



Article

Exorcising a Demon?: Why History Needs to Engage with the Whitechapel Murders and Dispel the Myth of 'Jack the Ripper'

Drew Gray

Department of History, University of Northampton, Northampton NN2 7AL, UK;
drew.gray@northampton.ac.uk

Received: 18 April 2018; Accepted: 18 May 2018; Published: 23 May 2018



Abstract: This article reflects on the current paucity of academic research into the Whitechapel Murders of 1888. Notably it suggests that there has been a tendency for historians of crime in particular to ignore the case and it argues that this has created an unwanted vacuum that has been filled (and exploited) by amateur history and the entertainment industry. This has consequences for how the public view both the murders and the killer, and the entire late Victorian period. The cultural phenomenon of 'Jack the Ripper' has been allowed to emerge as a result of this lack of academic engagement and this fuels an industry that continues to portray the murderer, the murdered and the area in which these killings occurred in a manner that does a terrible and ongoing disservice to the women that were so brutally killed. Moreover, the 'celebration' of the unknown killer has provided a role model for subsequent misogynist serial murderers and abusers. This article argues that it is time for historians of crime address this situation.

Keywords: Jack the Ripper; Whitechapel Murders; murder; history; public history; misogyny; gender; Victorian; culture

Exorcising a demon?: Why History needs to engage with the Whitechapel Murders and dispel the myth of 'Jack the Ripper'.

There's something inherently seedy and salacious in continually picking the scabs off these crimes, peering at mutilated bodies, listing the undergarments, trekking over the tainted ground in quest of some long-delayed occult frisson.

Iain Sinclair (1987), *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*

1. Introduction

How, in a collected issue about the Victorians and their fascination with murder, can we not discuss the most talked about murder series of the nineteenth, or indeed, any century? Yet that is generally how historians have chosen to deal with the Whitechapel murders of 1888. While there has not been a complete disregard for the topic, there has been a general attitude among historians of crime that 'Jack the Ripper' is the preserve of the amateurs, that we (as 'proper' historians) should avoid getting our hands dirty with what is often seen as merely a pointless game of pinning the blame on the usual suspects.

There are exceptions of course, notably Judith Walkowitz whose 1992 cultural history used the Ripper case to make an important contribution to gender history and specifically the dark history of male violence against women (Walkowitz 1992). Then, in 2007 Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis attempted to draw together a number of themes relating to the Ripper case and bring an academic

lens to the study of the murders and the phenomenon created by them in the preceding 120 years (Warwick and Willis 2007). Warwick and Willis, and some of the contributors to the volume, spoke at a conference that brought academics and some of the amateur researchers (dubbed ‘Ripperologists’, often disparagingly) together at the Museum of London Docklands in conjunction with a major retrospective exhibition dedicated to the murders, and another collected volume followed from this (Werner 2008). Partly inspired by this, I began delivering a module for undergraduates that explored the contextual cultural history of the Ripper murders from a number of angles (crime and violence, popular culture, poverty and philanthropy, history and mythology) and published my own cultural history of the case and its context in 2010 (Gray 2010).¹

Now, a decade or more after these initial forays into the subject, and as we approach the 130th anniversary of the Whitechapel murders, just how far have we come in establishing an academic representation in ‘Ripperology’? In this article I would like to suggest that, while some small steps have been taken, academics have remained ‘sniffy’ about the Whitechapel murder case. This has allowed a vacuum to develop that has sucked in all manner of unpleasantness culminating in the opening of a ‘museum’ (I use the term loosely) which, along with the regular ‘Ripper Tours’, presents a very partial and exploitative view both of the murders and the murdered, and, more broadly, of the Victorian East End. This, I will argue, reflects a wider misrepresentation of the nineteenth century in modern British and World popular culture. This has consequences for the way history is presented, viewed and understood. Therefore, I believe we need to engage with discussions around Jack the Ripper and the way he has been mythologized, packaged and sold, in order to take control of a narrative that has been used and abused for what are often quite unpleasant purposes.

2. The Whitechapel Murders: A Few Facts

Beginning at the beginning then, what do we know about the Whitechapel murders? Several women were murdered between 1888 and 1891, by a person (or persons) unknown in and around a small geographical district of East London. From the discovery of Martha Tabram’s corpse in August 1888 to the finding of Frances Coles’ dying body in February 1891, there are at least nine unsolved killings that have been the subject of speculation and five in particular that have fascinated ‘Ripperologists’. We know this because a police file exists in the national Archives that lists the names of nine women. They are: Emma Smith, Martha Tabram (or Turner), Mary Ann ‘Polly’ Nichols, ‘Dark’ Annie Chapman, Elizabeth ‘Long Liz’ Stride, Catherine (or Kate) Eddowes, Mary Jane (or Jeanette) Kelly, Alice ‘Clay Pipe’ McKenzie and Frances Coles.²

The ‘facts’ however are often disputed, in part because so few actual records have survived and because those that do have often had their provenance or utility challenged by a succession of amateur sleuths, many of whom are intent on using only those ‘facts’ that support the solution to the case they prefer. Thus, Smith is not considered to be a Ripper victim, and Tabram, McKenzie and Coles are all contested. Even Stride and Kelly have been attributed to separate killers.³ Experts continue to argue about the final death toll (the number of women attacked and killed by the same individual) with numbers as low as 3 or 4 and as high as 14. What is not in dispute is that the murders were brutal:

¹ There have also been some other interesting attempts by academic historians to engage with the case and its contexts: John Marriott’s *History of East London* touches on the case (Marriott, John. 2011. *Beyond the Tower: A History of East London*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; as does Fishman in his highly detailed study of Whitechapel in the year of the murders: Fishman, William J. 2008. *East End 1888*. Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications; Elizabeth Hurren has also considered the possibility that the murders were related to the trade in dead bodies and body parts in the late 1800s, in a rare example of a historian engaging with the ‘whodunit’ aspect of the mystery: Hurren, Elizabeth T. 2012. *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and its Trade in the Dead Poor, c.1834–1929*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

² MEPO 3/141. Description: The Whitechapel murders: ‘Jack the Ripper’. Date: 1888–1894.

³ For a detailed overview of the Whitechapel murders readers are recommended to look at the following more authoritative histories: Bell, Neil R. A. 2014. *Capturing Jack the Ripper: In the Boots of a Bobby in Victorian London*. Stroud: Amberley; Begg, Paul. 2006. *Jack the Ripper: The Facts*. London: Robson Books; Rumbelow, Donald. 2004. *The Complete Jack the Ripper*. London: Penguin Books; Sugden, Philip. 2002. *The Complete History of Jack the Ripper*. London: Robinson.

Tabram was stabbed 39 times with most of the wounds concentrated on her abdomen. Nicholls was 'ripped' open, Chapman's uterus was removed and her intestines were thrown over her shoulder in the process. In killing Stride, the murderer was disturbed and so she escaped mutilation if not death. Eddowes (killed an hour or so later on the same night) had her uterus cut out along with one of her kidneys, half of which was allegedly sent to a local man by the killer, the accusation being made that he had eaten the rest. Her face was also mutilated, adding a level of personalization to the murder. Kelly's body was eviscerated and she was left almost unrecognizable; her breasts were sliced off, nearly all the flesh was removed from her body and her heart was taken out. Again, cannibalism was suggested but never proved. Kelly's common-law partner only identified her by her 'ear and eyes' (Magellan 2005). All of the women (with the exception of Tabram) had their throats cut. Many arrests were made but no one was ever charged or tried for the killings. The police presence in the area grew and then declined after Kelly's death, with a mild panic again in 1891 when Coles' dying body was found in Chamber Street by a probationary constable on his first patrol (Begg and Bennett 2013, p. 219).

The lack of closure caused by the failure to catch the killer in 1888 or soon afterwards has certainly contributed to the creation of a mythology surrounding 'Jack', but it was the addition of an intense media interest in the case, and the juxtaposition of this with contemporary debates and fears that catapulted this murder series into a global phenomenon (Oldridge 2007; Curtis 2002). The public interaction with the murders (through the hundreds of 'Ripper letters' sent to the press and police) was almost unprecedented and this has been sustained for 130 years while other infamous Victorian murders (such as the Road Hill House case, the affair of the Mannings, or Amelia Dyer) whilst enjoying considerable longevity have not carried the same cultural fascination as 'Jack' (Evans and Skinner 2001). To understand why, we need to consider how the case and its study have evolved in the century or more since the murders ceased.

3. The Ripper Phenomenon and the Creation of a Cultural Monster

Writing in 1988, with more than a nod to the centenary 'celebrations' of the Whitechapel murders, Deborah Cameron noted that: 'Jack the Ripper has been thoroughly sanitized, turned into a folk hero like Robin Hood. His story is packaged as a bit of harmless fun: only a spoilsport would be tactless enough to point out it is a story of misogyny and sadism' (Cameron 1992, p. 185). Some years later, Robin Odell, a well-respected crime writer and author of more than one 'Ripper' book, penned a retrospective of 'Ripper writing' that detailed the ways representations of the case (and the emergence of a succession of suspects for the murders) had evolved from the 1880s to the present (Odell 2006). While Odell's work is not intent on undermining the industry created by the unsolved mystery, his analysis does reveal how the anti-hero of the Ripper was able to emerge in the manner Cameron noted.

Much of this has to do with the way the case was presented and represented at the time. Michael Diamond described the Ripper murders as the 'greatest murder sensation of the Victorian era'; the brutality, the serial nature of the killings, and the failure of the police to catch anyone, all contributed to making it the biggest story of its day (Diamond 2004, p. 184). One of the first published accounts of the murders was written in 1888 and so, at least superficially, would appear to be a useful primary source. The 'History of the Whitechapel Murders: a full and authentic narrative' was published in New York in 1888 (Anon 1888). However, it takes as its primary source the reportage of the contemporary London press. As a result, it lists the nine murders that the press had linked together to create the narrative of a single assassin, something that almost all subsequent studies have started with. But the New York article also makes several errors and this is typical of many of the writings that have surrounded the Whitechapel series. So for example, it states that the killer had removed organs from Tabram's body and that Nichols had been killed elsewhere and then left in Buck's Row later—neither of these 'facts' are accepted today. The reality is that subsequent narratives of the murders have built on previous retellings, cannibalizing information and taking the whole back catalogue of 'Ripperology' as sacrosanct.

Lee Perry Curtis claims that what ‘transpired in London during the autumn of 1888 was not just a series of five sadistic murders but a serial story combining mystery and sensation-horror spread out over almost four months and cobbled together by a metropolitan press eager to boost sales’ (Curtis 2002, p. 115). Darren Oldridge argued that the way that the Victorian press handled the case, linking together the murders of Emma Smith to those of Tabram, Nichols and then Chapman, established the idea of the lone killer and sidelined competing explanations that the murders were the work of a criminal gang of prostitutes’ ‘bullies’ (‘pimps’ to use modern terminology) (Oldridge 2007). Thereafter, this is the only narrative that has been generally accepted and forms the basis for all the ‘solutions’ offered by researchers.

Not only did the press of the day help construct a narrative of the murders, they also set down the framework for identifying the killer, something Odell notes when he states that: ‘In the twelve years that elapsed between the last of the Ripper murders and the new century, many of the distinctive features of Ripperology had already been sign-posted’ (Odell 2006, p. 17). This point is emphasized by Christopher Frayling in a seminal essay which argued that ever since 1888 we have been searching for an archetype of the killer rather than the killer himself. Frayling goes further, suggesting that the police hunt for the murderer was undermined from the very start because Detective Inspector Abberline and his men were chasing a cultural stereotype rather than a serial murderer (Frayling 2007).

Frayling’s typology of the ‘three ready-made models of the sort-of-person-who-might-do-such-things’ included ‘the English Milord’, ‘Mad Doctor’ and ‘deranged Jewish immigrant’, and reflected contemporary fears of the ‘other’ (Frayling 2007). That these arose is in part explained by contemporary fears but also by the paucity of official source material. As a result, certain surviving documents—including a number that surfaced decades after the murders ceased—have been given undue significance. This is certainly the conclusion reached by Spiro Dimolianis who suggested that the Macnaughten Memorandum (which named three suspects—Druitt, Ostrog and Kosminsky), the ‘Swanson marginalia’ and Sir Robert Anderson’s memoirs have all done more to obscure the truth than they have to provide ‘historical closure’ (Dimolianis 2010, p. 6). Anderson, head of CID (Criminal Investigation Department) in 1888 (but absent on sick leave when the murders began), favoured the idea that ‘Jack’ was Jewish but given his well-known dislike of ‘aliens’ and his lack of direct knowledge of the case, this should be treated with considerable skepticism. As Dimolianis points out, this merely ‘conveyed an entrenched racial prejudice of the time’ (Dimolianis 2010, p. 161). This skepticism with ‘official’ accounts is also shared by Craig Monk who reminds us to be cautious of autobiographical accounts from those, like Anderson, Macnaughten and Henry Smith (the Chief Superintendent of the City of London Police from 1885–1890), because like ‘the authors of all life narratives, they each construct individual truths that have but an uncertain relationship to verifiable fact’ (Monk 2010, p. 95).

Macnaughten preferred Montague Druitt as a candidate. A lawyer and school master, Druitt had thrown himself into the Thames shortly after Kelly’s murder in November 1888 and a suicide note he left declared that he was scared of going mad ‘like mother’ (Begg 2003, p. 259). Mental instability chimed with a popular contemporary notion that the killer must have been someone who manifested a split personality (decades before psychiatry could better explain mental illness) and suggested that a ‘civilized’ ‘gentleman’ had somehow lost control of himself and reverted to his primeval roots. This fitted nicely with late Victorian fantasies born out of Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella about a doctor who experimented with an alter ego. In the autumn of 1888, as ‘Jack the Ripper’ evaded the police in the East End, a West End stage was playing host to the American actor Richard Mansfield’s production of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in an all-too-real representation of the beast-within-man for contemporaries to cope with. Mansfield closed the show after widespread protests (Gray 2010, p. 103). Ideas that the killer was a ‘slumming’ aristocrat—a ‘champagne Charlie’ or ‘Burlington Bertie’ also reflected late Victorian distaste for the excesses of the rich and the infestation of the East End by hordes of newspapermen helped expose the desperate poverty of the residents of the ‘abyss’ and emphasized the huge gulf in wealth between the two halves of the capital of empire. For some then the ‘Ripper’ symbolized the callous disregard of the poor by the rich in late Victorian Britain.

The press fanned the flames of division between the classes in Victorian London as they raised concerns that the neglect of poverty in the East End of London might lead to bloody revolution in England as it had elsewhere on the European continent. Despite the 1848 revolutions taking place over a generation earlier, the Paris Commune and the rise of the rival Communist Internationals in the 1870s had kept the spectre of revolution on the agenda of commentators. There were similar echoes closer to home and Empire as Marriott has noted, and the ‘reading public were reminded that events in Whitechapel were strikingly similar to the atrocities of the Indian revolt of 1857, when British subjects were mutilated by alien savages unrestrained by Christian influence’. Central to understanding the effect of the Jack the Ripper phenomenon on late Victorian society then was the way in which the case was used by overlapping and sometimes competing interest groups—from philanthropists and social commentators, to radical politicians left and right, and, of course, the purveyors of popular culture and entertainment. Much has been made of the ‘positive’ influence the murderer had on social reform, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the killings when swaths of slum housing were cleared away to build new, clean ‘model dwellings’ for the poor. This had been at the heart of Canon Barnett’s campaign of ‘urban renewal’ and bore some fruit after legions of newspapermen had shone their lights on the squalor of the area (Walkowitz 2007, p. 191). However, before we get carried away with the notion that the ‘Ripper’ did some good, it is important to understand that this is itself part of the mythology surrounding the murders. While Odell declared that after the murders Britain ‘at last woke up to the poverty on the doorstep of its capital city, and much-needed reform quickly arrived’, he neglects to mention that the attempts to alleviate poverty were both partial and short-lived (Odell 2006, p. 251). Slum clearance simply moved the problem elsewhere and subsequent model dwellings housed the ‘respectable’ poor—those with a regular, if small, income—not the casual poor that relied on the cheap lodging houses that Barnett was so keen to ‘bulldoze’ in Flower and Dean Street.

So not only did the popular press seek to exploit a ‘crime news’ story by the use of sensational language (drawing on the ways that William Stead’s *Pall Mall Gazette* had exploited the scandal of child prostitution in the capital in 1885),⁴ the London and national focused papers also painted a picture of Whitechapel’s degraded state—helping build an image of a netherworld that we have seen in the writings of contemporaries such as Walter Besant, Octavia Hill and Andrew Mearns.⁵ This is important because the reality was that Whitechapel and Spitalfields was a much more mixed environment than these reports suggested. One only has to study Charles Booth’s poverty maps to see that the East End was far from being completely degraded. Booth’s survey revealed a very different picture of the area: ‘only 1.2 per cent of the East End population were in the category of “loafers and semi-criminals”, while well over 60 per cent tried to lead “decent, respectable lives” (“questions of employment permitting”). The rest were not so much “debased”, as living in conditions of almost perpetual poverty, and even so trying to support one another’, as Frayling points out (Frayling 2007, p. 25). The local press, for example the *East End Observer*, often refuted or played down claims that the area was the cause of the murders and that its inhabitants were in any way ‘degraded’. It was not in their interests to peddle an image of the East End as ‘an abyss’, bereft of any culture, humanity or decency. However, the idea that Whitechapel was so far removed from the rest of London as to be almost a separate country has persisted and, to this day, nearly all books, TV documentaries or movies which represent Victorian East London routinely trot out the same narrative of it as a place forever synonymous with poverty and crime. One of the key myths that needs challenging then, is that of the East End itself.

⁴ (Stead 1885, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*; see also Walkowitz 1992, *City of Dreadful Delight*, pp. 81–120).

⁵ (Besant 1882, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men: An Impossible Story*; Hill 1883, *Homes of the London Poor*; Mearns 1883, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor*).

The degraded streets and slum housing depicted by Mearns in his *A Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (Mearns 1883) or in all the newspaper reports of Whitechapel doss houses infested with drunken men and women in search of cheap sex and the next pitcher of gin have helped to create an image which has stuck with us. Another American visitor, Jack London, was one of several contemporary authors who wrote in graphic detail of the terrible state of poverty and immorality he found in Whitechapel (London 1903). John Tenniel's image of the 'Nemesis of Neglect' is another excellent illustration of how contemporaries portrayed the East End, but again it is not an accurate picture of the reality of the area. In nearly all movies about the Ripper, London is dark and foggy, the smog caused by thousands of coal fires gives it a spooky gothic horror feel. But none of the murders occurred in the middle of the night, and none in the midst of fog. Just as the killer never wore a top hat or swirled a black cape, we have invented an image of the streets that fits our imagination of the murders rather more than the reality of them. So 'The East End was more than a place, it was a living symbol' a symbol of the worst side of Victorian society and, by implication perhaps, the failure of Victorian civilization (Bloom 2013, p. 149).

4. The Legacy for Modern Popular Cultural Representations of Late Victorian London

Thus far then, this discussion has shown how myths about 'Jack the Ripper' and the area he 'haunted' have developed over the 130 years since the murders occurred and that these have been fueled by ongoing speculation brought about by the lack of clear and universally accepted protagonist. Put another way, because the Whitechapel murderer has never been caught the search for 'Jack the Ripper' has become *the* quintessential murder mystery and this has been further exaggerated by the attempt to establish who he was. The list of suspects is endless and is added to with each and every new book on the subject. Doctors (like Sir William Gull, D'Onston Stephenson, Dr. John Williams, or Tumblety) and 'gentlemen' (like Montague Druitt, the Duke of Clarence, James Maybrick or Walter Sickert) along with the 'mad', 'bad' or simply dangerous crew of 'others' (Aaron Kosminsky, George Chapman, William Bury, Joseph Barnett) all compete for our attention. But, as Frayling reminds us, this is to miss the point. None of these men (it is almost invariably men that are put forward although we have had a case made for 'Jill the Ripper'⁶) can be proven to have been the killer since insufficient forensic material survives from the period to establish anyone's guilt 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

What we are left with instead is a mythologized version of the killer as someone (or 'something') symbolic of modern popular (rather than academic) understandings of the late nineteenth century. Clive Bloom has suggested that the Ripper murders are 'the final frenzied acknowledgement of the coming of the age of materialism' (Bloom 2007, p. 105). He sees Jack as a timeless monster, not bound in the age of Victorian gaslight but able to travel and impact our own world; a sort of malign Dr. Who if you will. And while academic history has largely ignored the Ripper murders, other disciplines have been less quick to turn up their noses. Cultural, literature and film studies have all found something interesting to say about 'Jack', his representation and our fascination with him. Thus, Gary Colville and Patrick Luciano dedicate an entire volume to the study of the cultural impact of 'Jack the Ripper' on the entertainment industry (Colville and Luciano 1999). Likewise, Clare Smith explores the symbolism in movie representations of 'Jack' (Smith 2016). Colville and Luciano argue that: 'it is not so much *who* the Ripper was [. . .] that fascinates the public as much as it is *what* the Ripper was, and continues to be: a pervasive representation of ancient evil loose in a progressive, technological world' (Colville and Luciano 1999, p. 9).

This was apparent from the very start of Ripperology, in the days, weeks and months following the murders of the five canonical victims in 1888's 'autumn of terror'. Suggestions that the killer was a monster, inhuman and certainly 'not English' arose from popular superstitions and prejudices. It was easy to point the finger at the Jewish immigrant community with their ritualized butchery and 'foreign' customs. Or at the Irish whose 'Fenian outrages' had been grabbing headlines throughout

⁶ <http://www.casebook.org/suspects/jill.html> (last accessed 10 April 18).

the 1880s (Frayling 2007, p. 19). These all played into deeply ingrained folk traditions. Moreover, we had an established tradition of mythic characters that were drawn from folklore. As London filled up with tens of thousands of migrants from within the British Isles and agricultural workers rendered obsolete by the mechanization of farming, they all brought with them an oral tradition of fairy stories. Characters like Spring Heeled Jack and Sweeney Todd helped forge a new urban mythology that blended with Celtic folklore and the myths brought by more exotic migrants from Eastern Europe (the Golem for example), and beyond. These mutated and merged with fears about this developing 'modern' industrial and urban society. As Smith has written: 'Fin-de-siècle literature produced the male characters that still dominate our cultural imagination. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Dracula, Sherlock Holmes and Dorian Gray all emerged at the end of the nineteenth century along with Jack the Ripper' (Smith 2016, p. 9). With *Jekyll and Hyde* playing on the London stage and a waxworks exhibition featuring the mutilated bodies of Tabram, Nichols and Chapman appearing on the Whitechapel Road it is not hard to see how the boundaries between reality and myth, history and fiction, were blurred from the beginning of the 'Ripper drama' as Walkowitz dubs it (Walkowitz 2007, p. 183). In 2014, the British Library staged a major exhibition of the Gothic tradition covering 250 years of art and culture.⁷ Amongst the printed works from Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and others was the now iconic 'Dear Boss' letter written to the Central News Agency in September 1888 which carried the signature 'Jack the Ripper' written in red ink; surely thereby cementing 'Jack' in popular culture.

Smith's work takes us up to the present in that she includes the most recent screen adaptation of the Whitechapel Murders in her work, the 2001 movie *From Hell* (dir. The Hughes Brothers) itself inspired by the graphic novel of the same name. (Smith 2016; Moore and Campbell 1989). Moore and Campbell's novel utilizes a cast of hundreds from London's history to blend mythology with history and politics and reveal that the murders were part of a conspiracy to uphold the state and patriarchy. This was a popular representation of the murders that took root in the 1970s and reflected other conspiracy theories popular at the time (e.g., the faked Moon landings or the assassination of John F. Kennedy). Quite apart from the fact that it bore no relationship with the realities of the murder case (as we understand it from the small amount of information that survives), both the graphic novel and the film version of *From Hell* (which Moore hates, I know, I've asked him) continue to perpetuate the myths of the case and a vision of Victorian London which owes more to fiction than it does to history. Both Peter Ackroyd (*The Limehouse Golem*) and Iain Sinclair (*White Chappel Tracings*) deploy psychogeography in their novelized versions of the capital. This alchemical blending of sources to paint a mythologized version of the past has long roots: as Lonsdale says, in the 1880s the 'media also drew on cultural fantasies of the grotesque and sexually promiscuous female body; the labyrinthine city, including the illicit and squalid Whitechapel setting' to establish the context for the killings (Lonsdale 2002, p. 104).

This process continues apace, with a glut of Victorianism appearing on the large and small screen in recent years. Ackroyd's *Limehouse Golem* had life breathed into it by Juan Carlos Medina and Jane Goldman, while *Ripper Street* has enjoyed five series since it first aired on the BBC in 2012. The latter used a mixture of real historical characters (Fred Abberline, Edmund Reid) and placed them in a 'real' historical setting (1880s Whitechapel) exposing them to fictionalized versions of real events while at the same time presenting us with a twenty-first century vision of the late nineteenth century. John Logan's *Penny Dreadful* went even further. It combined fictional personalities from the 1800s with 'real life' narratives and depicted London as almost a 'steam punk' capital of empire. Here, Dracula fought with Victor Frankenstein while Dorian Gray interfered from the sidelines. Less horrifically (and more entertainingly perhaps), the BBC's *Dickensian* mini-series populates mid-Victorian London with well-known characters from several of Charles Dickens' novels as Inspector Bucket (Bleak House) investigates the murder of Jacob Marley (*A Christmas Carol*) while subplots involve Fagin and Nancy

⁷ (Townshend 2014–2015, *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination*).

(*Oliver Twist*) and Miss Haversham (*Great Expectations*). To what extent do these versions of the past, however entertaining they are, contribute to a misrepresentation of it? More importantly perhaps, does any of this matter?

5. Conclusions: Ripperology and the Future

In 2010, I wrote that if there was a reason ‘to continue to study the events of August to November 1888’ it was ‘to try to understand the reality of the lives of ordinary people living on one of the most depressed corners of the British Empire’ (Gray 2010, p. 237). This search for the reality of the lives of the ‘ordinary’ is in stark contrast to the extraordinary and fantastical world that has been created around the murderer of five or more working-class women in Whitechapel. According to Kate Lonsdale, ‘Jack the Ripper remains a definitional paradox: he is both labeled and disembodied, both historical figure and discursive presence, both representation and reality [. . .] He is simultaneously nobody, somebody, and everybody’ (Lonsdale 2002, p. 98). For Bloom the ‘Jack’ was also an ‘everyman’ character, and an ‘icon of late Victorianism’ (Bloom 2013, p. 201). Colville and Luciano concur, arguing that through film ‘Jack the Ripper has transcended mere criminality to become a representation of the dark side of ourselves, and hence the Ripper is no longer somebody, but everybody’ (Colville and Luciano 1999, p. 8).

Self-evidently of course, while ‘Jack the Ripper’ might be ‘everyman’, the Whitechapel murderer—the brutal killer of at least five ‘ordinary’ women—was very real. Moreover, the idea that a violent male killer was able to terrify, kill and disembowel his victims without being caught has given hundreds of serial murderers and rapists license to replicate his crimes in the intervening century or more. Charlotte Mallinson is currently working on a post-graduate thesis that explores the legacy of the Whitechapel murders (Mallinson). Mallinson has drawn important parallels between the representation of the murders and the profile of the ‘Ripper’ and a succession of male serial killers from Peter Sutcliffe onwards. The symbolic use of the historical ‘Jack the Ripper’ to perpetuate ‘whorephobia’ and misogyny in attacks on women echoes down the centuries she argues and is sadly ever present in modern Ripperology and in popular culture surrounding the Whitechapel case.

The power of the Ripper to legitimise violence against women was recognized, by some at least, as early as 1888. Like the London Monster scare of the 1790s, ‘Jack the Ripper’ was a useful mechanism to reassert patriarchy and define who was (and who was not) a ‘respectable’ or ‘decent’ woman. Both Walkowitz and Cameron referred to a contemporary letter published by the *Daily News* in the year of the murders. It was from Florence Fenwick Miller, who was described by Walkowitz as ‘a London journalist and “platform woman”’. (Walkowitz 2007, p. 190). Fenwick Miller wrote that:

‘Week by week and month by month, women are kicked, beaten, jumped on until they are crushed, chopped, stabbed, seamed with vitriol, bitten, eviscerated with red-hot pokers and deliberately set on fire—and this sort of outrage, if the woman dies, is called “manslaughter”: if she lives, it is common assault’. (Cameron 1992, p. 186)

As Warwick and Willis declared in their introduction to the volume of essays that was to launch a greater academic interest in the subject: ‘Jack the Ripper is a phenomenon that shows no sign of being incarcerated’ (Warwick and Willis 2007, p. 9). Most recent academic authors recognize the debt they owe to Judith Walkowitz for being bold enough to take on this money-making juggernaut by challenging the ways in which we have depicted the killer. Yet the outpouring of Ripper books (most of which repeat the myths and ‘glorify’ the killer), Ripper tours (the worst of which project images of the mutilated bodies of the women onto the fabric of the modern city, in a callous repetition of the brutality of the murderer) and even the travesty of a ‘museum’ to the killer, are the main legacy that most people will experience when they encounter the ‘history’ of the Whitechapel murders. The museum in Cable Street *can* be dismissed as little more than ‘an attraction’, akin, if you like, to the waxworks that graced Whitechapel High Street in 1888. This is how one eminent Ripperologist prefers to see it. But I take issue with this because very many visitors to the area will *only* see the Whitechapel murder case through the lens of this tawdry and exploitative venture. As Claire Hayward complains, ‘the museum

relies on myth and morbid imagination to sew a patchy narrative together; it lacks the information required to teach visitors much about Jack the Ripper, his victims, or the historical context in which they lived' (Hayward 2017, p. 52). It not only does the victims a disservice, it does Whitechapel and history one too.

Iain Sinclair's characters traipse around a modern Whitechapel, which is tainted by the events of 1888. Yet the image of the killer is always seemingly more important than the memory of the women he killed. 'These were the names of the victims and they were locked together like a football team', Sinclair writes, they were 'part of the doctrine' (Sinclair 1987, pp. 39–40). Lonsdale notes that 'the Ripper's victims are themselves often reduced to "stage props" in discussions of these crimes, their lives "overshadowed by repeated exhibition of their bodies" in the gruesome mortuary photos by which we have come to remember them' (Monk 2010, p. 94). The so-called museum is the epitome of this exploitation of the victims, engaging (as some elements of the contemporary press did) in 'victim blaming' and relegating the five women to the status of 'supporting characters' in a fictionalized narrative of 'Jack the Ripper' as anti-hero (Hayward 2017, p. 54). Thus, I would add here that there is an important role for public history in challenging the prevailing misrepresentation of Whitechapel and the 'Ripper' case. Serious questions need to be asked about how we present history and whose history we are telling when we do so. Public History has made significant inroads into academia in the past decade but remains a sub-discipline that is largely confined to post-graduate study and professional development. The Whitechapel Murders are taught in schools but so much of what I have experienced there falls short of addressing some of the myths and stereotypes generated by 130 years of 'Ripperology'. The 'Ripper' then, is clearly a topic that public historians could bring a much-needed intellectual perspective to.

Ripperology has moved on from the 1980s when Cameron dismissed it as 'pseudo-intellectual' accusing some authors of 'stupidity' and 'a barely suppressed erotic excitement with the idea of killing for sexual pleasure—and in the case of Jack the Ripper, of *getting away with it*' (Cameron 1992, p. 185). Now very many of those involved with the Whitechapel Society and the Casebook internet site are much more interested in finding out about the women who were killed and the lives they led. They painstakingly research the area and challenge some of the preconceived myths that surround it. Yet Ripperologists come in all shapes and sizes, male and female, and many delight in adopting pseudonyms inspired by the case. So we have 'Sir Robert Anderson', 'Abberline', 'Mr. Barnett', 'PC Neil', 'Saucy Jack' and 'Leather Apron'—even 'Carotid Capers'—amongst the many contributors to the Casebook message boards and numerous Facebook groups. You can also buy 'Ripper' merchandise and games themed on the case. In 1996, a PC game was released (RIPPER, by Take 2 Interactive) which allowed gamers to chase the killer through the streets of a futuristic New York. Now gamers have the opportunity to 'be' Jack the Ripper in the most recent version of the popular video game *Assassins Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007 onwards). Here he is a member of the assassins' guild and all his victims are other assassins, justifying their murders of course, and in effect, rewriting history. I asked if any of this matters and I believe it does. The vacuum caused by the lack of academic history (crime history particularly) with the Whitechapel murder case has allowed the narrative to be driven by popular history, by Ripperology, and by the entertainment industry. This has not served the victims of the Ripper very well (although a new study may go some way to addressing this) (Rubenhold 2019). There is space for a proper engagement by historians with the Ripper case and with Ripperology. Several prominent Ripperologists are keen to debate the case and its legacy with crime and cultural historians and there is much we could learn from them and the years of dedicated research they have invested in the minutiae of the case. Moreover, with the recent 'Me Too' campaign by women across the globe to expose the inherent misogyny of world society and the ongoing and frankly scandalous revelations of the gender pay gap, the Ripper needs to undergo a cultural transformation. No longer should he be presented as the 'criminal mastermind' who eluded the Met's finest; or a symbol of male dominance to inspire the next series of femicides; nor a way to justify 'whorephobia' and the continued exploitation of women to satisfy unrestrained male lust. 'Jack the Ripper' needs to be brought out of

the dark shadows into the light and exposed to the full glare of academic study. His victims should be commemorated and their deaths recognized as symbolic of thousands of women who have suffered at the hands of male abusers before and after 1888. Deborah Cameron demanded this in 1988 and we are still waiting. As she wrote then ‘those who glorify the criminal should be forced to remember the victims’ (Cameron 1992, p. 187). It is fitting to give the last word in this essay to Judith Walkowitz who has done so much to inspire a historical debate about the Whitechapel murders and their legacy for gender and crime history.

‘The Whitechapel murders have continued to provide a common vocabulary of male violence against women, a vocabulary now more than one hundred years old. Its persistence owes much to the mass media’s exploitation of Ripper iconography. Depictions of female mutilation in mainstream cinema, celebrations of the Ripper as a “hero” of crime, intensify fears of male violence and convince women that they are helpless victims’. (Walkowitz 2007, p. 193)

Enough is enough.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Anon. 1888. *The History of the Whitechapel Murders: A Full and Authentic Narrative of the Above Murders with Sketches*. New York: Richard K. Fox.
- Begg, Paul. 2003. *Jack the Ripper: The Definitive History*. London: Pearson Education.
- Begg, Paul, and John Bennett. 2013. *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Besant, Walter. 1882. *All Sorts and Conditions of Men: An Impossible Story*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Bloom, Clive. 2007. The Ripper writing: A cream of a nightmare dream. In *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History*. Edited by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bloom, Clive. 2013. *Victoria’s Madmen: Revolution and Alienation*. Basingtoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cameron, Deborah. 1992. “That’s Entertainment”?: Jack the Ripper and the Selling of Sexual Violence. In *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. Edited by Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Colville, Gary, and Patrick Lucanio. 1999. *Jack the Ripper: His Life and Crimes in Popular Entertainment*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co.
- Curtis, Lee Perry. 2002. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Diamond, Michael. 2004. *Victorian Sensation: Or, the Spectacular, the Shocking and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. London: Anthem Press.
- Dimolianis, Spiro. 2010. *Jack the Ripper and Black Magic: Victorian Conspiracy Theories, Secret Societies and the Supernatural Mystique of the Whitechapel Murders*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.
- Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. 2001. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing.
- Frayling, Christopher. 2007. The House that Jack Built. In *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History*. Edited by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 13–28.
- Gray, Drew D. 2010. *London’s Shadows: The Dark Side of the Victorian City*. London: Continuum.
- Hayward, Claire. 2017. Waxworks and Wordless Women: The Jack the Ripper Museum. *The Public Historian* 39: 51–57. [CrossRef]
- Hill, Octavia. 1883. *Homes of the London Poor*. London: Macmillan.
- London, Jack. 1903. *The People of the Abyss*. London: Macmillan.
- Lonsdale, Kate. 2002. Rounding up the Usual Suspects: Echoing Jack the Ripper. In *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Edited by Christine L. Krueger. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Magellan, Karyo. 2005. *By Ear and Eyes: The Whitechapel Murders, Jack the Ripper and the Murder of Mary Jane Kelly*. Derby: Longshot Publishing.
- Mallinson, Charlotte. Forthcoming. Our History, Our Streets, Our Voice, Our Future: Reclaiming the Historiography of the Whitechapel Murders. Ph.D. thesis, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK.
- Mearns, Andrew, Revd. 1883. *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor*. London: James Clarke & Co.

- Monk, Craig. 2010. Optograms, Autobiography, and the Image of Jack the Ripper. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 12: 91–104.
- Moore, Alan, and Eddie Campbell. 1989. *From Hell: Being a Melodrama in Sixteen Parts*. Marietta: Top Shelf Productions.
- Odell, Robin. 2006. *Ripperology: A Study of the World's First Serial Killer and a Literary Phenomenon*. Ohio: Kent State University Press.
- Oldridge, Darren. 2007. Casting the spell of terror: The press and early Whitechapel murders. In *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History*. Edited by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 46–55.
- Rubenholt, Hallie. 2019. *The Five: The Lives of Jack the Ripper's Women*. London: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sinclair, Iain. 1987. *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*. London: Penguin Books.
- Smith, Clare. 2016. *Jack the Ripper in Film and Culture: Top Hat, Gladstone Bag and Fog*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Stead, William Thoma. 1885. The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission. *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4–10.
- Townshend, Dale. 2014–2015. *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination*. London: British Library.
- Walkowitz, Judith R. 1992. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. London: Virago.
- Walkowitz, Judith. 2007. Narratives of sexual danger. In *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History*. Edited by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Warwick, Alexandra, and Martin Willis, eds. 2007. *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Werner, Alex, ed. 2008. *Jack the Ripper and the East End: Introduction by Peter Ackroyd*. London: Chatto and Windus.



© 2018 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).