

What We Can Learn from Jack the Ripper

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The murders in London in 1888, attributed to Jack the Ripper, were bloody and bizarre. The Ripper tour the students and I took, graphically narrated by our guide, was stomach turning. The murders involved not only the slashing of several women's throats but also the removal of their internal organs, including their uteruses. These grisly murders drew widespread public attention (and continue to fascinate people today). Why were such horrific crimes the subject of so much interest?

The brutality of the crimes understandably drew Londoners' attention at the time, particularly because some or all appeared to be the acts of one person, a serial killer. With the murders unsolved, people were understandably afraid that more would occur and that they or others could become victims. The ongoing mystery about the identity of the perpetrator and his motives also generated interest. Even Queen Victoria got into the act, offering royal advice to the police.

There was also a darker side to the public's interest, fueled by forces still present today.

First, the crimes were a major media event. Newspaper coverage, in the form of daily, shocking headlines about the murders, was unrelenting and stoked fears. The coverage was also exaggerated and misleading, going beyond the available evidence to speculate about the crimes and possible perpetrators. One scholar has observed that the coverage represented a new style of reporting, characterized by an emphasis on sensation and themes to attract readers. See Darren Oldridge, *Casting the spell of terror: the press and the early Whitechapel murders*, in Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History, at p. 47 (Alexandra Warwick & Martin Willis, ed., 2007). It's a style we sometimes see today. Inaccurate or overblown media coverage can lead people to believe crime is rising when actually it's declining and that punishments have become more lenient when they're actually more stringent. See Ian Marsh & Gaynor Melville, *Crime, Justice and the Media*, at p. 210 et seq. (2d ed. 2009).

Other reactions to the Ripper murders are also disturbing, fueled in part by the media but also a result of prevailing attitudes. Suspicion fell almost immediately on Jews, the predominant group of immigrants in East London where the murders occurred. The first person arrested, a Jewish shoemaker who drew attention because of the collection of knives he used in his work, was eventually cleared and released, but the greatest proportion of the men questioned were Jews. The view of Jews as different, as the "Other," drove suspicions. See Sander L. Gilman, *'Who kills whores?' 'I do,' says Jack: race and gender in Victorian London*, in Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History, at p. 217. In his memoirs, the police official in charge of the case wrote that "the conclusion we came to was that he [the killer] and his people [those covering for him] were low-class Jews." *Id.* The government's bias had repercussions in the community, contributing to increased hostility and threats of violence toward Jews. *Id.*

Another troubling reaction was blaming of the victims. Most were thought to be prostitutes—fallen, unchaste women who brought their troubles on themselves. "Sensational newspaper coverage . . . blamed 'women of evil life' for bringing the murders on themselves." Judith Walkowitz, *Narratives of sexual danger*, in Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History, at p. 182. Of course, such a view is flawed because victims of sexual assault do not "ask for it." Nor does the view account for the circumstances that impel impoverished women to make difficult, precarious choices.

The reaction to the Ripper murders had some bright spots. The crimes focused attention on the terrible poverty in East London and led to reforms as simple as more street lighting, taken for granted in more affluent parts of London. Authorities also embarked on longer-term efforts to improve health and housing for poor people. See William J. Fishman, *Crime and punishment, in Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History*. Not all succeeded. Urban renewal efforts in the East End drove out poor people to other impoverished, dangerous parts of London.

We may never know who committed the Jack the Ripper murders. I will leave that to the Ripperologists. But, as we continue to struggle with problems of crime, poverty, and bias, these 130-year-old crimes still have some things to teach us.