

INTRODUCTION

BABY FARMING IN BRITISH HISTORY

A once popular English ballad opens,

The old baby farmer 'as been executed,
It's quite time she was put out of the way.
She was a bad woman, it is not disputed,
Not a word in her favour can anyone say.

The song recounts the story of Amelia Dyer, who was convicted of murder and hanged in 1896. In return for cash payments of five to ten pounds, Dyer took several illegitimate infants from their mothers and promised to raise them as her own. Instead, she killed the babies and dropped their corpses in the Thames. As the ballad suggests, few Englishmen doubted that Dyer deserved her fate. In fact, the song celebrates her execution at Newgate Prison (the “Old Bailey”) with a gleeful refrain:

The old baby farmer,
The wretched Mrs. Dyer,
At the Old Bailey her wages is paid.
In times long ago we'd a' made a big fy-er,
And roasted so nicely that wicked old jade.”¹

Amelia Dyer was the fourth of eight baby farmers to be executed in Britain. Margaret Waters, hanged in London in 1870, had the grim distinction of being the first; Rhoda Willis of Cardiff became the last in 1907. In the century after Waters's execution, baby farmers made up a quarter of the thirty-two female murderers put to death in England.² Baby farmers both repulsed and fascinated the public. Madame Tussaud's wax museum placed the likenesses of three baby farmers on display in its famous Chamber of Horrors, where Amelia Dyer's waxwork remained on view until 1979.³

Because the term “baby farming” fell out of popular use in the second half of the twentieth century, some account of its origin and meaning is in order. In the mid-1800s,

London's Poor Law authorities were required to send pauper children under the age of six to live outside the city limits. Metropolitan parishes "farmed out" nearly fourteen hundred children in 1849 to Bartholomew Drouet, who received more than £300 each week to house the children at his Juvenile Pauper Asylum in Tooting. To maximize his profits, Drouet skimmed on the children's food, clothing, accommodation, and medical care. When more than 150 occupants of his "child farm" died of cholera within a few days of one another in January 1849, Drouet (the "child farmer") faced trial for manslaughter. Although a jury acquitted him, the practice of farming out pauper children fell into disrepute, and the term itself acquired negative connotations.⁴

A different method of profiting from child neglect came to public notice in the late 1860s. With a nod, perhaps, to the 1849 child-farming scandal, the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* first used the term "baby-farming" in 1867 to describe a situation in which a woman's four children died sequentially in the care of the same hired foster mother (or "nurse," as such women were often called at the time).⁵ An article entitled "Baby-Farming" insinuated that the mother had turned her children over to the "baby farmer" with the implicit understanding that they would be neglected until they died. In a series of sensationalist pieces published the following year, *BMJ* editor Ernest Hart argued that many baby farmers committed serial infanticide. His articles attracted a great deal of attention and brought the term "baby farming" into widespread use.⁶

Strictly speaking, "baby farming" described the practice of adopting children or "taking them to nurse" in exchange for payment. It could refer to honest foster mothers as well as to women who neglected or abused the infants they were paid to rear. No respectable woman, however, would have called herself a baby farmer. "Baby farming" was an accusation, not a profession. In normal usage, the term conflated the criminal acts of willful murderers with the

daily labor of honest nurses. Opponents of baby farming found its double meaning useful in their quest to transform the public's hatred and fear of women like Amelia Dyer into support for legislation that would place all paid childcare providers under state supervision. The powerful negative connotations that the phrase retains to this day are one of the legacies of the campaign to regulate paid childcare. Novelists and scholars too often leave the impression that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all hired nurses and adoptive mothers were callous and evil.

Consider how two novelists, writing more than a century apart, have portrayed baby farmers. George Moore's 1894 novel *Esther Waters* tells the story of a young woman's struggle to raise her illegitimate son in late Victorian England. After giving birth, Esther finds work as a wet nurse and pays a woman named Mrs. Spires to care for her baby. Esther does not like Spires. Having "always heard that children die that are put out to nurse," she fears for her infant's safety. When Esther learns that her son is sick, she concludes that Spires is at fault, quits her job, and rushes to reclaim him. In a fascinating scene, Spires rebukes Esther for being such an attentive mother. "You girls is all alike," she tells Esther. "Yer thinks of nothing but yer babies for the first few weeks, then yer tires of them, the drag on yer is that 'eavy . . . and then yer begins to wish they 'ad never been born." Spires attempts to convince Esther to pay her five pounds to murder the baby. She seems to believe that by killing infants (and she has already murdered several) she is performing an act of charity. "I don't say that I'm not often sorry for [the babies], poor dears," Spires tells Esther, "but they takes little notice than you'd think for, and they're better out of the way, and that's a fact; it saves a lot of trouble hereafter." Indeed, Spires says, "I do often think that to neglect them, to let them go off quiet, that I be their best friend." Far from persuading Esther, Spires's pragmatic speech makes the young mother cry. Esther's subsequent

escape from the baby farmer's clutches with her infant in tow is portrayed as a significant triumph.⁷

Sarah Waters's historical novel *Fingersmith*, a finalist for the 2002 Man Booker Prize, brims with colorful characters from the Victorian underworld, including thieves, madhouse inmates, and baby farmer Grace Sucksby. When protagonist Susan Trinder is left in Sucksby's care, she raises Susan as her own daughter and treats her like "a jewel." The other babies fare worse: "laid top-to-toe in cradles, like sprats in boxes of salt," they are dosed with gin when they whimper and otherwise largely ignored until either someone claims them or they die.⁸ Susan assumes that Sucksby acts tenderly toward her because she loves her. It turns out, however, that Sucksby has a more practical reason for bestowing special treatment on her adopted daughter: Susan's mother was a gentlewoman, and Sucksby expects to make her fortune when Susan comes of age. After betraying Susan, Sucksby suffers the inevitable fate of a baby farmer when she is hanged for murder.

While Mrs. Sucksby and Mrs. Spires are not flat characters, they function as little more than stereotypes in these two novels. A few scholars have attempted to move beyond such stereotypes, first by considering what motivated criminal baby farmers to commit infanticide. Amateur historian Patrick Wilson proposed in 1971 that baby farming illustrates the influence of social conditions on crime. In Wilson's view, baby farmers like Margaret Waters and Amelia Dyer were intelligent and affectionate human beings whom poverty "brutalized" until they became "accustomed to" infant death. As a result, they treated their relatives with tenderness but "thought no more of murdering [an infant] than of drowning kittens."⁹ More recently, feminist scholars have argued that criminal baby farmers were not passive victims of poverty but rather women who made the rational choice to profit from infant death. Echoing Wilson, historian

Judith Knelman argued in 1998 that Margaret Waters “not only had . . . not considered neglect murder, she had not considered babies people.” Yet it was not greed, Knelman suggested, but “an instinct for survival” that motivated Waters and others like her. Carol Smart made a similar point in 1992. Comparing infanticide, abortion, the use of birth control, and criminal baby farming, Smart pointed out that “understood in class terms,” all of these acts were “rational responses to severe legal and material penalties consequent upon unmarried motherhood.” In a 1991 study of the events surrounding Margaret Waters’s execution, Margaret Arnot contended that “looked at dispassionately, Waters was simply a poor, struggling widow who had latched onto a way of keeping food in the cupboard in a society which offered her few options.”¹⁰

Waters’s contemporaries did not see it this way. While unmarried mothers who killed their own infants were generally viewed sympathetically, baby farmers aroused fear and anger in equal measure. Feminist historians Knelman and Arnot attributed this difference to the destabilizing effect that criminal baby farming had on prevailing social assumptions about femininity and motherhood. Knelman argued that because Victorian females were thought to be “emotional, not rational, beings,” women who committed calculating and premeditated crimes “were despised for making a mockery of this stereotype as well as for the killing.” While single mothers were thought to murder their infants in fits of postpartum desperation, criminal baby farmers received payment up front. The press could only explain such seemingly unnatural behavior by labeling baby farmers as monsters and madwomen.¹¹ According to Arnot, the “cash nexus” also played a significant role in assessments of Margaret Waters’s crimes. Well in advance of Waters’s 1870 trial, some members of the medical community had begun to develop a critique of paid childcare and mothering among the poor. These men believed that by introducing cash into “what should have been ‘natural’ relationships between women and

children,” baby farmers perverted and degraded these relationships. Arnot argued that the Waters episode gave medical reformers an opportunity to introduce a wider audience to their dissatisfaction with paid childminders and working-class mothers.¹²

Misgivings about Victorian and Edwardian childrearing methods persisted for a century, and only since the 1970s have historians begun to question whether the nurses who raised many poor children deserved to be condemned as ignorant and feckless. Carol Dyhouse pointed out that as the medical profession began to develop a more sophisticated understanding of infant physiology, these new experts “almost inevitably” devalued the knowledge that poor women had accumulated from experience. Dyhouse concluded that “the historian has no real reason to assume that the majority of those women who undertook the day care of the children of working-class mothers were wholly unqualified for their task.” Taking Margaret Waters as a case study, Margaret Arnot maintained that the children Waters took to nurse would probably have died regardless of the steps she took to save them. Late Victorian methods of hand-rearing babies, Arnot explained, “gave an infant little chance of surviving for long after birth.” In a 1993 study of working-class mothering, finally, Ellen Ross demonstrated that the mortality rates of infants cared for by nurses “paralleled . . . similar rates for bottle-fed infants living in poverty and cared for by their own mothers.”¹³ By studying the history of baby farming, these scholars have suggested, we might learn a great deal about the “construction” of modern motherhood.

Examining baby farming in another important context, a separate group of historians has considered the part that opponents of baby farming played in the late Victorian transformation of attitudes toward children. In *Children in English Society*, Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt counted the campaign against baby farming as one of several late-nineteenth-century movements that suggested “a general awakening . . . of social, rather than individual, conscience” to the

suffering of children. George Behlmer later argued that opponents of baby farming set the stage for child protection advocates to develop and disseminate “a new moral vision” of children’s rights. Behlmer explained that end-of-the-century attempts to establish children’s claim to government protection challenged the prevailing opinion that the family should remain impervious to state interference. By stressing the commercial nature of child nursing, however, the physicians and social reformers who fought for what they called “infant life protection” managed to demonstrate that baby farming was one form of child abuse that “fed upon the privacy surrounding domestic relations.” Thus, a decade before the child protection movement began in earnest, opponents of baby farming had already forced the state to place limited regulations on paid childminders and thereby to take a “halting first step” into the English home. Lionel Rose argued, furthermore, that the campaign against baby farming helped to reduce infanticide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, in a 1998 study of “the English home and its guardians,” Behlmer linked fears of baby farming to the advent of state-regulated adoption.¹⁴

Yet even scholars who have noted the connection of baby farming to important historical developments have largely treated it as a matter of peripheral concern: no one has made baby farming the focus of a sustained and comprehensive study. I believe that baby farming merits a closer look. The battle against baby farming was fought more or less continuously from 1865, when the first notorious baby farmer was condemned to death, to 1943, when the Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act made it illegal to adopt children for payment. In that period, medicine became a regulated profession and “medical men” (as they were called until the late nineteenth century) began to exert increasingly powerful influence on the government’s public health policies. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the medical campaign against ignorant

nurses and feckless mothers took on greater resonance when the high infant mortality rate achieved the status of a major social problem. In the voluntary sector, meanwhile, private charities proliferated, and from the 1860s a number of organizations began to specialize in the moral “rescue” of unwed mothers. By the end of the First World War, these charities had begun to shift their focus from rehabilitating single mothers to cultivating a more generous public attitude toward illegitimacy, lobbying for amendment of the bastardy laws, and providing both mothers and children with practical assistance. Finally, and most significantly, perceptions and expectations of the state changed radically in this period as the age of laissez faire came to an end and the Liberal Party laid the foundations of the modern welfare state. Although baby farming did not spur any of these transformations, it had something to do with all of them. Looking closely at the history of baby farming allows us to see the points of contact and conflict between these important developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Furthermore, historians have left important questions about baby farming unresolved. Opponents of baby farming assigned a variety of meanings to the phrase, and its sense changed from one speaker to another and from one decade to the next. Yet scholars have made little effort to discriminate between baby farmers of different stripes. We know how men and women from privileged socioeconomic groups felt about baby farming, but we do not know how baby farmers—both honest and criminal—perceived themselves, or how they fit into their communities. Nor do we adequately understand the campaign against baby farming. George Behlmer has demonstrated that it originated in the infanticide panic of the 1860s, but no one has explained why it took reformers seventy-eight years to push through effective legislation to regulate this “social evil.”

In order to begin answering these questions, it is necessary to look at the entire history of baby farming, rather than just a few criminal cases, and to consider the subject both from the viewpoint of accused baby farmers and from the perspective of their opponents. It is impossible to understand why the battle against baby farming dragged on for so long without appreciating how baby farming functioned in English society. The issue at the heart of debates about baby farming was not how to deal with cold-blooded criminal behavior but who should care for Britain's illegitimate children and under what conditions.

Without the women known pejoratively as “baby farmers,” single mothers who lacked the support of family and friends would have found it difficult to keep themselves and their infants out of the workhouse. Few private charities extended their help to “fallen” women or their bastard offspring before the First World War, and the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act prohibited guardians from giving outdoor relief to unmarried mothers.¹⁵ When they could find work, usually in domestic service, single mothers either paid nurses to board and care for their children or gave a lump sum payment (known as a “premium”) to women who thereby “adopted” their babies. These forms of baby farming afforded unwed mothers with a way to cope with illegitimacy, and they also offered other poor women an opportunity to profit from it. In other words, transactions between baby farmers and single mothers were mutually beneficial: women in need of supplementary income agreed to take some of the burden off single mothers' shoulders in return for cash payments that helped them and their dependents survive.

From the 1850s and 1860s, traditional forms of foster care and adoption coexisted with more commercial, more widespread, and more anonymous forms of baby farming that were stimulated by urbanization, the severity of the Poor Law, and the availability of both cheap newspaper advertising and inexpensive rail travel. Rather than place their children out to nurse

with acquaintances as they once would have done, some unmarried mothers answered classified advertisements, arranged meetings at railway stations, and handed their babies over with adoption premiums to women they had never met and about whom they knew nothing.

There was an element of uncertainty in all such transactions as to what the mother expected would happen to her child and what the adoptive mother intended to do with the baby. English society placed little value on illegitimate children for their own sake, and many people clearly would have agreed with the fictional Mrs. Spires that these babies were “better out of the way.” Because their mothers had to work, moreover, illegitimate infants were usually deprived of breast milk and therefore more susceptible than breast-fed babies to illness and the digestive complications that accompanied artificial feeding. At least twice as many illegitimate as legitimate infants died before their first birthdays.

A handful of women took advantage of both the indifference that accompanied illegitimate babies’ deaths and the frequency with which hand-fed infants perished to make a career of what I will call “criminal baby farming.” Some earned money by killing the infants in their charge quickly, by means of poison or violence, or slowly, by means of neglect. Others never kept infants at all. Instead, they simply adopted babies for lump sums and almost immediately passed them off to other women with token payments. Criminal baby farmers made pretense a tool of their trade: they lied continuously about who they were and what they intended to do with the children they acquired. By feigning to be what they were not, they simultaneously soothed clients’ fears, gained access to money, and protected themselves from discovery and prosecution. Their fabrications, furthermore, allowed both their neighbors and the mothers who sold children to them to convince themselves that nothing was awry.

Because criminal baby farmers mimicked honest, respectable women who wished to adopt for love, it was hard to tell a criminal baby farmer from an honest one. In 1870, for example, Margaret Waters became the English public's archetypal criminal baby farmer. Although Waters's contemporaries saw her crimes in black and white, a close examination of her trial reveals many shades of gray. Waters's case suggests that it was often impossible to determine a criminal baby farmer's intentions from the effects of her behavior and to discriminate between deliberate infanticide and accidental death.

This ambiguity encouraged some reformers to generalize about the behavior of all foster mothers and adoptive parents from the criminal actions of a few nurses. John Brendon Curgenvin and Ernest Hart, who together led the movement to regulate foster care in Victorian England, both understood that it was important to distinguish between good and bad nurses. They knew that infanticide had complex social causes, and they believed in using the parliamentary system to reform those causes. But in the immediate aftermath of Waters's trial, they reasoned that if a nurse's methods killed the babies in her charge, her intentions did not matter. Curgenvin and Hart encouraged the public to identify baby farming with women like Waters so that popular fear of criminal baby farmers would stimulate public support for their goal: state supervision of all paid child nursing and adoption.

For the purposes of propaganda, this tactic was effective. But as the basis for a reform movement, Curgenvin and Hart's definition of baby farming was problematic. By encouraging the populace to view all unregulated foster care and adoption as baby farming, they masked the complexity and the scale of the problems they wished to solve. Stamping out criminal baby farming alone proved to be difficult. Reformers first had to create deterrents to criminal baby farming by making it easier for policemen to detect the crime and ensuring that baby farmers

who abused infants would regularly be caught and prosecuted for murder, manslaughter, or neglect. They had to tackle the conditions that put illegitimate children at risk by forbidding the exchange of cash premiums with adopted children, placing all forms of adoption under some type of official supervision, and outlawing adoption advertisements. At the same time, the opponents of baby farming had to discourage single mothers from handing their children over to dangerous people by giving them better alternatives. Because the English public tended to think of baby farming in terms of aberrance and evil, it took some work for the opponents of baby farming to convince their countrymen that extensive social reforms were necessary to eradicate what many people thought of as a police problem.

Improving the standards of foster care turned out to be an even more herculean task, and one that many Englishmen opposed. The *Quarterly Review* observed in 1906 that “tradition and custom die hard,” and no English tradition had been harder to kill “than that which declares that an Englishman’s home is his castle, and that a man has a right to do what he likes with his children.”¹⁶ The opponents of baby farming not only asked the public to allow the government to interfere with parental decisions about childcare, they also seemed to want to ensure that illegitimate children at nurse would receive higher quality care than legitimate children of the same social class. If ignorance was all too common among working-class mothers, it was nevertheless to be forbidden among paid foster mothers. The infant life protectionists’ efforts absorbed the attention of eight government committees and inspired or influenced the passage of at least seventeen acts of Parliament.¹⁷ Considering the scope of the social reforms required to eliminate baby farming, it is perhaps not surprising that it took seventy-eight years to achieve them.

The medical men who first opposed baby farming did not witness its disappearance. They might have been surprised to see child protection work win widespread public support in the first decade of the twentieth century and to watch the state rapidly shed its reluctance to interfere with the rearing of the nation's children. These developments, which owed at least a small debt to the fight against baby farming, were ultimately responsible for bringing it to an end. When the 1908 Children Act finally placed all paid foster mothers under official supervision, it soon became clear that most foster mothers were indeed honest and caring people. The Children Act not only dissociated honest foster mothers from the stigma of baby farming, it also helped to eradicate many of the conditions that allowed criminal baby farming to flourish. By the mid-1920s, criminal baby farming had all but disappeared. Fears of criminal baby farming continued to linger, however, to be periodically revived by news of a particularly horrible incident of abuse. Finally, as the adoption of illegitimate children became more popular among the respectable classes during and immediately following the First World War, the call for regulation of adoption grew stronger. Reacting to public demand, Parliament gradually closed the loopholes that left illegitimate children at risk, finally legislating baby farming out of existence in 1943.¹⁸

Notes

¹ “Mrs. Dyer, the Baby Farmer,” in Palmer, *Ballads*. Elsa Lanchester recorded the ballad in 1960; according to Judith Knelman, it is still sung today. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 178.

² See Wilson, *Murderess*, for an account of every female executed in Britain since 1843.

³ Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 22, 180.

⁴ [Charles Dickens], “The Paradise at Tooting,” *Examiner*, 20 January 1849; [Charles Dickens], “The Tooting Farm,” *Examiner*, 27 January 1849; [Charles Dickens], “A Recorder’s

Charge,” *Examiner*, 3 March 1849; [Charles Dickens], “The Verdict for Drouet,” *Examiner*, 21 April 1849; Brice and Fielding, “Dickens and the Tooting Disaster”; Pinchbeck and Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, 508; Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 49; Webb and Webb, *English Poor Law Policy*, 108.

⁵ “Baby-Farming,” *BMJ* (19 October 1867): 343. Hyphenation of “baby-farming” and “baby-farmer” followed no consistent pattern, but over time the hyphen was gradually dropped. I have retained the unhyphenated usage except where appropriate in quotations.

⁶ See chapter 2 for a discussion of the discovery of baby farming. *BMJ* editor Ernest Hart may have coined the term “baby-farming.” It certainly fits with what we know about his journalistic style and personality. John Brendon Curgenven did not invent it: he said in March 1869 that “baby-farming is a phrase new to us until within the last twelve months,” though by then it was at least seventeen months old. Hugh Percy Dunn, “Report on the Baby Farming System and its Evils,” *BMJ* (22 February 1896): 489; Curgenven, *On Baby-Farming*, 1.

⁷ Moore, *Esther Waters*, 143, 154.

⁸ Waters, *Fingersmith*, 6.

⁹ Wilson, *Murderess*, 164–66.

¹⁰ Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 9, 145, 172, 227, 273; Smart, “Disruptive Bodies,” 24; Arnot, “Infant Death,” 278.

¹¹ Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, xii, 6, 13, 20, 145, 167, 230.

¹² Arnot, “Infant Death,” 272, 279, 282.

¹³ Dyhouse, “Working-Class Mothers,” 261–62; Arnot, “Infant Death,” 278; Ross, *Love and Toil*, 135.

¹⁴ Pinchbeck and Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, 612; Behlmer, *Child Abuse*, 42, 17; Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents*; Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*.

¹⁵ Paupers who received payments from Poor Law authorities in cash or in kind to supplement inadequate wages were said to be on “outdoor relief”; “indoor relief,” by contrast, could be obtained only in the union workhouse.

¹⁶ “The Cry of the Children,” *Quarterly Review* 205, no. 408 (July 1906): 30.

¹⁷ See appendix A for a list of the principal government committees and acts of Parliament related to baby farming.

¹⁸ The chapters that follow describe the history of baby farming in England, though information about practices in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland has been incorporated where possible. Large markets for foster care and adoption existed in most major urban centers: baby farming flourished in Cardiff, Glasgow, and Edinburgh as well as in London, Manchester, Exeter, Bristol, Liverpool, Sheffield, and Brighton.¹⁸ Yet because criminal baby farmers were notoriously mobile, baby farming was not strictly a metropolitan problem. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) discovered abused foster children in every area of Britain where it had inspectors. The problem struck observers as most developed and most threatening in London, however, and it was there that the most vigorous efforts were made to eliminate it. In the metropolis, the London County Council (LCC), the Metropolitan Police, and the London-based NSPCC worked together both to eradicate criminal baby farming and to regulate paid foster care and adoption. Local authorities elsewhere in the country lagged behind and ultimately modeled their enforcement efforts on London’s. Although research in local archives and repositories outside London would surely yield useful material to complement this

study, I believe that it presents a faithful portrait of the origins and history of baby farming in England.