

PRIME SUSPECT ¹

A review of some Jack the Ripper suspects

David Canter

Asked to provide an introductory overview to a book of contributions proposing suspects for the Whitechapel murders I was surprised by what these accounts revealed. Perhaps the most salutary was the repeated revelations about the life and times of those living in the East End of London in the 1880s. These conditions are not just of historical interest. They provide the crucial backdrop for understanding the investigations into the horrific murders and the suspects who emerge, but also speak to us across the century with relevance today. This is a relevance both for understanding modern detective work as well as the consequences of desperate poverty and the degradation that often comes with it.

Again and again throughout these chapters we are reminded of the despairing conditions that drive women to dangerously sell sex on the street. This has echoes in the present day. Not long ago I studied the experiences of present-day street sex workers. Violence was accepted as part of their trade. Legal controls and police disdain only made this something they had to live with. In a subsequent study in the Netherlands, a country we mistakenly think of as liberal and facilitative towards prostitution, with the consequent assumption that these women's lives would not be so dangerous, I actually studied 120 murders of prostitutes, a great many of which had gone unsolved.

The murders in the East End of London in 1888 are therefore one more illustration of how predatory men will find vulnerable victims on whom to act out their predilections. Serial killers become skilled in knowing where to find women (usually) who are defenceless and in situations where they can attack and abuse them without being disturbed. This skill poses particular problems for any police investigation. Often the only thing the victims have in common is their vulnerability and location. They have no link to the killer. Consequently, there is no trail to follow of contacts and associations that will lead to the culprit.

In present day murder enquiries in the UK, in which there is no apparent link between the criminal and the victim, huge teams of police officers are put onto the task. One estimate is that it costs the tax payer as much as a million pounds for these enquiries. When carried out systematically the process is to generate a comprehensive a list of possible suspects, from police records, house to house enquiries and intelligence sources including informants. The process is then to trace each suspect, check his (typically) identity is correct and then eliminate him through availability, alibi or any other appropriate criteria. Those who survive this trawl then become key suspects who are examined very closely.

If there is any fibre or other forensic evidence, preferably fingerprints or DNA, this can be used to focus the trawl. Of course, if the culprit's identifier is in police records, or comes into the searches of investigators that greatly speeds up the process. But none of this was available to the police in 1888.

¹ (Text of talk given to H-Division Crime Club UK conference on 28th September 2018, to be published as the introduction to a book edited by Richard Cobb)

Have you noticed that there have been no reports of serial killers in the UK in the last few years? This is the case although the frequency of violent crime, notably knife and gun crime, has not decreased to a very great degree over that period. I put the lack of serial killers down, at least in part, to the improved effectiveness of the boys in blue. If a person kills a stranger, and gets away with it, that person is more dangerous. Whatever psychological processes gave rise to the killing they are not likely to have faded away. But now the murderer has determined the risks and how to avoid them. He may even believe his success is a sign from the fates that he ought to be doing what he is doing. In other words, incompetent policing facilitates serial killing.

It is almost axiomatic that where a murder, or even more so a series of linked murders, go unsolved that the initial investigation was flawed in a number of different ways. The search for Jack the Ripper fits this process, perhaps not because of bungling by the police – I'm not enough of an historian to comment on that, although there are rebukes recorded by a coroner telling the police they had not interviewed everyone they ought to – but because they did not have the personnel resources or those of modern forensic science to make their investigation more effective.

It is doubtful if they had thorough systematic records of known criminals (even today police records are not as accurate or complete as crime fiction often implies). The records of who lived where in the Whitechapel area were also likely to be incomplete. Today the various spellings and alternative names of immigrants and many others can cause havoc in computer searches. In late Victorian London seeing waves of migrants passing through that was doubtless even more problematic. Martin Fido demonstrates this problem in his discussion of Kosminski and Cohen, both of whom are difficult to identify with any certainty, against the range of misspellings, mistaken records and general confusion of the time.

A further challenge in the obstacle course which was the East End of London, where unsolved, stranger murder was not uncommon, is determining which murders are committed by the same person - crime linkage. This is not as established an art as TV dramas would have us believe. There are many reasons why a killer may change his actions from one crime to the next. He may learn 'on the job' so to speak about how to control and kill his victims. He may wish to push his experiences further and try new things that excite him. Also, of course, there is the possibility of being disturbed and his actions therefore being very different.

The other challenge of linking, in the absence of forensic material to tie different crimes together, is that the information about what happened in the crime has to be gleaned from information recorded about the crime scene. Obtaining such records is notoriously open to confusion. In addition, the record has to be interpreted. Even with videos and photographs the crime scene may have been disturbed by intruders and actions subsequent to the murder. The presence of a 'signature' that defines unique aspects of the crime is extremely rare.

The sobriquet that came to define the Whitechapel murders implies that some form of vicious mutilation was characteristic of all the linked crimes. However, the record of these attacks on the victim's bodies are not as reliable as we would hope and they are certainly not all the same. Nonetheless, the immolation in any form, of a victim is, happily, extremely rare. Therefore, the linking of murders by the 'ripper' knife wounds is as good a start to considering them the work of one man as anything else available.

We can therefore understand the challenges facing the police investigations in 1888 and the inevitable plethora of suspects that emerged and keep emerging today. But even now we can only TIE (trace identify and eliminate) suspects generated from available records. Yet in the absence of any forensic evidence, no bloodstained coat, body-part hidden in a fridge or suspect hair found on the victim's body. How are we to generate suspects and evaluate their likely culpability?

Any crime fiction writer, from Edgar Allen Poe, Conan Doyle and on to the perpetrators of Nordic Noire and beyond, will tell you that the narrative can be driven on, in the absence of anything substantial, by speculating about the characteristics of the perpetrator. Thomas Harris with his invention of Hannibal Lector introduced into popular culture the notion of an 'offender profile'. This also generated the mythology that such 'profiles' were somehow the exclusive domain of Special Agents of the FBI. However, although people have been helping investigations by speculating about crucial features of the culprits since biblical times, those Special Agents made an important contribution by showing the value of focusing on the details of what actually happened, when and where, as the basis for any proposals about the offender.

Following the surprisingly profound idea that what a person does and how he does it, when committing a crime, is indicative of who that person is, inevitably draws attention to the distinguishing features inherent in the self-proclaimed *nomme de guerre* of Jack the Ripper. It was on the basis of the mutilations of the victims' bodies that the crimes were linked to the same offender.

These links, though, drew attention to another aspect of the crimes. They were all in walking distance of each other. Police records were not collected in a coherent way across London or the country in the 1880's and 1890s' so it is possible there were other similar murders. But none have emerged that have an incontrovertibly similar pattern. There are some which may be linked by one feature or another, but the consensus seems to be that we are indeed considering murders that occurred in the Whitechapel area of East London in the Autumn of 1888.

This conclusion opens up a further inference. If the murders were in walking distance of each other, over a relatively short period of time, then the killer was very likely to be based in the same area. In a large scale study I've conducted into serial killers in various countries it does emerge that as many as three out of every four live within an area circumscribed by where their victims' bodies were found. So, Jack the Ripper could have been traveling into the area in order to find vulnerable women on the streets, but the highest probability is that he had a base in that area.

THE SUSPECTS

Joseph Barnett – The Live-in Lover

The great majority of murders are solved very quickly because the culprits are known to the victims. They either give themselves up or are quickly identified by detectives following links that people have to the deceased. Keith Stride nominates Mary Kelly's lover as a plausible killer of her and the other women who suffered a similar fate. The circumstantial evidence that Keith amasses is interesting, but unlikely to survive a decent defence barrister in court.

In the absence of detailed scientific study of the very rare occurrence of serial killing (the FBI in their often quoted ‘study’ only got access to a couple of dozen across the U.S.) one-off examples have to be drawn on. It is intriguing, as Stride points out, that there could be parallels between the Ripper of 1888 and the Yorkshire Ripper a century later. Human beings have probably not changed in their fundamentals for at least 40,000 years, so what is a century of apparent progress in that time scale?

Jacob Levy – A Syphilitic Butcher

In the pantheon of mentally disturbed Jews living in the area of the murders Jacob Levy has a claim to significance because of his occupation as a butcher. The traumas in his life included his brother committing suicide by cutting his own throat. Tracey L’anson thus puts her (metaphorical) money on mental disturbance as support for her fingering of Jacob Levy.

The delight of Tracey’s explorations is that she has uncovered the clinical file describing Jacob recorded in The City of London Asylum. I suppose it is reassuring that a qualified doctor was required to diagnose Jacob as mentally disturbed enough to be banished to the Lunatic Asylum and that he apparently was able to adjust to his life there sleeping and eating well.

Intriguingly Jacob Levy had lived in Middlesex Street, that same street and only location mentions in the “Diary of Jack the Ripper” as a place where the putative author had “taken rooms”. My own geographical profiling studies show that this street is a reasonable location for a person to walk from to carry out the murders. This combines with the circumstantial evidence amassed by Tracey L’anson to show that he had the capability and knowledge to commit the murders. The trauma and mental disturbance she claims would be enough to trigger his killing and mutilation spree.

George Hutchinson -A Person of Interest

A curious figure to emerge as one of the witnesses is proposed by Bob Hinton. He focusses on a forensic examination of a statement made to the police by George Hutchinson. The statement gives a detailed description of a person who could have been JtR. Yet Bob’s clinical analysis punches holes in the possibility of Hutchinson having seen what he claims. This opens up the possibility that Hutchinson was trying to mislead the investigation by giving a description that could not possibly have been himself. Curiously, of course, if that description is misleading it throws doubt on other suspects who fit that description.

This does draw attention to another problem faced by investigations in the public eye. All the people who seem to crawl into the light to contribute to the enquiry. Indeed, many of them may even falsely confess to the crime. There were at least fifty people who confessed to killing Olof Palme, the Swedish prime minister. None of whom could have done it.

Some of the witnesses who emerge just want to be part of the excitement. One senior police officer in Israel told me he would never ask the public for help in an investigation because the police would then be inundated with people offering guesses and instructions about what the police should do. Dealing with these would just clog their activities. However, there is another possibility promulgated by FBI Special Agents, that criminals, especially serial killers, will insinuate themselves into an enquiry. There are certainly examples of this when the culprit

wishes to use his intervention as a way of finding out what information the police have and how close they are to discovering his identity.

Is that what George Hutchinson was doing? Or was he seriously trying to mislead the investigation. Or was he excited by the furore that was unfolding around the murders and wanted some part of the action?

David Cohen -Mistaken Identity

Martin Fido's explorations for possible suspects also relies heavily on an evaluation of the witnesses who offered up suspects, either in autobiographies or marginalia. These had offered one Kosminski as the most likely culprit. But in the course of the dogged investigation for which Martin has become renowned he began to believe that the person meant was actually called Cohen probably David Cohen.

As so often happens in the world of Ripperology Martin Fido's search for the truth has all the hallmarks of a police procedural about it, with red herrings and false trails there to trip up the unwary. He sidestepped these by going back to the initial source, Swanson, who had also claimed that his suspect had died in an asylum. According to Martin, David Cohen was the only overtly aggressive patient who had died in Colney Hatch asylum, being also Jewish, which was assumed to be a characteristic of JtR.

Robert Mann – Mortuary Assistant

Mei Trow is another contributor who draws on the idea of a 'profile' of the murderer to make her claim for Robert Mann as the killer. Like Catherine Ramsland she draws on what is known about twentieth century US serial killers to draw up as she calls them 'ground rules' to characterise JtR.

Robert Mann was a witness at the inquest, like so many other suspects, opening the way into Victorian archives to find out who he was. This revealed a man who seemed to live on his own and may well have had some form of epilepsy. There are no obvious indications why this man in his early 50's would stalk and kill street prostitutes, but in the world of folk looking for suspects his very plausible harmlessness is a cause for concern.

Charles Lechmere -Hidden in Plain Sight

People who interact suspiciously with the police can quickly become suspects. Colin Stagg found this when he lied about being on Wimbledon Common around the time that Rachel Nickel was murdered. He was eventually fully exonerated. This is perhaps a salutary thought when considering Charles Lechmere who Edward Stow offers as the culprit.

Charles Lechmere came into the investigation as a witness. Edward Stow shows that he had the opportunity to commit the murders linked to JtR but also possibly many other murders around the area, before and after the Autumn of 1888. This opens up the sort of can of worms that would have Abberline and the others central to the detective work spinning in their graves.

The problem for Edward Stow, though, is that Lechmere is not recorded as having any disturbing characteristics other than a delay in coming forward and some confusion over what he called himself. But as we know such details do not limit the serious Ripperologist. Edward Stow reaches for psychological inferences. Resentment at falling from his affluent origins. Anger at his powerful mother who bigamously married, leading to the projection of this anger onto his victims. An interpretation that Sigmund himself might be proud of.

Albert Bachert – Where did he go?

Mick Priestley has dug out another person who became of note because he argued with a coroner and was a member of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee. Thus, he was part of the events surrounding the murders. Opening himself up (historically speaking) to having inserted himself into the investigation. Once identified by Priestley, there is then the task of exploring whether he has any of the features that would be associated with a serial killer.

Once again, the flawed study by FBI Special Agents of those couple of dozen serial killers in the US, who were willing to talk to them, is drawn on to generate statistics that can provide a template for the killer. Bachert was certainly a nasty piece of goods. Often drunk and frequently disorderly. Involved in many forms of petty crime. However, Mick Priestly notes that only about one in ten of the serial killers studied by the FBI (i.e. a couple) stated conflict with another male was a factor and only about one in four claimed legal issues had influenced their actions. So although Bachert suffered from these prerequisites the probabilities are not strongly in his favour.

But if a chronic liar, who had many altercations with the police, known to be violent on occasions, was involved in a range of crimes and kept on being part of the search for Jack the Ripper, living in the area of the murders, had been looked at more closely before he disappeared from view, he may have emerged as a likely suspect.

William Bury – The Dundee Connection

One particularly interesting suspect apparently fingered by detectives is offered by Bill Beadle. He quotes a hangman as saying that detectives told him that when he did hang William Bury “we are quite satisfied you have hanged Jack the Ripper”. So there we are (as we say in the area of Wales where I live) all sorted.

Bury was last man hanged in Dundee. Claims that Bury could have been the Ripper began to appear in newspapers shortly after Bury's arrest. Like Bury, the Ripper had inflicted abdominal wounds on his victims immediately after their deaths, and Bury lived in Bow, near Whitechapel, from October 1887 to January 1889, which placed him fairly near the Whitechapel murders at the appropriate time.

William Bury was known to be nasty, manipulative man who was hanged for strangling his wife, who he had mutilated in a not dissimilar way to Jack's ripping. He had left the East End of London not long after the JtR murders there ceased. Bill Beadle draws parallels to the recent serially violent killer Levi Bellfield on the plausible basis that a man who kills women he has no acquaintance with is also likely to have a known history of violence.

In the best crime fiction traditions Beadle reaches for a motive for Bury killing women on the streets of London. He draws on the delights of psychological interpretations and the vagaries

of FBI ‘offender profiles’. Interestingly, whereas Ramsland creates a profile of a ‘lust murderer’, Beadle implies that it is low self-esteem and some sort of fantasy led desire to mutilate women. That’s the great thing about ‘offender profiles’, there’s always one available to suit the culprit you first thought of.

The real problem with FBI profiles, though, is that only a very small proportion of those with the characteristics described in the profile kill anyone, let alone a number of prostitutes. Thus, once again in the absence of any direct evidence we have to take hearsay, plausible indications of the culprit with the salt that is so readily spread around debate about the 1888 murders.

A different set of suspects from those indicated by investigators are those who are recorded as witnesses in the various enquiries and inquests around the time of the murders.

Francis Tumblety – The Man in the Slouch Hat

A quack doctor with homosexual leanings seems an unlikely candidate to be JtR, but as Michael Hawley points out he is one of the few suspects who was taken to court by the police. He is even quoted as having said that if he had his way he would disembowel street workers. Hawley claims that this apparently was because “they lured impressionable young men away from a life of homosexuality”. The respectable gay life was being undermined by these disgusting, degraded prostitutes. Certainly a novel explanation for becoming a serial killer.

However, in the rich world of speculation and the ready availability of a ‘profile’ to fit the suspect first thought of, Michael Hawley turns not to FBI Special Agents who have tried to corner the market in ‘offender profiling’, but to the enigmatic figure of Brent Turvey, whose PhD was awarded for a deeply critical examination of forensic scientists. Michael cites Turvey’s recycling of the work of established forensic psychologists Knight and Prentky. They studied rapists in their care and identified subset of anger-retaliatory and reassurance-oriented rapists. Turvey applies both these epithets to JtR on the basis of details of the crimes. Apparently, this is distinct from a sadistic sexual serial killer, although the evidence for this distinction is hard to find.

Nonetheless this allows the claim that JtR had extreme and bitter feelings towards women to be used to reflect on Tumblety’s declared antipathy to prostitutes. The lack of self-esteem, which is required to be diagnosed as needing reassurance, is drawn from his bragging in his autobiography and the fact that JtR seemed to have taken two rings from Annie Chapman. The claim being that the taking of ‘trophies’, in this case including body parts, is characteristic of those who feel inadequate.

Besides these incriminating pointers Tumblety also had knives not dissimilar to those used in mutilating the victims. He even had in his possession organs like those taken from the victims. He therefore, in classic crime fiction style, had the motive and means and, as far as can be determined, the opportunity to carry out the 1888 murders. The question therefore has to be asked as to why he was not convicted of the murders? He absconded.

Kosminski – Prime (Unknown) Suspect

The name Kosminski occurs in a number of police documents and autobiographies as a plausible suspect. This makes him a favoured villain as JtR. But this tidy solution, which of course would have killed the Ripper industry stone dead, is happily fraught with problems. As Steve Blomer argues there are two problems with this. One is the reliability of the claims by the police of the time. The inconsistency in their reports and the ambiguity of their statements raise doubts about the validity of their claims.

The second challenge to Kosminski being the first and most well-known, unknown killer of modern times, is that as Martin Fido also points out, it is not at all clear who he is. He may not be Kosminski but someone else of the same name, or possibly a different name. In the hall of mirrors that is the search for Jack the Ripper, people who may or may not have been Kosminski, who may or may not have been nominated by investigators for the starring role, feature as an enduring monument to the power of human endeavour in the search for the truth.

Montague Drutt – Homicidal Suicide

Apparently, the body of Montague Drutt was fished out the Thames seven weeks after the Miller's court murder, the most vicious killings of those attributed to JtR. This fact becomes the cornerstone of David Andersen's proposal that various references by the police at the time of JtR being at the bottom of the Thames makes Drutt a prime suspect. It is not often that a dead body is taken as crucial evidence that it's that of a serial killer, but as Andersen builds his network of hints and links, with Drutt being named in one or two places as a key suspect by detectives, the case is made that Montague was likely to have been in the right places at the appropriate time for suspicion of his guilt to be convincing.

Here again, the suspect comes into the frame because of what was in MacNaghten's notes for the Home Secretary, when MacNaghten was assistant Chief Constable for Crime. An intriguing aspect of these notes and the surrounding discussion is the general reference to Drutt and other suspects being 'insane'. He was found with stones in his pockets and a reasonable assumption was that he threw himself in the river. This was put down to his extreme 'insanity' possibly as part of his 'homicidal insanity'.

There are two aspects of this that are worth noting. One is that the police not infrequently are convinced who the villain is and have it wrong. The case of Colin Stagg accused of the murder of Rachel Nickell is a recent example. Indeed, MacNaghten is heralded for getting a wrongly convicted man freed and thus contributing to the development of the Court of Criminal Appeal.

The other aspect is the naïve assignment of the general term 'insane' to what today would be regarded as a host of different forms of mental illness. Although it is true that many UK murderers do commit suicide from remorse that would be unusual for a serial killer. Deep depression – leading to suicide- may have been regarded as a form of 'insanity' in the late 19th century, but it is very different from being a 'homicidal maniac'. Even the much misunderstood term 'schizophrenia' can take many different forms and is often challenged as not being a coherent diagnosis at all.

The suspects thrown up by these intrepid searchers for the identity of JtR reveal a motley crew of syphilitics, ne'er-d-wells' and snake-oil merchants. Immigrants or the children of immigrants who ended up in lunatic asylums, often with serious, totally untreated, mental

illnesses. They've been selected in part because they lived in, or at least knew well, London's Whitechapel. Often they've come to notice because they played a role as witnesses in the inquests that followed the murders. The recurring problem, though, as I found when I was giving advice to police investigations, is that there is always a person who is thrown up by the enquiry who seems like the perfect suspect, but turns out in the end to be completely innocent.

Person(s) Unknown

Beyond these possibilities assumptions about the character of JtR is even more speculative. In her essay in his volume Katherine Ramsland draws on extensive consideration of serial killers in the USA. Most of these people carried out their crimes in the last half century. There has to be questions, therefore, about how relevant those results are to a Victorian murderer. Yet the plausible description she derives is not that far removed from the proposal put forward by the physician Dr Thomas Bond not long after the murders.

Interestingly she labels JtR as an angry 'lust killer'. He does indeed mutilate and in some case deliberately leave his victims in a way that degrades them. It seems unlikely he was an amateur anatomist exploring bodies that were available, so anger is an interesting reason for the mutilations. The fact that they were women offering sexual services on the street and that some of the physical attacks were on areas of their bodies usually considered erotic does open up the idea that sexual gratification, or 'lust', was at base of the killer's actions. The lack of any overt sexual penetration would then need a further explanation. However, the details of the post-mortem and records of the victim's bodies are such that it is difficult to be certain that this did not happen.

My own studies of serial killers take a more mundane approach to the actions that distinguish them. My work draws attention the rarity of mutilation of the victim in the absence of sexual activity. This seems to be linked to a great deal of mental disturbance. These very unusual killers are typically known to be seriously out of contact with day-to-day reality, they are psychotic in some way.

The important point about Katherine Ramsland's or my proposals about JtR are how, or indeed if, they can be used to evaluate the claims about various suspects? The suspects brought together in this volume are limited to those that were known, or assumed, to be in the area of the murders during that Autumn in 1888. There are other suspects who appear in various police documents who, again it is a big assumption, those investigating the crimes at the time had good reason to believe was the culprit.

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