

Review

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ADIRONDACK TRAGEDY: THE GILLETTE MURDER CASE OF 1906. By Joseph W. Brownell and Patricia A. Wawrzaszek. (Interlaken, N.Y.: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1986. Pp. 216. \$9.95 paperback.)

MURDER IN THE ADIRONDACKS: AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY REVISITED. By Craig Brandon. (Utica, N.Y.: North Country Books, Inc., 1986. Pp. ix, 373. \$18.95 hardbound.)

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On March 30, 1908 the People of the State of New York electrocuted Chester Gillette, convicted of the premeditated murder of Grace Brown. When Grace discovered her pregnancy in April 1906, she assumed she and Chester would marry. Their trip to the Adirondacks ended not in marriage, but in Grace's death in Big Moose Lake. Evidence suggested that Gillette was responsible.

Today, the Gillette Case of 1906 remains in the consciousness and folklore of Upstate New York. Theodore Dreiser based his 1926 novel, *An American Tragedy* on the characters and trial of the Case. The novel inspired a play in 1926 and two films, *An American Tragedy* in 1931 and *A Place in the Sun* in 1951. Film director George Stevens described the attraction to the story: ". . . it is all things to all people . . . this might have been the love story of any Johnny or Mary in America."

The Gillette Case is the subject of Joseph Brownell and Patricia Wawrzaszek's *Adirondack Tragedy* and Carl Brandon's *Murder in the Adirondacks*, both published in the spring of 1986, eighty years after Grace's drowning in Big Moose Lake. Together, these works compile the history and the folklore of Chester Gillette and Grace Brown. Students of history, folklore, journalism, law, literature, and psychology will find in both accounts a recreation of the actual events and the personalities. The Gillette Case offers thoughtful study of the ethics of the press, the nature of guilt and punishment, and literary criticism. *Adirondack Tragedy* and *Murder in the Adirondacks* present the facts of 1906—1908, allowing us to reach our own conclusions.

Brandon, Brownell and Wawrzaszek have studied the massive trial manuscripts, the newspaper stories, genealogical histories, and the literature; they have travelled and interviewed descendants—all in search of the answer to what really happened on July 11, 1906 on Big Moose Lake.

Brownell and Wawrzaszek's *Adirondack Tragedy* presents the personalities, circumstances, and effects of the Gillette Case. Brownell describes life in Cortland County at the turn of the century. Those who enjoy searching genealogical histories will appreciate the minute details of the origins of the Gillette family and how Chester Gillette was destined to find Cortland.

Albertus Gillette farmed in East Scott until his sudden migration to the Pacific Northwest in 1862. Brownell traces the rising career of Albertus' third oldest child and Chester's uncle, Horace. His experience in the New York garment business led to the establishment in Cortland of his own company, the Gillette Skirt Factory. Frank, Albertus' fifth and youngest child did not prosper as Horace did. He and his wife Louise moved from Montana to Spokane, Washington to join the Salvation Army. For their thirteen-year-old son, Chester, this move began "a decade of long journeys, short stays, and strange lodgings" (p. 44). When he was eighteen, Chester entered the preparatory division of Oberlin College in Ohio. The following summer, he worked at the Gillette Skirt Factory and returned to Oberlin for a less than successful academic year. His parents had turned to John Dowie, leader of the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion. Lacking commitment and direction, twenty-two-year-old Chester tried selling books and working as a railroad brakeman before returning to Cortland in April 1905, expecting to work for his uncle, Horace Gillette.

Brownell contrasts the rootlessness of Chester's youth to the stability of Grace Brown's life. The middle child in a family of nine children, Grace grew up on her parents' dairy farm in South Otselic in Chenango County, thirty-five miles east of Cortland. At age nineteen, after graduation from high school, Grace, nicknamed Billy, moved to Cortland and lived with her older married sister Ada. She found employment as a skirt cutter at the newly completed Gillette Skirt Factory.

Brownell quotes four excerpts from Grace Brown's high school diary, but they are disappointing. We read about her attitude toward her teacher Maude Crumb, a fainting episode, her displeasure of ending a visit with her sister, and her homesickness working for another family. One wonders about the rest of the diary as a clue to Grace Brown's personality and character.

Brownell then profiles Chester's social life with Cortland's upper class, his attention to Grace Brown at the factory, their secret courtship, their strained relationship, and finally the unplanned pregnancy that catapulted the pair to tragedy.

Brandon's *Murder in the Adirondacks* also begins with a description of Chester's and Grace's early lives. His exhaustive research of history, biography, official records, newspapers, and interviews, gives life to the people, places, and events that shaped Chester and Grace. Brandon comments on Chester's character: "He was an intelligent gentleman who, through the unfortunate circumstances of his family's conversion to a bizarre religious cult, had not become all he was capable of being" (p. 57). Brandon also believes that "Chester's early separation from his family and his rejection of the family's strict moral code was at least part of the

source of his personality flaws . . . but he never seems to have developed his own ethics to replace those he rejected”(p. 58).

After Grace’s death, the letters discovered in her trunk and in Chester’s room implicated Chester. They reveal his ambivalence and her insecurity. He is bored, restless, and lonesome in one letter, yet sincere and concerned in the next. Grace’s letters in the spring of 1906 reveal a soul tortured by fear, desperation, and love. They were answered with no assurances, merely a promise to meet. Brandon notes that Grace probably saw it as “the worst thing that could happen,” but also as “a trump card in the game she and Chester were playing; one that could lead to his doing ‘the honorable thing’ and marrying her”(p. 76). Chester, Brandon says, “was looking for a way out that involved neither matrimony nor public exposure”(p. 77). The final option, “and one he must have thought about before this time, even if he had not already made up his mind, was to get Grace out of the picture permanently. . . . Grace’s death, he must have thought, would solve both their problems. Grace’s honor would remain intact . . . and Chester would be free”(p. 113). Brandon’s judgments about Chester’s character and thoughts interfere with ours. His account reads like a novel, but he claims his purpose was to “put all of this together into a complete and readable account so that each reader would not have to go back to the original clippings”(p. x). Brownell and Wawrzaszek do not judge the characters—they simply tell the story.

Grace’s final letter before she met Chester for their Adirondack trip held a haunting premonition: “Great heavens how I love mamma! Sometimes I think if I could tell mamma, but I can’t. If I come back dead, perhaps if she does know, she won’t be angry with me. I will never be happy again dear . . . ”(Brownell, 73).

From witnesses’ accounts in the trial manuscript, Brownell and Brandon reconstruct the complicated events of the Adirondack trip the week of July 9, 1906. We sense the tension as the couple board the train in DeRuyter Monday morning and continue north on the Adirondack line. They recount each stop, each false signature, each detail of Chester’s unusual behavior before the boat ride on Big Moose Lake.

Brownell’s most exciting chapter describes the complicated series of coincidences that led to Chester Gillette’s arrest. District Attorney Ward and undersheriff Austen Klock intercepted Gillette at the Arrowhead Hotel in Inlet. They asked if he knew that Billy Brown had drowned. He replied, “No! Is that so?” All the circumstances pointed to Gillette as the Carl Graham who had been with Grace when she died, had left the death scene, and had not reported anything. Brandon too, traces the chain of evidence incriminating Chester.

His trial for premeditated murder began in Herkimer, in November

1908. Brownell focuses on the fairness of the trial. He implies that a fair trial was precluded by complicated and inflammatory testimony, presented by an ambitious District Attorney, undermined by a weak defense, and fueled by an irresponsible press. D.A. Ward announced before the trial: "This fellow is a degenerate, and all circumstances point to the belief that he knocked the girl senseless and threw her overboard"(p. 105). Adding to Chester's plight, Uncle Horace Gillette and Chester's family in Colorado remained silent. The trial made national headlines as Ward called over 70 witnesses and displayed 101 exhibits. Brownell summarizes, while Brandon dramatizes. In either case, the accounts fascinate.

The New York papers persisted with the love triangle theory despite denials from Cortland's Harriet Benedict. Brandon says the theory remains inconclusive. District Attorney Ward tried to prove Chester and Harriet had a liason, possibly a secret engagement. Brownell tries to dismiss any doubts about Harriet Benedict and Chester Gillette. Her testimony, Brownell says, "explained everything," but "Harriet would never be allowed to forget her small role in the Gillette story"(p. 124).

Ward successfully demonstrated, instead, that Chester was not a man of his word, that he had a motive to kill Grace, and the opportunity. But Ward had no proof, no witness. The autopsy listed the cause of death: "primarily concussion, followed by syncope and then asphyxiation." The doctors presented inconsistent and inconclusive medical testimony. They could prove neither accidental drowning nor murder. Brandon brings us into the courtroom as he describes how Ward, not to be undone, played his trump card. He tried to peel away the paper covering the jar with the fetus taken from Grace's body. The defense objected, Judge Devendorf sustained the objection, but it was too late to change the sentiment against Chester. No one believed his story of Grace's suicide. Brandon summarizes Defense Attorney Mills' appeal that it would be wrong to send Chester to the electric chair based on a bungled autopsy: "I should think these doctors would be ashamed, and I am ashamed for them"(p. 220). Brandon excerpts Ward's powerful summation—powerful enough for conviction of premeditated murder. After the trial, Louise Gillette's lectures failed to raise money for an appeal, the Court of Appeals upheld the conviction, and Governor Hughes declined to commute the sentence or pardon Gillette.

Brownell indicts the press' treatment of the case: "The press knew its business. The public which had an appetite for conviction and penalty, also thirsted for confession"(p. 141). However, Chester's spiritual advisors, Cordello Herrick and Henry MacIllravy, refused to acknowledge a confession, but observed, after the execution, "no legal mistake" was

made. Brandon leads us to think of Chester in more human terms as we read his final letters to his brother, mother, and father to whom he wrote: "I have done all I could to make my peace with God. So will wait for you on the other side."

The nature of Chester Gillette's guilt still haunts us. If he did not plan to murder Grace, or even if he did not murder her when an opportunity arose, Brownell suggests that he is guilty of another sin—of deceiving Grace Brown and abandoning her. Brandon notes that the difference between letting her die and planning her death was the difference between life in prison and the electric chair.

The Gillette Case may have faded in memory, jogged only by anniversary feature stories, but Theodore Dreiser's 1926 novel, *An American Tragedy*, simply "changed the story." Wawrzaszek and Brandon review Dreiser's controversial career and place in American literature. Dreiser broke with the tradition of nineteenth-century realists. His naturalistic treatment, particularly of protagonist Clyde Griffiths, portrays him "As a man who could not be held responsible for his actions." (Wawrzaszek, 178) This is not the way it was and Wawrzaszek wants to be sure we understand that. Dreiser's interpretation becomes a problem says Wawrzaszek, when readers try to judge Gillette's guilt or innocence.

Students of American literature will appreciate her comparison of fact and fiction, illustrating precisely where Dreiser "borrowed" from the Gillette Case. She explains that Dreiser's own life parallels parts of Chester Gillette's life, possibly accounting for Dreiser's attraction to this murder story. Brandon expands our understanding of Dreiser's interest in the case. Beyond the parallels to his own life and beyond his reliance on the sensational *New York World* is Dreiser's own explanation: "I concluded that the murder was not one which could either wisely or justly be presented to an ordinary conventional, partly religious, and morally controlled American jury and be intelligently passed upon" (p. 36). Brandon suggests that Dreiser saw, beyond the people of 1906, the trial and death of the American dream.

Dreiser's fiction, followed by stage and screen versions, in addition to retellings through the years, add to the folklore. Readers tend to look at the newspapers as the facts, though unreliable. Even at the time, Brandon explains in his chapter "Purple Prose and Yellow Journalism," the New York City press poisoned the truth and pressured local and regional newspapers. Brandon's own background as a news reporter accounts for his understanding and his defense of the local press. He cites an editorial from the *Utica Saturday Globe*, reminding us that local newspapers condemned the New York Press: "The Gillette trial furnished a splendid illustration of the contrast that exists between legitimate journals and the

faking sensationalism which brings disrepute to printer's ink"(p. 332).

Brandon renews our confidence in investigative reporting. His research is exhaustive; his writing is analytical and interpretive. Brownell and Wawrzaszek cover the same territory, but their dispassionate account leaves the reader in control of his or her own interpretations.

Together, *Adirondack Tragedy* and *Murder in the Adirondacks* show us the lives, events and legends of the Gillette Case. Regardless of the answer to the question of what really happened, the inherent interest of the story moves us to know more. The Gillette Case reflects the values and morals of upstate New York at the turn of the century. It is a story of real people who suffered in different ways for different reasons. This is the human tragedy that Brownell, Wawrzaszek, and Brandon bring to light.

FDR: THE NEW YORK YEARS 1928–32. By Kenneth S. Davis. (New York: Random House, 1985. Pp. 512. \$19.95 hardbound.)

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"Franklin D. Roosevelt is no crusader" Walter Lippmann commented in January, 1932, looking back at the New York governor's first three years in office. "He is no tribune of the people. He is no enemy of entrenched privilege. He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be president." In contrast, Rexford Tugwell, who met FDR for the first time two months after Lippmann wrote, later recalled that this initial encounter was "like coming into contact with destiny itself."

Lippman, the preeminent political commentator of his day, was writing in the moment. He was distressed by the governor's failure to achieve effective bank regulation. He believed that FDR could have gained more substantial victories for public power development and distribution in New York. But most of all, Lippmann was angered by FDR's seeming indecisiveness in handling rampant Tammany corruption in New York City, corruption that reached into the office of Mayor "Gentleman Jimmy" Walker itself. Roosevelt's gentleness with the machine was a part of a delicate balancing act between the left and right of his national party, a tightrope he had to walk to gain the presidential nomination.

Tugwell, a Columbia Professor and member of the "Brains Trust," framed his recollections a decade after FDR's death and a quarter of a century after the meeting he described. The New Deal was history, and so was the Second World War. Roosevelt had been elected president four times, and had already become a legendary figure, joining Washington,