken homes from 1845 to the present day*. (Edinburgh: John Donald) is a notable exception.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- [25] Carol Smart (1992) Disruptive Bodies and Unruly Sex: the regulation of reproduction and sexuality in the nineteenth century, in Carol Smart (Ed.) *Regulating Womanhood: historical essays on marriage, motherhood and sexuality* (London: Routledge), p. 13. Smart asserts that the substantial death rate amongst this group of infants stems from living in conditions of squalor and the absence of safe formula milk.
- [26] Report of the Committee, Select Committee on the Protection of Infant Life, 1871, p. xii. British Parliamentary Papers, VII.607.
- [27] Peter Laslett (1980) Introduction, in Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen & Richard Michael Smith (Eds) *Bastardy and its Comparative History* (London: Edward Arnold.)

- [28] A Sabbath School Teacher (1864) *The Moral Statistics of Glasgow in 1863* (Glasgow: Porteous & Hislop); Christopher Smout (1980) Aspects of Sexual Behaviour in Nineteenth-Century Scotland, in Laslett *et al.* (Eds), *Bastardy and its Comparative History*.
- [29] Report of the Committee. Select Committee on the Protection of Infant Life, 1871, p. xii. British Parliamentary Papers, VII.607.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Abrams, *The Orphan Country*, p. 36.
- [32] Ibid., p. 52.
- [33] Ibid., p. 41.
- [34] For example, J. P. Kay (1832) *The Moral and Physical Conditions of the Working Classes* (London: James Ridgway.)
- [35] Charles Donaldson (1986) *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland: language fiction and the press* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press), p. 29.
- [36] *BMJ* (28 March 1896), p. 796.
- [37] *Glasgow Herald* (28 September 1867), p. 4; *The Scotsman* (7 August 1868), p. 3.
- [38] *Dundee Courier & Argus* (2 December 1892), p. 3.
- [39] *Glasgow Herald* (5 July 1870), p. 5 and *Glasgow Herald* (5 July 1870), p. 2. The former was syndicated from *The Times* and the latter *The Spectator*. They adopt wildly different stances.
- [40] *The Scotsman* (30 December 1874), p. 5.
- [41] Report of the Committee. Select Committee on the Protection of Infant Life, 1871, p. xii. British Parliamentary Papers, VII.607.
- [42] *Glasgow Herald* (14 June 1870), p. 2.
- [43] *Glasgow Herald* (15 September 1874), p. 5.
- [44] *The Scotsman* (25 June 1870), p. 4.
- [45] Ibid.
- [46] *BMJ* (19 November 1870), p. 568.
- [47] A system of compulsory registration of births was introduced in England and Wales in 1836. It was not until the 1874 *Birth and Deaths Registration Act* that parents were made legally responsible for ensuring that the birth or death of an infant was registered.
- [48] *The Scotsman* (15 March 1888), p. 6.
- [49] Evidence of David Ferguson Findlay, *Necessary Precognition against Jessie King* 1889, National Archives of Scotland.
- [50] Homrighaus, *Baby-Farming*, p. 172.
- [51] *North British Daily Mail* (16 February 1871), p. 5. (Hereafter *NBDM*.)
- [52] Ibid.
- [53] For example, Elizabeth Gaskell (1854) *Lizzie Leigh* (London: Chapman & Hall).
- [54] John R. Gillis (1983) Servants, Sexual Relations and Illegitimacy in London 1800–1900, in Judith L. Newton (Ed.) *Sex and Class in Women's History* (London: Routledge.)
- [55] This may have a basis in reality. John R. Gillis (ibid.) argued that female servants were some of the few working-class women who had the opportunity for unsupervised daily contact with male colleagues and the capacity to accrue savings.
- [56] Minutes of Evidence. Select Committee on the Protection of Infant Life, 1871, p. 227. British Parliamentary Papers, VII.607.
- [57] *Glasgow Herald* (5 July 1870), p. 7.
- [58] Linda Mahood (1990) *The Magdalenes: prostitution in the nineteenth century* (London: Routledge.) Mahood explored the care of 'fallen' women in Glasgow and the creation of a cult of sentimentality around them.
- [59] *Glasgow Evening News* (19 February 1889), p. 5.
- [60] *Evening Citizen* (19 February 1889), p. 5; *The Scotsman* (19 February 1889), p. 4.

- [61] *The Scotsman* (9 March 1889), p. 9.
- [62] *Dundee Courier and Argus*, (9 March 1889), p. 4.
- [63] Adam L. Hargreave (1911) *Women and Crime* (London: Werner-Laurie). Hargreave casts 'baby-farmers' as 'mad' rather than 'bad'.
- [64] *The Scotsman* (9 March 1889), p. 9.
- [65] Ballinger, *Dead Woman Walking*, p. 53.
- [66] *NBDM* (19 February 1889), p. 6.
- [67] *The Scotsman* (19 February 1889), p. 4.
- [68] *Ibid.*
- [69] Charles Cameron fulfilled his political ambitions when he was elected Member of Parliament for Glasgow College in 1874.
- [70] *NBDM* (30 March 1871), p. 4.
- [71] *NBDM* (11 February 1871), p. 6.
- [72] *NBDM* (23 February 1871), p. 5.
- [73] *Ibid.*
- [74] *NBDM* (16 March 1871), p. 5; *NBDM* (9 March 1871), p. 4.
- [75] *NBDM* (16 March 1871), p. 5.
- [76] *Ibid.*
- [77] Judith R. Walkowitz (1992) *City of Dreadful Delight: narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)
- [78] Shadow (1858) *Midnight Scenes and Social Photographs: sketches of life in the streets, wynds and dens of the city* (Glasgow: publisher unknown); J. Smith (1856) *The Grievances of the Working classes and the Pauperism and Crime of Glasgow with their causes extent and remedies* (Glasgow: Alexander Smith).
- [79] Anon. (1884) *City Echoes or Bitter Cries from Glasgow* (Paisley: Alex Gardiner), p. 101.
- [80] Smith, *Grievances of the Working Classes*, p. 13.
- [81] Anon. *City Echoes*, p. 108.
- [82] *NBDM* (2 March 1874), p. 4.
- [83] *NBDM* (9 March 1871), p. 4.
- [84] Gerry Holloway (2005) *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (London: Routledge).
- [85] Neil Davie (2006) *Tracing the Criminal: the rise of scientific criminology in Britain* (Oxford: Bardwell Press), p. 23.
- [86] Second Declaration of Jessie King, *Indictment against Jessie King*, 1889. National Archives of Scotland, JD26/89/179.
- [87] First Declaration of Barbara Gray or McIntosh, *Indictment against Barbara Gray or McIntosh*, 1880. National Archives of Scotland, JC26/81/266.
- [88] Second Declaration of Barbara Gray or McIntosh, *Indictment against Barbara Gray or McIntosh*, 1880. National Archives of Scotland, JC26/81/266.
- [89] Evidence of Susan Sheppard or Ireland, *Precognition against Barbara Gray or McIntosh*, 1881. National Archives of Scotland, AD14/81/82.
- [90] *The Scotsman* (22 February 1881), p. 4.
- [91] *Ibid.*
- [92] Evidence of Mary Fraser or Mather, *Precognition against Barbara Gray or McIntosh*, 1881. National Archives of Scotland, AD14/81/82.
- [93] Evidence of Margaret Lockhart or Reid, *Necessary Precognition against Jessie King* 1889, National Archives of Scotland, AD14/89/146.
- [94] Evidence of Catherine Gunn, *Necessary Precognition against Jessie King*, 1889. National Archives of Scotland, AD14/89/146.
- [95] Minutes of Evidence. Select Committee on the Protection of Infant Life, 1871, p. 218. British Parliamentary Papers, VII.607.