

## The Idaho Librarian, Vol 59, No 2 (2009)

HOME ABOUT USER HOME SEARCH CURRENT ARCHIVES ANNOUNCEMENTS

1998-2008

---

Home > Vol 59, No 2 (2009) > Thompson-Franklin

Font Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

## Review: *Murder, Morality, and Madness*

**Reviewed by Samantha Thompson-Franklin**

*Murder, Morality and Madness: Women Criminals in Early Oregon*

Diane L. Goeres-Gardner

Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2009

978-0-87004-470-0, Paperback

199 pages, \$16.95

*Murder, Morality and Madness: Women Criminals in Early Oregon* looks at the lives of women who committed crimes in 19th-century Oregon and whose crimes have largely been forgotten. Author Diane Goeres-Gardner, a fifth-generation Oregonian and retired reading instructor and school administrator, has previously written and published a variety of articles on Oregon history. She is also the author of *Necktie Parties: The History of Legal Executions in Oregon, 1851-1905* (2005, Caxton Press).

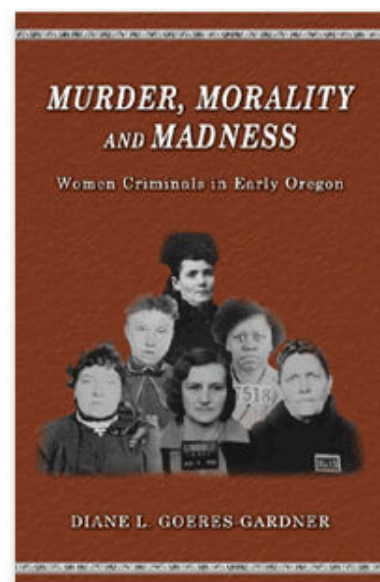
In *Murder, Morality, and Madness*, Goeres-Gardner sets out to “examine the context within which women committed murder during Oregon’s early historical period and the motives that led them to that act” (p.viii). She notes that although women committed violent acts, very little was written about female murderers because compared to men their numbers were insignificant.

Violent behavior was considered outside of the expected norm for 19th-century women (pp.vii-viii).

Written for a general audience, the book focuses primarily on the lives and crimes of eighteen women. It is divided into six sections based upon the motives for the crimes, from domestic abuse in “Wives Fight Back” to alleged mental illness in “Insanity is the Enemy.” The author begins each section by discussing the relevant issues or obstacles that women faced in 19th-century Oregon. Chapters within each section are devoted mainly to the individual women’s stories. In the author’s view, the cases she highlights “represent how society expected women to behave and the repercussions women faced when they challenged that role.” (p. vii).

The cases in the book demonstrate the subjective nature of justice during this period, and how Victorian-era views of a woman’s role influenced the way society (and specifically the legal authorities) treated women. The author illustrates that many factors, such as a man’s legal right to control his family and their finances, frequently left women with few options in situations of domestic abuse or lack of community support--a circumstance that led some women to take matters into their own hands. She also notes that abused women were disregarded if they tried to defend themselves with violence, and pleas of self-defense often fell on deaf ears. For instance, Charity Lamb, after fifteen years of domestic abuse, killed her husband Nathaniel in self-defense but was convicted of murder by an all-male jury because she “acted assertively by killing Nathaniel before he could kill her” (p. 16). Women also typically served longer sentences than men for committing the same type of crime (p. 1). Ellen Johnson, who at age 58 was charged with burglary along with her husband, was given a two-year sentence while her husband was acquitted of the same crime (p. 46).

Goeres-Gardner’s retelling of the women’s situations is very engaging and moving. Regardless of the women or their



circumstances, she tells their stories with empathy. The book is well-researched and includes considerable detail about each woman's case. The author credits newspaper articles as her primary source of research, along with court transcripts and statistics from the Oregon State Penitentiary prison registers housed at the Oregon State Archives. Detailed references and footnotes are included at the end of each chapter and photos of most of the women are included throughout the book.

There is no conclusion or final comments to bring greater meaning to the women's stories. Despite this drawback, along with a few minor typographic errors, the book provides an informative look at a little-known aspect of Northwest history. I would recommend this book for all libraries interested in collecting materials on women's history in the Pacific Northwest.

*Samantha Thompson-Franklin is a Collection Development and Acquisitions Librarian at Lewis-Clark State College Library in Lewiston.*

*The Idaho Librarian is a publication of the [Idaho Library Association](#).*