

BOOK REVIEW

Probing Deaths, Saving Lives: Birmingham's Victorian Doctor-Coroner by Angela Coulter

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Troubador

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Angela Coulter is a distinguished health service social scientist turned biographer. In this book she tells the story of her great-great-grandfather, Dr John Birt Davies, who played an important role in the early medical and social history of Birmingham during the industrial revolution.

Coulter starts her account by describing her ancestor's childhood and youth in Wales and Dorset. He had dual training as a surgeon apothecary, via apprenticeship, and as a physician, via university study. After qualifying, he set up in private practice in the rapidly growing industrial town of Birmingham.

Early in his career, the ambitious philanthropist, Birt Davies, campaigned for the foundation of hospitals for those suffering from eye complaints and infectious diseases. It seems he acquired a reputation for harbouring "radical" tendencies that hampered his professional advance. He was unsuccessful in his attempts to join the staff of the Birmingham General Hospital but succeeded in becoming a clinical educator in the Birmingham dispensary and new Queens Medical School where he lectured in forensic medicine.

After marrying, Birt Davies' became associated with several politician in-laws, and he was active in the early 19C campaign for Parliamentary and Municipal reform. In 1839, he was appointed as Birmingham's first H M Coroner. He served in this role for 36 years and oversaw 30,000 inquests.

In the second part of her book, the author examines some of Birt Davies' inquests. The descriptions contain much detail about the social history of Birmingham in the industrial revolution. We also get a flavour of the types of death that were common in a rapidly developing industrial town with overcrowding and poverty and little health and safety legislation. Inquests were generally held in a public house close to the scene of death and the jury were expected to inspect the deceased body as part of the proceedings. Accidents, homicides and suicides were common causes of death, and the effect of excess alcohol consumption and lax legislation for the supply of drugs and poisons were also exacerbating factors.

I enjoyed reading this book, which draws on much primary source material from early coroner's records. It will appeal particularly to those interested in the social history of industrial towns and cities during the early 19th century.

Chris Derrett
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