

Barbara Minchinton profiles infamous nineteenth-century brothel-keeper Caroline Hodgson (review written by Alana Piper)

Madame Brussels: The Life and Times of Melbourne's Most Notorious Woman, by Barbara Minchinton with Philip Bentley, Collingwood, La Trobe University Press, 2024, 336pp., pbk, 9781760644932. Publisher's website:

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In this biography, Barbara Minchinton presents a highly absorbing and painstakingly researched portrait of Caroline Hodgson, better known as Madame Brussels, Melbourne's most renowned nineteenth-century brothel-keeper. Her self-styled moniker (which belies Hodgson's actual origins in Prussia) remains familiar in the city even today, bestowed on a laneway where one of her brothels once stood. Hodgson's enduring infamy seemingly speaks to the truth of historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's observation that 'Well-behaved women seldom make history'. But this book makes clear that to remember Hodgson just as a 'misbehaving' woman would be a disservice to the complexities of her story, and the other rich histories with which it intertwines.

Hodgson's biography is used as a vehicle for illuminating and humanising the historical world of sex work. Minchinton provides an evocative sense of the day-to-day life of both brothel madams and workers: the hierarchy of different establishments; the fluidity with which women moved in and out of the industry; the types of clients encountered; the financial rewards on offer; and the legal and social challenges faced. Hodgson's own career showcases the transforming attitudes towards sex work from the boom period in the 1880s when her success was at its zenith and well-run brothels received little police interference, to a toughening of perspectives and laws by the time of her death in 1908. The book also provides insights into the sexual cultures of the period more generally, with fascinating explorations of topics such as pornography, contraception and homosexuality.

Other individuals and histories are also vividly brought to life. Two important but elusive figures are Hodgson's husbands; the first left her in Melbourne not long after their arrival there to become a country policeman for twenty years, only returning to be nursed by her in his final weeks of life; and the second, a younger man, lived on her money and abandoned her twice before she eventually divorced him. These episodes highlight women's social and economic vulnerabilities in this period, as do incidents surrounding other women who appear in the book, from a worker who sought Hodgson's protection after fleeing her violent husband to another whose daughter Hodgson adopted after the mother, abandoned by her lover, left the child in Hodgson's care.

A sense of the wider social world of Melbourne is strongly conveyed by the characters who appear, however briefly, in Hodgson's life. This includes reputed clients of her establishments, such as the music critic and composer Alfred Plumptre. The book also introduces readers to many of the notable legal fraternity in the period, who were often involved in defending, prosecuting or hearing the cases brought against Hodgson. In showcasing the workings of the justice system, the book also reveals how the administration of the law was often influenced by both individual personalities of particular officials and the wider social and media context. This context in turn was shaped by individuals who arraigned

themselves as opponents of Hodgson, most notably the censorious social purity campaigner and reverend Henry Varley, and the irascible John Norton, editor of the scandal-sheet *Truth*. In delineating these varied personalities, Minchinton produces an animated social history.

The biography further acts as a work of absorbing local history, with Melbourne itself another central character in Hodgson's history. Minchinton details how the city's sense of identity and urban landscape changed from the 1870s when Hodgson arrived in a town still heavily influenced by a freewheeling gold rush mentality, through the 1880s when placing itself on the world stage introduced a greater self-consciousness, into the 1890s when the economic depression hardened the city and its attitudes, and finally the 1900s when a new era ushered in many changes. Individual localities, such as the notorious Saddling Paddock at the Theatre Royal, are conjured up for readers by the inclusion of lengthy excerpts from the writings of first-hand observers, as well as a number of photographs and drawings.

The depth of primary source research is truly stunning, with each source closely mined to extract the maximum amount of detail from it. A wedding photograph of Caroline and Studholme Hodgson is forensically dissected for insights into the class backgrounds and the quality of their relationship. Newspaper advertisements offer tantalising evidence of the circumstances that precipitated Hodgson's transformation from respectable boarding-house keeper to the infamous Madam Brussels. A bent coin included among Hodgson's keepsakes is presented as a possible memento of her sexual past. The in-memoriam notices that Hodgson placed annually for Studholme after his death offer perhaps the most intimate insights into her interior life, while family memorabilia and recollections also sharpen the image conveyed of the real woman behind the legend. Understandably though, there are limits to what can be known. As Minchinton acknowledges, some matters remain purely speculative: the reasons for the breakdown of Hodgson's first marriage; the extent to which Hodgson may have used bribery or influential clients to avoid convictions in most of the cases brought against her; or whether she herself engaged in sex work or merely profited from that of others.

The book does embody a satisfying answer to the question of why Madam Brussels remains a figure of such enduring interest. Minchinton's highly engaging biography of her will be valuable reading to anyone with an interest in the history of gender, sexuality, criminal justice or nineteenth-century Melbourne.

* Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. "Vertuous women found: New England ministerial literature, 1668-1735." *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 20-40.