A Review of
The Murder of Mary Bean and Other Stories

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Book: *The Murder of Mary Bean and Other Stories*
Author: Elizabeth A. De Wolfe
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As its title suggests, *The Murder of Mary Bean and Other Stories* is focused not on a crime but on the multitude of cultural narratives that grew up around that crime. In the town of Saco, Maine in April of 1850 the body of a young woman was discovered in a river. Investigations soon determined that she had died from complications of a doctor-assisted abortion attempt, and the abortionist was brought to trial on murder charges. While these facts were sordid enough in and of themselves, it was the heavy symbolism attributed to the incident by various storytellers that caught the imaginations of the reading public at that time. De Wolfe examines the intricate connections between fact and fiction that turned one woman's death into many tales of horror, seduction, and strong words of caution for all young women who might contemplate following in her footsteps.

"Mary Bean" was an alias given to Berengera Caswell, a young, unmarried woman who had traveled far from home in order to seek employment at a textile factory. Because of the distance she had traveled, Caswell's remains were not immediately identifiable to the community members who found them and launched the investigation. This fact was one of the first to be picked up by an alarmist media, and was used to demonstrate that the employment of young women takes them far from their families to places where they are unsafe. De Wolfe attributes this to a general unease with the changing landscape of the economy as well as with women's growing financial independence in the mid 1800s. The term "factory girl," which Caswell was consistently named in the media, implied at that time a temporary period in a woman's life between girlhood and motherhood. Paid work was expected to be a short-term solution, with marriage as the ultimate goal. Women working in the factories, however, had begun using their buying power on leisure pursuits and jewelry, and the elder generation did not approve. Guiding the reader through historical and social nuances such as these is perhaps this volume's greatest accomplishment. De Wolfe's explanations and attention to detail allow readers who are not intimately familiar with this period of American history to evaluate the cultural narratives with a far greater degree of sophistication than would otherwise be possible.

The fact that Caswell had clearly engaged in pre-marital sexual activity was met with even less approval from the community than her spending habits. De Wolfe asserts that abortion services were widely available at that time in New England, if one knew

where to look (for example, they were often advertised as psychic readings). In addition, many women knew recipes for concoctions designed to "bring on a period"—something considered to be entirely different from abortion, although the result may have been the same. All of this knowledge was resulting in a greater separation of sexuality from reproduction than many were comfortable with.

De Wolfe's coverage of these reproductive issues, which are scarcely less controversial today than they were in Caswell's time, is both sensitive and matter-of-fact. Women of the 1800s are presented to the reader as making reproductive choices based on rational thought, personal values, and the best factual information available to them at the time. It is very easy for an author to fall into the trap of sensationalizing outdated information about sexuality, of making it into a sideshow of the bizarre. De Wolfe's ability to humanize Caswell and her peers as she explains their decisions shows a deep understanding of the repercussions of this kind of sensationalism.

Because Caswell's story touched on so many hot-button social issues of its time, it was followed carefully by newspapers as it unfolded and re-told dozens if not hundreds of times even after all of its facts were known. De Wolfe discusses the newspaper coverage of Caswell's death and its investigation in detail, and then turns to "sensational novels." Sensational novels often had a true-crime basis, as with the "Mary Bean" story, but were told with heavy-handed moral overtones. They collapsed all grey areas of morality into easily digested black and white. Through this collapsing process, Berengera Caswell became Mary Bean: in other words, a young woman who earned her own money and made her own decisions about her sexuality became an innocent, fragile young girl who was seduced at every turn by a moustache-twisting rapscallion until her final, tragic end. (A typical quote, taken from her seducer's inner monologue, reads: "I will instill into the ears of the unsuspecting Mary Bean, the first poison that shall ultimately make her mine. Yes, Mary Bean, with thee the die is cast; thou art mine! Mine! I am resolved!")

Two of these sensational novels are reproduced in their entirety in *The Murder of Mary Bean and Other Stories*. The first, *Mary Bean, the Factory Girl* creates the persona of Mary Bean using far more imagination than facts drawn from Caswell's life history. It then details her seduction by George Hamilton (also more imagination than fact) and subsequent travel from home, introduction to factory work, pregnancy, abortion attempt, and untimely death. The second, *Life of George Hamilton*, focuses on the criminal pursuits of Mary Bean's seducer after her death. As De Wolfe points out, these novels must have served a dual purpose. While they caution the reader incessantly about the dangers of making choices similar to the fictional Mary's, they also discuss her actions in more detail than the reader may have previously encountered. For example, when she finds herself pregnant Mary first consults an astrologer and later employs the services of a "Dr. Savin." Astrologers and fortune tellers, as explained above, were often also sellers of abortifacients. In addition, Savin was an herbal substance known to cause uterine contractions, so the name "Dr. Savin" served as an additional hint. Although the stated purpose of the sensational novels was to deter women from that particular course of action, narrative details such as these may have given readers who were already in a

difficult situation an idea of how to seek out abortion services.

Although the two sensational novels are very interesting and an important resource in their own right, De Wolfe's decision to fully reprint them in *The Murder of Mary Bean and Other Stories* is a bit confusing. After reading the Part One of the book, which consists entirely of De Wolfe's critical and engaging scholarly writing, the reader must make a very jarring adjustment in order to adapt to the heavy-handed antebellum prose of the two novels in Part Two. The novels simply seem out of place—perhaps better suited to an anthology of similar writing from the time period. In the context of an academic work extensive quoting would probably have been more appropriate or, failing that, a concluding chapter after the novels to help the reader digest such a large amount of raw narrative information.

De Wolfe's analysis, though, is an excellent and thought-provoking read. She guides the reader carefully through the difficult facts of the actual incident as well as the fascinating ways that these facts resonated with social and cultural issues of the 1850s. *The Murder of Mary Bean and Other Stories* draws together the threads of this woman's story, both the true facts and the fictionalized accounts, and demonstrates how media representations tie into cultural themes. These cultural themes included the role of women in society, moral panics about a feminized workforce and women with increasing economic power, and the idea that women, especially unmarried, were making choices about their own sexuality. A dense but powerful exploration of the power of the media, this book would be well received by scholars and students in both graduate and upper-level undergraduate criminology courses, as well as courses in sociology, the media, and women's studies.