

Jack the ripper, a
gore-filled, unheard-
off modus operandi
and legend-like
charac...

[History](#)



Sisters of the abyss Jack the Ripper and the London Press L Perry Curtis Jr 354pp, Yale ““ Orrible murder in Whitechapel - read all about it.” The cliché of the newspaper boy’s shout is still used to evoke the atmosphere of 19th-century London. Reporting sensational crime was a commonplace even in the 18th century, but the unfolding of a crime story was possible only because of the development of a daily press, an innovation uniquely suited to the activities of a serial killer. Earlier crime narratives had a comforting sense of completion: they were tales of crime and retribution. The apparently motiveless violence of the Whitechapel killings denied journalists a structure, and it is the resulting creativity in news reporting that L Perry Curtis Jr describes. His impressive book makes a genuine contribution to 19th-century history in a way that books addressing the banal question of the identity of the Ripper do not.

By 1888, a circulation battle was raging between the 13 morning and nine evening national papers published in London. They played a leading role in heightening the public’s alarm by stressing the inherently dangerous nature of the East End, turning the murders into a media event, and raising the Ripper’s body count. Of at least nine women found butchered in and around the tiny area of Whitechapel in the 18 months between 1887 and 1889, only five are now thought to have been killed by the same person, and two of these are contested. The other deaths were part of the routine brutality of the place. When the first Ripper murder took place in August 1888, the Times headed its modest report “ Another Murder in Whitechapel”. This piece noted that police suspicions centred on a “ High-Rip” gang of

protection racketeers who demanded a percentage of prostitutes' earnings (two women had been killed in similar circumstances in the previous year).

As the crisis intensified, newspapers divided along party lines. For the Liberal and radical press, the issue was the inability of incompetent police to protect the poor of east London – the same police whose baton charges had denied trade unionists their right to assemble in Trafalgar Square in 1887. For the Tory press, both trade-union agitation and the Whitechapel killings were symptoms of the uncontrolled growth of a semi-criminal social underclass. The local press assured readers that the East End was as safe as any other part of London, and at first downplayed the horror of the attacks. It is illustrative of the values of our society that later fictions built up around the Ripper (including claims, most recently by Patricia Cornwell, that he was the artist Walter Sickert) have tended to see him as a toff battenning on the poor for his perverted entertainment. Contemporary theorists had no doubt from which group the Ripper came. The Star was quick to accuse a Jewish bookmaker of the crimes, and paid £50 for the libel. Newspapers were full of reports of foreign-looking suspects with beards and dark complexions. Claims were made that orthodox Jewish men ritually murdered gentile women with whom they had had sex, and that eastern Europeans made candles for use in magic rituals from “ the same portions” taken from Ripper victims.

Many of the gory details would be unprintable in today's papers; “ we breakfast, luncheon, dine and sup on human blood and viscera”, as Reynold's News said. Contemporary sensitivities refused to allow explicit

mention of the victims' occupation, however: " prostitute" was too bold a word, and journalists preferred " fallen woman", " sister of the abyss" or " woman of the streets". The Times, Standard and Morning Post all referred to the Ripper's victims as " unfortunates". When there were no Ripper activities to cover, newspapers ran stories about imitators who had been inspired by what they had read in the press, such as Doctor Holt of Willesden, who made up his face in a ghoulish mask and wandered through Whitechapel pretending to be the murderer. At least one journalist surmised that the Ripper might be an " enterprising newspaperman" who killed in order to supply copy. That is more than unlikely, though the early Ripper letters supposedly written " from hell" were, and are, thought to have been the work a journalist who had truly entered into the spirit of his story.