

Recent Scholarship on Jack the Ripper and the Victorian Media

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Author:

Stewart Evans

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Reviewer:

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Interest in Jack the Ripper continues to be insatiable. New books, articles and webpages on the subject appear almost weekly - a Google search on 'Jack the Ripper' yields nearly 197,000 online references with varying degrees of accuracy and seriousness, the front-runner being www.casebook.org [3]. At least three periodicals are entirely devoted to the matter, *Ripperana*, *Ripper Notes*, and *Ripperologist*, and it has spawned many films, from Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926) via *Hands of the Ripper* (1971) to the more recent *From Hell* (2001). There have been novels and countless television programmes based upon the case, and the description 'Ripper' is routinely attached to new murder hunts by the tabloid press ('Yorkshire Ripper';

'Camden Ripper' and many more). Interest is so great that the National Archives finds it necessary to provide a helpful source sheet with a list of the main Metropolitan Police and Home Office references relating to the murders. Everyone has heard of Jack the Ripper, even if he tends to blend into the world of Sherlock Holmes, hansom cabs and thick fog. Why does one Victorian murderer still exert such world-wide fascination in an age hardly short of its own violent crimes? The Ripper has been outdone many times since 1888, both in terms of his brutality and the number of his victims. Yet the case has taken on a mythic quality, to be reinterpreted again and again by succeeding generations.

The basic facts are easily outlined. In the autumn of 1888 five (maybe six) London prostitutes were killed and appallingly mutilated in the East End by an unknown murderer who struck suddenly and swiftly by night, and who was never caught. Public panic spread far beyond the East End and the police, both City and Metropolitan, were widely criticised for their failure to bring the killer to justice. After four months of media frenzy, the attacks stopped. The reason for this is not known, but the theories about it, and the culprit's identity, are legion.

Happily neither of the titles reviewed here sets out to unmask the true killer. They are serious attempts to provide solid information and analysis in a field too often oversupplied with sensationalism and titillation. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press* breaks new ground in its examination of the role of newspaper reporting during the police hunt for the first notorious serial killer. Professor Curtis has looked in depth at the way the case was covered by fifteen London newspapers, most with national coverage, but three of them local to the East End. The papers are selected, as far as possible, to give a balance of political views. Their background and standpoints are described and discussed in detail in Chapter six, 'The First Two Murders'; however it would have been helpful to have a separate list of them as an appendix. The lack of a bibliography and list of sources hinders the reader's approach somewhat here, though the equivalent information is contained, less accessibly, in the endnotes.

Professor Curtis provides an introduction to the existing 'Ripperature', and a useful chapter on 'Images and Realities of the East End' to establish the background to the murder scene. He stresses the prevailing outsiders' view that the East End was a crime- and disease-ridden, uncivilised 'jungle' full of semi-barbarians, so that the Ripper case - though shocking - was perhaps unsurprising. Press coverage tapped into this pessimistic vision and exaggerated it for dramatic effect, with rewarding results for newspaper sales figures. It was, of course, the press that enthusiastically adopted the name 'Jack the Ripper', taking it from the famous 'Dear Boss' letter sent (almost certainly by a hoaxer) to the Central New Agency after the fourth murder.

The chapters on the conventions of Victorian journalism generally, and on sensational crime-reporting particularly, are an illuminating preparation for Professor Curtis's analysis of press reports on the Ripper murders as they unfolded, beginning with Nichols and Chapman and moving on to Stride, Eddowes and Kelly. Column inches were extravagantly dedicated to the subject for weeks on end, but the newspapers varied in the amount of graphic detail they were prepared to print, and tended to stress the violent rather than the specifically sexual aspects of the murders. Chapter ten, 'The Inquests: Reporting the Female Body' examines these reports in some detail, much of it gory.

All the papers tried to follow up the latest killing with 'human interest' angles, recycling evidence from the coroner's court, often with contradictory results. Thus the *East London Observer* quoted a friend of the victim Annie Chapman telling the court that 'I have seen her the worse for drink', while the *Western Mail* rendered the same evidence as 'Farmer asserted that her murdered friend was apparently a sober, steady-going sort of woman . who seldom took any drink'.

Naturally the papers had their own agendas to promote while covering the story, so *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* stressed the 'danger to law and order' aspect of the case, while *The Star* and *The Gazette* emphasised the need for social reform to alleviate the poverty causing crime. An incidental pleasure of the book is the light it sheds on contemporary journalistic practice. The modern reader is struck by how rapidly an edition could be turned around to include the latest horror. Professor Curtis describes how the Sunday

paper, *Lloyds Weekly*, received information about the murder of Catherine Eddowes at 2.10 a.m., only twenty minutes after her body had been found on 30 September. By 4.00 a.m. the editor was able to start printing an 'extra special edition' so that the sensational news could reach the nation's Sabbath breakfast tables: an impressive achievement and a gratifying scoop for his paper.

Jack the Ripper and the London Press is strong on factual material and very interesting in its blow-by-blow account of the reporting of this sensational case and of the responses to it from readers who wrote to the papers. It is less persuasive in its analysis of the 'cultural politics' of that reporting. What was the cultural impact of the Ripper? No real answer is found here. The final chapter, which attempts to draw a moral from the whole affair, merely seems slightly desperate in its political correctness: 'we must keep asking just how complicitous we (men) are with the serial killers whom we have so clearly demonized or 'Othered'.

In *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*, Stewart P. Evans and Keith Skinner have collated and published all the anonymous letters sent to the press, police, Home Office and others by people claiming to be the Ripper, including the 'Dear Boss' letter mentioned earlier. This is a valuable publication for several reasons. The letters are all transcribed and many are reproduced in colour, providing fascinating insights into late Victorian handwriting and phraseology, as well as educational levels and the psychopathology of hoaxing. The book contains a good bibliography and list of journals and supplies an index of signatories to the letters, postcards and telegrams. The signatures, predictably, are mainly variations on Jack the Ripper - 'Jack the Ripper', 'jack ripper and son', 'Jack the Skipper', 'Jacky the Ripper', 'J.T. Ripper' - and even overseas claimants such as 'Jack o estripador' (of Lisbon). Lesser-known rivals like 'Brumigan Bill the Slaughterman', 'Jim the Cutter' and the 'black brunswick boy' also make their appearance, revealing the sheer quantity and variety of correspondence reaching the police at the time, from all over the world.

Rightly assuming that the background to Whitechapel at the time will be well known to those using the book, the authors move straight into an account of the first of the murders, that of Emma Smith, in April 1888. Each successive killing is clearly outlined and examined against the development of the police investigation and the arrival of increasing quantities of anonymous mail, some sent directly to Scotland Yard, but much arriving through news agencies or newspapers. Publicity given to the 'Dear Boss' letter, written in red ink and signed 'Jack the Ripper' had led to a proliferation of copycat practical jokes and to the permanent assignation of the Ripper tag to the crimes known earlier simply as 'the Whitechapel murders'. Many of the letters taunt the police for their lack of progress; others are clearly fuelled by a personal grudge, like the letter addressed to 'Mr Boss, Desford Industrial School, Near Liecester [sic]' which read 'Dear Boss, I write these few lines to you That the ripper is coming over on the 9th Novr. Don't forget'.

Later chapters deal with the involvement of the medium and clairvoyant Robert James Lees in trying to interpret the letters, and the interest taken by the alienist Dr Lyttleton Forbes Winslow, who claimed to have received letters from the Ripper. The authors successfully peel back layers of myth that have gathered around Ripper writings over the years, revealing the origins of various distortions, pieces of misinformation and even invention in earlier works, like the surprising elevation of the Queen's distinguished physician Sir William Gull to the role of Ripper suspect as a result of pure speculation in an article written in 1970.

Who were the hoaxers? A few were discovered and prosecuted, including a young Yorkshire mantle-maker, Maria Coroner, who had written to her chief constable and to a local newspaper announcing in flowery language the arrival of the Ripper in Bradford, later claiming she had done it 'in a joke'. Asking what she had been charged with, she was told it was a breach of the peace under the common law, to which she replied 'I should like to see the common law, it is so common I have never seen it'. Despite this rash flippancy, she was only bound over to be of good behaviour for six months on her own recognisance of £20. Maria's landlady claimed that the girl was so excited by reading about the Whitechapel murders that she (the landlady) was afraid to go to bed at night. Miriam Howells, an Aberdare labourer's wife, wrote letters as the Ripper threatening to kill two local women, but claimed she 'only did it for a lark'. She, too, escaped with a similar sentence. Edward Grover, of Fletching in Sussex, wrote as the Ripper to threaten Lord Sheffield, who had issued an eviction notice to Grover's mother, but the results of his prosecution are not known. However, the great majority of the hoaxers went undetected. As to their motives, the authors do not attempt

to investigate them here, if indeed they can ever be satisfactorily explained.

The last section of part one of the book deals with some of the 'usual suspects': Druitt, Tumblety, Cream and others, briefly setting out the case against each and comparing their handwriting with the hoax samples, but coming to no startling new conclusions. Part two comprises a very clear, useful calendar of the surviving letters in the National Archives and the Corporation of London Record Office. The book is copiously illustrated with contemporary prints, cartoons and photographs as well as the reproductions of the letters themselves. It is an admirable example of the imaginative presentation of original source material, and of considerable interest to cultural and social historians generally, as well as Ripper enthusiasts.

Other reviews:

The Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/feb/09/historybooks.highereducation1> [4]

Yale University Press

<http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/reviews.asp> [5]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/333>

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1595>

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[3] <http://www.casebook.org/>

[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/feb/09/historybooks.highereducation1>

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