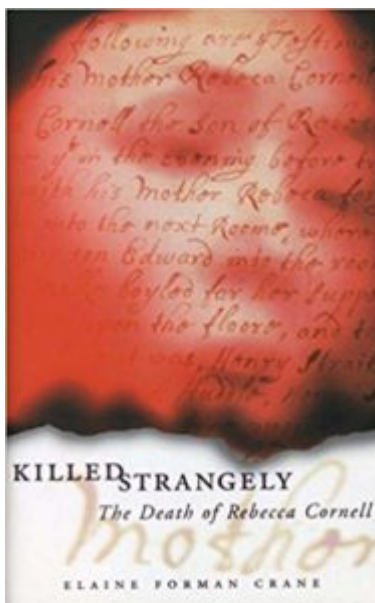
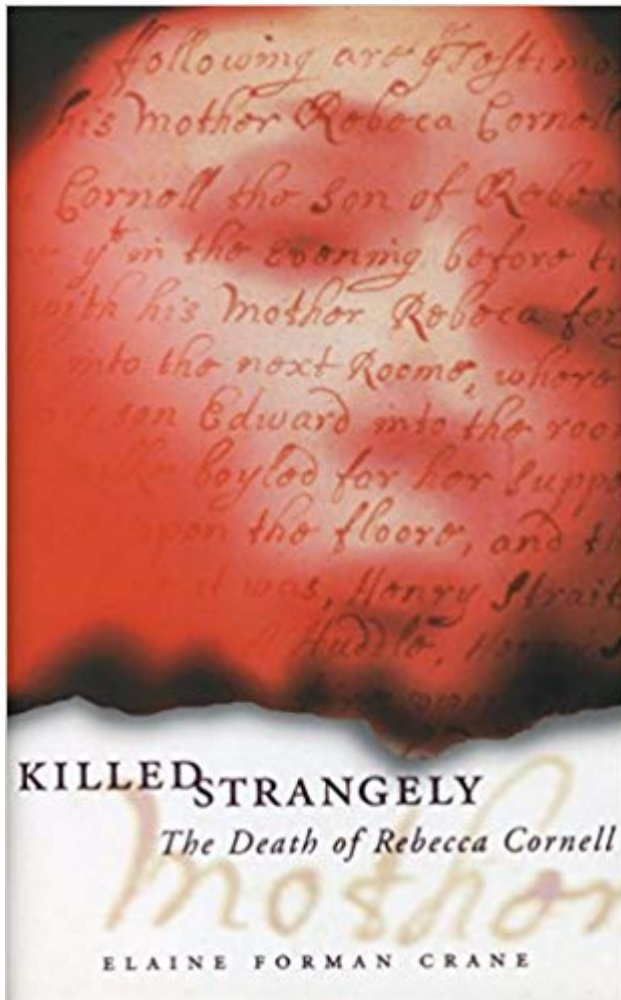


Getting Beyond “Who Done It”



Killed Strangely: The Death of Rebecca Cornell

“Rebecka Cornell widdow was killed Strangely at Portsmouth in her own Dwelling House”: so reads the cryptic entry for February 8, 1673, in the Quaker records of Rhode Island, recording the death of a seventy-three-year old matriarch. When Elaine Crane stumbled across the paper trail that Widow Cornell’s death generated—two inquests, a post-mortem, a capital trial with twenty-four surviving depositions—she was hooked. Seventeenth-century Rhode Islanders did not use the verb “kill” frequently or lightly; yet in modifying it with the adverb “strangely,” the Quaker scribe encapsulated the messiness, the lack of certainty, that characterized Rhode Islanders’ attempts to solve the mystery of Rebecca’s death. The strength of Crane’s microhistorical study of the case is that she preserves the messiness, both by recapturing the interpretive quandaries shared by Rebecca’s colonist neighbors and by offering perspectives from our own era.

What was strange about Widow Cornell’s death? In the evening, Rebecca’s body was found badly burned, lying some distance away from the hearth in the downstairs room she inhabited in the Cornell family’s large, clapboard homestead. Her married son Thomas, his wife, teenage sons, and boarders had been eating supper in an adjacent room, on the other side of a closed door, apparently oblivious to the catastrophe. The next morning a twelve-man inquest was convened, as was done in the cases of all suspicious or sudden deaths. The panel returned a verdict that Rebecca “was brought to her untimely death by an Unhappie Accident of fire as Shee satt in her Rome [sic]” (17). But two days later, the dead woman’s brother-in-law, John Briggs, was visited at night by Rebecca’s ghost who “Twice sayd, see how I was Burnt with fire.” Here was a dilemma posed to the Portsmouth community: Rebecca’s ghost failed to accuse a specific person, yet, as Crane explains, seventeenth-century Protestants believed that the spirit of a dead person might appear in order to draw attention to “an injustice that might not be detected by other means” (20). By enabling the spirit’s appearance, God was ensuring that a murderer would be exposed.

Briggs’s dream, when reported to authorities, triggered the convening of a second inquest along with the exhumation of the body. After watching two physicians conduct an autopsy and discover near Rebecca’s heart a hole that might have been made with a long, narrow, iron spindle, the inquest jurors concluded that the widow had died not just from fire but also from a “Suspitious wound” (28). This turn of events, along with now-circulating rumors that Rebecca had recently complained of ill treatment by her son Thomas, and with the fact that Thomas had been “the last man in her company” (51), spending more than an hour alone with his mother before supper on the evening she died, led to Thomas Cornell’s arrest and indictment for murder.

If strangeness and uncertainty inflected the scenario of Widow Cornell’s death, there were also strange aspects of the legal proceedings that followed. Just as she did in her essay, “[In Praise of Hearsay](#),” in this journal, Crane nicely explicates the differences between trials of the 1670s and those of today, and concludes that Thomas received a fair trial in the context of his era. What was

strange was the outcome, given that “the odds” were in Thomas’s favor (49): homicide convictions were rare, the evidence against him was entirely circumstantial, and the defendant’s high status as a frequent town officeholder and former legislator made him a likely candidate for clemency, if convicted. Yet after the trial jury brought in a verdict of guilty and the judges pronounced a sentence of death, Thomas (all the while protesting his innocence) declined to petition either the legislature or the crown for clemency. Hence the forty-six-year-old swung from the gallows on May 23, watched by a crowd of a thousand.

And yet the legal actions did not end there. One year later, Wickopash, an Indian who had been a servant in the Cornell household in 1673, was indicted for abetting the murder. We know only the bare bones of the proceeding: He pleaded not guilty and was acquitted by a jury of nine English settlers and three Native Americans. In late 1675, one of Thomas Cornell’s brothers, suspicious that Thomas’s wife Sarah had had a hand in their mother’s death, initiated a highly unusual private prosecution against her but then failed to bring witnesses or make good the charge when the time of trial arrived. Sarah herself had already publicly declared her own verdict in her husband’s case: when she gave birth to Thomas’s posthumous daughter, Sarah named the child Innocent.

Crane insists that answering the question of whether or not Thomas Cornell killed his mother need not be the point of a book-length exploration of the case. Rather than solve the mystery definitively, Crane’s twin goals are to explain the surprising verdict that sent Thomas to the gallows and to use the case as a window onto late seventeenth-century Rhode Island society and culture, especially family dynamics.

If we are to believe a string of women friends of Widow Cornell who testified at Thomas’s trial, then Crane argues that we find “an uncanny resemblance” between what we know today about elder abuse and the pattern between Thomas and his mother (163-64). For months and even years before her death, Rebecca had evidently complained tearfully to female agemates and selected kin that while sharing the house with Thomas and his family, she “was much neglected,” “forced in the winter season . . . to goe to her Bed unmade, and unwarmed” (41), forced to fetch firewood by herself, and in general, “disregarded” and disrespected by her son and grandsons (40, 44).

Add to this the fact that Rebecca Cornell fits the profile of those unusual colonial women whom we identify as “inheriting women” (a phrase coined and developed brilliantly in Carol Karlsen’s analysis of New England women who were the target of witchcraft accusations). Rebecca’s husband, Thomas Sr., had died in 1656, stipulating in his will that Rebecca receive all his property to distribute as she saw fit. In the ensuing years, Thomas Jr. watched while Rebecca deeded various tracts of land to his siblings but not to him. When she finally did sign over their shared homestead to him, the transfer of title was to take effect only at Rebecca’s death—and then conditionally on Thomas’s

paying legacies to his siblings. Moreover, Rebecca apparently made Thomas pledge verbally that he would pay the taxes, submit yearly rent to her, and provide her with a maid during her remaining years. Witnesses recounted that Thomas, angry over these demands, refused to fulfill them. Rebecca told her confidantes that he accused her of being "A Cruell Mother to hime" and that he behaved "soe High and soe Crose [cross]" as to be a "Terror to Her" (45). At times she even considered suicide, but her Quaker piety stayed her hand.

If we honor the hearsay testimony, then there were indeed unusual aspects to the family tensions in the Cornell household that elevate this "grim episode" to probable candidacy as "the only fully recorded case of matricide in colonial America" (4). First, "the mother's reluctance to give preferential treatment to her eldest son (or even treat him on equitable terms with his siblings)" departed dramatically from norms of property transmission (86). Rebecca had much landed wealth to distribute and yet she deliberately denied Thomas the role as independent head of household, thus putting his "masculinity and social standing . . . at stake" (9). Second, rather than show his widowed mother the filial respect that were her due according to Protestant beliefs, Thomas had been an unusually angry and abusive son, thus incurring a reputation for "bad character" which Crane believes persuaded the trial jurors to convict him. (If Thomas abused his mother, it was psychological not physical abuse, since Rebecca never charged her son with striking her.) This framing of the trial evidence gives Thomas a profile that recent studies posit can explain the abuse of elders: here, the middle-aged son emerges as a caregiver deeply dependent on his elder mother (164).

Crane builds this psychological interpretation in different chapters of the book, and it sits rather uneasily with the best part of chap. 4, which is cleverly entitled "Doubting Thomas: Or, Considering the Alternatives." Here, the author, taking inspiration from Akira Kurosawa's classic film *Rashomon*, presents various scenarios that could have led to Widow Cornell's death. She effectively builds suspense, first, by laying out the ways in which Thomas had "motive, means, and opportunity," and then (for the first time in the book) by seriously questioning the logic of this version. Why would Thomas risk burning the whole house down? Why was no stained clothing or a murder weapon ever produced? Could the tensions between son and mother over inheritance have been enough to drive him to violence? And if Thomas had killed in a rage, contemporary studies tell us to expect multiple stab wounds. Crane might have structured her study around the alternative causes of death, but instead, after treating them briefly—suicide, accident, an (Indian?) intruder—the author reverts to the implication that matricide took place. Excited by her discovery that three brutal murders in the nineteenth-century Northeast (including the Lizzie Borden case) involved persons born with the surname Cornell, Crane jumps to the dubious conclusion that these seemingly unstable individuals shared Thomas Cornell's "gene pool" (135). Reading backwards from this shaky tableau, Crane seems to think that at the very least the violent murder of his wife by Alvin Cornell in Vermont in 1843 when linked to Rebecca Cornell's violent death gives "credence" to researchers who argue for "the heritability of

a tendency toward aggression,” putting certain families at greater risk (133, 143).

Killed Strangely is an engaging read that will entrance and inform readers who are at once murder mystery and history buffs. However, with a final chapter that fails to wrap up with éclat, and with an ongoing tension between playful “what ifs” and muddy, often contradictory argumentation, the book doesn’t attain the standard of a classic in the genre. Some of this may be due to the spare nature of seventeenth-century records; North Americanists who focus on events that occurred in the Revolutionary period or after typically have much richer biographical and literary materials at hand. Some of it may also be due to roads not taken: unlike John Demos’s much lauded *Unredeemed Captive* (New York, 1994), Crane forfeits the opportunity to examine the Cornell family crisis and the Portsmouth area from the perspective of local Indians like Wickopash. The best microhistories aim to tell us something new about the culture placed under the author’s magnifying glass. Crane’s book disappoints here, trotting out tired teleology in arguing that Thomas Cornell and his contemporaries were caught between the values of a traditional society and those of a modern, commercializing one.

What format should an author choose for a particular, book-length microhistory? Cornell University Press has produced Crane’s study as an attractive small, easily held book, its 190 pages of text containing a smattering of helpful maps, diagrams, and photographs. Of greater value to teachers, students, researchers, and general readers might have been a somewhat shorter exposition by Crane (say, one hundred pages), accompanied by transcripts of the original documents.

Further Reading: Trial-based microhistories include Irene Quenzler Brown and Richard D. Brown, *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest, and Justice in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Cynthia B. Herrup, *A House in Gross Disorder: Sex, Law, and the Second Earl of Castlehaven* (New York, 1999); and Deborah Navas, *Murdered by His Wife: A History with Documentation of the Joshua Spooner Murder and Execution of his Wife, Bathsheba, Who Was Hanged in Worcester, Massachusetts, 2 July 1778* (Amherst, Mass., 1999). A good introduction to the Italian roots of microhistory as a genre is Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, Md., 1991). *Murder at Harvard* (Spy Pond Productions), a film application of the Rashomon approach to the 1849 Parkman murder case, based on Simon Schama’s essay in *Dead Certainties, Unwarranted Speculations* (New York, 1991), aired in the [American Experience](#) series on PBS on July 14, 2003; see the producer Eric Stange’s [essay](#) in this journal and the up-to-date American Experience website. See also Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987), and Patricia E. Rubertone, *Grave Undertakings: Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians* (Washington, D.C., 2001).

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Cornelia Hughes Dayton is a member of the history department at the University of Connecticut and is the author of *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995) and an article-length microhistory, "Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 48 (Jan. 1991), 19-49.