



***Christchurch Crimes and Scandals 1876–99***  
by Geoffrey W Rice.  
**Christchurch: CUP (2013). RRP: \$35. Pb, B&W illustrations, 259pp. ISBN: 9781927145517. Reviewed by James Watson.**

This miscellany of court cases from late-Victorian Christchurch includes incidents that entered

the city's folklore, such as the attack on holidaying members of the local Orange Order as they marched to the railway station and the popular assault on the false prophet, sexologist and serial bigamist 'Arthur Bently Worthington', leading to the reading of the Riot Act. Together with various cases of homicide, sexual assault, arson, theft and bankruptcy, they give us some insight into the seamier and unhappier sides of a town now large and well-connected enough with the rest of the world to host a visit from a circus boasting elephants, lions, a tiger, a rhinoceros and 'an educated pig'.

The author provides brief biographies of the leading court officials and police involved, puts the cases into context and suggests generally plausible explanations – though the suggestion that a constable was tricked into rendering himself insensibly drunk by being given gin instead of water definitely stretches credibility. Alcohol is unsurprisingly associated with many of the crimes, especially those involving violence. Conversely, unwise denunciation of upmarket Coker's Hotel as 'a common brothel' by the popular prohibitionist Tommy Taylor (another Christchurch legend) results in an action for defamation. Markedly less racy is an extended account of the collapse of the law firm Harper and Co. and it is difficult not to share contemporary amazement that Leonard Harper escaped without a conviction – he would not have under current legislation.

There's some further evidence here to support Stevan Eldred-Grigg's assertion that women were often treated with special sympathy in the courts and public opinion. The wife of an insurance fraudster, who plainly assisted in his gruesome attempt to prove his own death, is acquitted by a jury. A mother

and grandmother found guilty of the brutal murder of an illegitimate baby have their death sentences commuted.

This is yet another historical publication that owes an immense debt to the National Library's *Papers Past* project, both for ready access to newspaper reports of trials but also for tracing the subsequent careers of subjects. Geoff Rice has established himself as a leading historian of Christchurch and it is pleasing that this work foreshadows further publications.

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