The Enduring Mystery of Jack the Ripper

The name ‘Jack the Ripper’ has become the most infamous in the annals of murder. Yet, the amazing fact is that his identity remains unproven today. In the years 1888-1891 the name was regarded with terror by the residents of London's East End, and was known the world over. So shrouded in myth and mystery is this story that the facts are hard to identify at this remove in time. And it was the officers of Scotland Yard to whom the task of apprehending the fearsome killer was entrusted.

They may have failed, but they failed honourably, having made every effort and inquiry in their power to free London of the unknown terror.

Over the years the mystery has deepened to the degree that the truth is almost totally obscured. Innumerable press stories, pamphlets, books, plays, films, and even musicals have dramatised and distorted the facts to such a degree that the fiction is publicly accepted more than the reality.

Suspects

Suffice to say genuine suspects are far fewer than the prolific authors of the genre would have us believe. In fact, to reduce them to only those with a genuine claim having been nominated by contemporary police officers, we are left with a mere four. They are:

- Kosminski, a poor Polish Jewish resident in Whitechapel;
- Montague John Druitt, a 31 year old barrister and school teacher who committed suicide in December 1888;
- Michael Ostrog, a Russian-born multi-pseudonymous thief and confidence trickster, believed to be 55 years old in 1888, and detained in asylums on several occasions;
- Dr Francis J. Tumblety, 56 Years old, an American 'quack' doctor, who was arrested in November 1888 for offences of gross indecency, and fled the country later the same month, having obtained bail at a very high price.

The first three of these suspects were nominated by Sir Melville Macnaghten, who joined the Metropolitan Police as Assistant Chief Constable, second in command of the Criminal Investigation Deptment (C.I.D.) at Scotland Yard in June 1889. They were named in a report dated 23 February 1894, although there is no evidence of contemporary police suspicion against the three at the time of the murders. Indeed, Macnaghten's report contains several odd factual errors.

Kosminski was certainly favoured by the head of the C.I.D. Dr. Robert Anderson, and the officer in charge of the case, Chief Inspector Donald Swanson. Druitt appears to have been Macnaghten's preferred candidate, whilst the fact that Ostrog was arrested and incarcerated before the report was compiled leaves the historian puzzling why he was included as a viable suspect in the first place.

The fourth suspect, Tumblety, was stated to have been ”amongst the suspects” at the time of the murders and ”to my mind a very likely one,” by the ex-head of the Special Branch at Scotland Yard in 1888, ex-Detective Chief Inspector John George Littlechild. He confided his thoughts in a letter dated 23 September, 1913, to the criminological journalist and author George R Sims.

For a list of viable suspects they have not inspired any uniform confidence in the minds of those well-versed in the case.

Indeed, arguments can be made against all of them being the culprit, and no hard evidence exists against any of them. What is obvious is the fact that the police were at no stage in a position to prove a case against anyone, and it is highly unlikely a positive case will ever be proved. If the police were in this position in 1888-1891, then what hope for the enthusiastic modern investigator?
To clear the confusion for the new student of the case we have to return to factual basics. Just who was ‘Jack the Ripper,’ and what were the ‘Whitechapel murders’?

**The crimes**

What has to be understood is the fact that the ‘Ripper’ murders and the ‘Whitechapel murders’ are not the same thing, although the latter does include the ‘Ripper’ murders. So to set the scene, the list of the eleven Whitechapel murders, (all of which at some stage have been looked upon as ‘Ripper’ murders), was as follows:

Throat cutting attended the murders of Nichols, Chapman, Stride, Eddowes, Kelly, McKenzie and Coles. In all except the cases of Stride and Mylett there was abdominal mutilation. In the case of Chapman the uterus was taken away by the killer.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Circumstances</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 3 April 1888</td>
<td>Emma Elizabeth Smith</td>
<td>Assaulte and robbed in Osborn Street, Whitechapel.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 7 August 1888</td>
<td>Martha Tabram</td>
<td>George Yard Buildings, George Yard, Whitechapel.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 31 August 1888</td>
<td>Mary Ann Nichols</td>
<td>Buck's Row, Whitechapel,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday 8 September 1888</td>
<td>Annie Chapman</td>
<td>Rear Yard at 29 Hanbury Street, Spitalfields.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday 30 September 1888</td>
<td>Elizabeth Stride</td>
<td>Yard at side of 40 Berner Street, St Georges-in-the-East.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday 30 September 1888</td>
<td>Catherine Eddowes</td>
<td>Mitre Square, Aldgate, City of London.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 9 November 1888</td>
<td>Mary Jane Kelly</td>
<td>13 Miller's Court, 26 Dorset Street Spitalfields.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 20 December 1888</td>
<td>Rose Mylett</td>
<td>Clarke's Yard, High Street. Poplar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday 17 July 1889</td>
<td>Alice McKenzie`</td>
<td>Castle Alley, Whitechapel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 10 September 1889</td>
<td>unknown female torso</td>
<td>Found under railway arch in Pinchin Street, Whitechapel,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 13 February 1891</td>
<td>Frances Coles</td>
<td>Under railway arch, Swallow Gardens, Whitechapel.</td>
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Eddowes’ uterus and left kidney were taken; and in Kelly’s case, evidence suggests, the heart.

The murders were considered too much for the local Whitechapel (H) Division C.I.D, headed by Detective Inspector Edmund Reid, to handle alone. Assistance was sent from the Central Office at Scotland Yard, after the Nichols murder, in the persons of Detective Inspectors, Frederick George Abberline, Henry Moore, and Walter Andrews, together with a team of subordinate officers. Reinforcements were drafted into the area to supplement the local men. After the Eddowes murder the City Police, under Detective Inspector James McWilliam, were also engaged on the hunt for the killer.
Every one of these murders remained unsolved, no person was ever convicted of any of them. Thus it must be said that we simply do not know which of them for certain were the work of a single killer. Over the years, mainly as a result of Macnaghten’s beliefs, the ‘Ripper’-victims have been listed as

- Nichols
- Chapman
- Stride
- Eddowes
- Kelly,

with Tabram having gained favour more recently as a possible sixth in the opinion of some historians.

**Non-Ripper murders**

Certainly the evidence indicates that Smith was murdered by a group of three young hoodlums. The police investigated a suspicion that Tabram was murdered by a soldier. Mylett, who was not even murdered according to the Assistant Commissioner Robert Anderson, was probably strangled by a client.

McKenzie’s wounds indicated yet a different killer. The ‘Pinchin Street torso’ was undoubtedly an exercise in the disposal of a body, and Coles was possibly murdered by a male companion, James Thomas Sadler, who was arrested and, certainly for a while, suspected of being the Ripper.

**The name**

Almost certainly the one single reason for the enduring appeal of this rather sordid series of prostitute murders is the name Jack the Ripper. The name is easy to explain. It was written at the end of a letter, dated 25 September, 1888, and received by the Central News Agency on 27 September, 1888. They, in turn, forwarded it to the Metropolitan Police on 29 September.

The letter was couched in lurid prose and began "Dear Boss......" It went on to speak of “That joke about Leather Apron gave me real fits......” (‘Leather Apron’ was a John Pizer, briefly suspected at the time of the Chapman murder). "I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled...”; and so on in a similar vein. The appended “trade name” of Jack the Ripper was then made public and further excited the imagination of the populace.

The two murders of 30 September 1888 gave the letter greater importance and to underline it the unknown correspondent again committed red ink to postcard and posted it on 1 October. In this communication he referred to himself as 'saucy Jacky...' and spoke of the “double event.......” He again signed off as Jack the Ripper. The status of this correspondence is still being discussed by modern historians.

**The message on the wall**

Immediately after the Eddowes murder a piece of her bloodstained apron was found in a doorway in Goulston Street, Whitechapel. Above the piece of apron, on the brick fascia in the doorway, was the legend, in chalk, "The Juwes are The men that Will not be Blamed for nothing." A message from the murderer, or simply anti-Semitic graffiti? Expert opinion is divided.

**The hype**

It was at this time that the panic was at its height and the notoriety of the murders was becoming truly international, appearing in newspapers from Europe to the Americas. Even at this early stage the newspapers were carrying theories as to the identity of the killer, including doctors, slaughterers, sailors, and lunatics of every description.

A popular image of the killer as a ‘shabby genteel’ man in dark clothing, slouch hat and carrying a shiny black bag was also beginning to gain currency. The press, especially the nascent tabloid papers, were having a field day. With no Whitechapel murders in October there was still plenty to write about. There were dozens of arrests of suspects “on suspicion” (usually followed by quick release); there was a police house to house search, handbills were circulated, and Vigilance Committee members and private detectives flooded the streets.
The discovery of a female torso in the cellars of the new police building under construction at Whitehall added to the air of horror on 2 October, 1888. The floodgates to a deluge of copy cat ‘Jack the Ripper’ letters were opened, and added to the problems of the police.

An unpleasant experience befell the Chairman of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee, builder George Lusk, on 16 October, 1888, when he received half a human kidney in a cardboard box through the post. With this gruesome object was a letter scrawled in a spidery band and addressed “from Hell ......” It finished. “signed Catch me when you can Misher Lusk.” The writer claimed to have fried and ate the other half of the “kidne,” which was “very nise.” The shaken Lusk took both kidney and letter to the police. The police, and police surgeon felt it was probably a hoax by a medical student, although others believed it was part of Eddowes’ missing organ.

**Inquests fuel press speculation**

Popular and lengthy inquests were held by Coroner Wynne Baxter on the victims falling under his jurisdiction, which was the majority of them, and he fuelled the press coverage to fever pitch. He was not grudging in dishing out his criticism of witnesses. By the time the murders came to an end in 1891, the proprietors of the Working Lads’ Institute had had enough of the noisy, unruly, proceedings and informed Baxter that he could find a different venue for his next inquest.

The murder of Mary Kelly, in November 1888, was accompanied by mutilation of such ferocity that it beggared description, and, for once, left the press short of superlatives. The murder had been committed on the day of the investiture of the new Mayor of London and the celebrations were soon overshadowed by the news of the Ripper’s latest atrocity.

The Metropolitan Commissioner of Police, Sir Charles Warren, resigned at the time of the Kelly murder, after a long history of dispute with the Home Office, and was replaced by James Monro.

**The panic subsides**

After the Kelly murder, and many more abortive arrests, the panic began to die down a little and a more quiescent atmosphere began to reign. In early 1889 Inspector Abberline left, to take on other cases, and the inquiry was handed over to Inspector Henry Moore. His last extant report on the murders is dated 1896, when another ‘Jack the Ripper’ letter was received. There were brief flurries of press activity and wild suggestions that the ‘Ripper’ had returned on the occasions of the subsequent murders. However, Sadler was the last serious suspect arrested, and his seafaring activities obviated him from blame for the 1888 murders.

It will be seen from the foregoing that this is a mystery, when stripped of its fictional trappings, which provides all the raw material the imaginative writer or armchair detective could hope for. So popular is the subject that meticulous and scholarly research is carried out on the background of all the characters named in the story. Detailed plans are drawn and Victorian census returns and post office directories are consulted. The newspapers of the time are trawled for every scrap of information. Every minor detail revealed and added is hailed as a major triumph of research, sometimes even justifying a book.

The five prostitutes were stabbed to death in Whitechapel between August 31st and November 9th, 1888, always late at night. Then, for unknown reasons, the killings stopped. Each of the women – Mary Ann (Polly) Nichols (August 31st, 1888), Annie Chapman (September 8th), Elizabeth Stride and Catharine Eddowes (both September 30th, about half-a-mile apart), and Mary Jane Kelly (November 9th) – was not merely murdered, but horribly mutilated, with organs removed and a strong possibility of cannibalism. The last victim was mutilated almost beyond recognition. Even today, the photographs of the bodies are still deeply shocking.

It is probably the elusiveness of a true solution to the Ripper mystery that remains its central attraction to researchers. Most believe that some rearrangement of the evidence combined with a lucky new find will enable them to crack the secret. Perhaps it will. The association of the Ripper with the London of Sherlock Holmes, with fogs, riverside opium dens, the haunts of prostitutes and criminals, virtually adjacent to great wealth and the aristocracy, is enticing to many. Added to this, many amateur Ripper historians are Londoners, often with ancestral roots in the East End. For them, Jack the Ripper is a part of their heritage. Meanwhile, the prolific output of research on the Ripper has had many benefits for social historians. The five murdered women have been investigated in minute detail to see if any association can be found with any Ripper suspect or with each other (none has been discovered). As a result, probably more is known about the lives of these five than of any other group of working-class women in Victorian England. Detailed research on the Ripper crimes has also shed considerable light on a range of late Victorian institutions, from the police to the press.

Given the general air of mystery surrounding his life, it is not surprising that Druitt was the preferred candidate of many Ripperologists. During the past two decades, however, his star has waned. Extensive research has failed to find evidence clearly linking him to the Ripper crimes. In 1959, for instance, the Ripper researcher Daniel Farson was told of a pamphlet entitled *The East End Murderer – I Knew Him*, allegedly written by a Dr Lionel Druitt, Montague's cousin, and published in Victoria, Australia in 1890. It is now apparent that tales of the work are no more than a garbled account of several other works published around the same time, none of which relate to Druitt. MacNaghten's information about Druitt was also highly inaccurate: in the Memorandum he described him as a doctor rather than a barrister and overstated his age by ten years. It is curious and regrettable that MacNaghten destroyed evidence which may have been crucial. The suspect's suicide seems to have been occasioned either by a scandal at his school or by severe depression, perhaps inherited (his mother was in an asylum). Recently it has been discovered that Druitt was playing cricket at Camford, Dorset, six hours after the Polly Nichols murder.
Further attempts to link him with the Royal/Freemason theory of the murders are often made, but are fanciful. Because of MacNaghten, Druitt will always remain a serious candidate, but one so far lacking in any direct supportive evidence.

Montagu was also a notable philanthropist to Jewish causes in the East End. If the Ripper had been a local Jewish lunatic, it is difficult to believe that Montagu and other Anglo-Jewish leaders would not have heard rumours about his identity, and moved to have him placed in an asylum as quickly as possible. Yet in September 1888 (after the second killing), Montagu offered a £100 reward for the Ripper's capture, and five weeks later (after the fourth killing) he sent Scotland Yard a local petition for police protection.

Equally plausible, at first glance, are the theories that the Ripper was an ordinary East End workingman, someone who knew the district well and could come and go without attracting undue attention. A number of such persons, including known associates of Mary Kelly, the last victim, have been proposed. However, the police did not believe that any such man was the Ripper. Had any evidence existed, it would have been relatively easy to secure the conviction of an impoverished workingman, but none did.

The Royal/Masonic Ripper theory appears to be palpable nonsense from beginning to end, without a shred of evidence to support it. The whereabouts of senior royals is known with considerable precision: Clarence was in Scotland or Yorkshire at the time of all of the murders. There is no evidence that any member of the Royal family ever set eyes on any Ripper victim, or that Mary Kelly was blackmailing a Royal or anyone else. There is no evidence that Clarence entered into an illegal marriage with anyone. Sir William Gull was seventy-one in 1888 and had suffered two serious strokes the year before. The five Ripper victims were not associates: there is no evidence that they had even met. If Gull and his collaborators murdered Mary Kelly, they would surely have lured her into a carriage, chloroformed her, hit her on the head, and thrown her into the Thames: the apparent drowning of a drunken East End prostitute would not have received five lines in any newspaper.