

Book review

MAD OR BAD? THE LIFE AND EXPLOITS OF AMY BOCK 1859–1943

Jenny Coleman

Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2010

ISBN 9781877372711

This is the first full-length version of the life of fraudster Amy Bock, a famous character in the social history of New Zealand. It is based on Coleman's years of research on Bock, born in Hobart, Australia, who came here aged 25, beginning her criminal career with a dozen convictions and several prison sentences for fraud and false pretences, the last at the age of 72 in Hamilton. She frequently assumed aliases, all of which were female, before her famous disguise at the age of nearly 50, when as "Percy Carol Redwood" she fraudulently married "his" landlady's daughter, Miss Agnes (Nessie) Ottaway. Bock was convicted and sentenced to two years with hard labour, and the exploit has been told and retold through the years, tagged on to news stories of other cross dressers, and forming part of a discourse of New Zealand gender transgression. Whether there were motives other than financial for Bock's action cannot be known; certainly later in her life rumours circulated as to her lesbian interests, as described by Fiona Clark (2009) and by Julie Glamuzina (1993). Coleman dismisses these writers, stating, "those making these claims have not produced any supporting evidence that can be scrutinised by others" (n. 25, p. 359). However, as Paula Boock has pointed out in her review of the book, Coleman "asks all the really fascinating questions ... too little, too tentative and way too late" (Boock 2010, p.27), as she does not incorporate her views on the "mad or bad" thesis through the biography, nor address the lesbian, cross-dressing, kleptomaniac questions until an all too short epilogue.

Coleman's account of Bock's life is written in a clear and accessible style, that all readers can enjoy. There is a great deal of detailed information, especially about the places where Bock lived, providing a social history of the period. However, I missed an ongoing interrogation of the material, and the inclusion of arguments and opinion that would have strengthened the work. In this sense, there is too much reliance on the detail to tell the story. Where Coleman does raise questions, she does so well, and the story is lifted, as when Coleman wonders whether Bock "genuinely wanted to find a way of returning to Victoria" when discussing the incidents leading to Bock's prison sentence in 1886 for false pretences (p. 132). However, there is too little of this, and Coleman is remarkably absent from her own narrative, except in her excellent Prologue, where she does raise questions as to the interpretation of sources. However, biographers who incorporate speculation and comment throughout their narratives – New Zealand examples include Maureen Birchfield *A Life of Elsie Locke*, Megan Hutching *Leading the Way, how New Zealand women won the vote*, and Lynley Hood *Minnie Dean, her life and crimes*, invite readers to consider the complex questions of interpretation as they read,

which Coleman having introduced these in her Prologue, then treats only in an all too short Epilogue.

This criticism does not detract from the overall value of the biography, however. Coleman has meticulously amassed a great deal of material, and brought it together into a resource that is comprehensive and fascinating. Her work advances our knowledge of her elusive and difficult subject, and will certainly entertain readers. I recommend this book as an important resource on Bock, and as an enjoyable read for everyone interested in the lives of New Zealand women.

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References

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