

ANDREW LYCETT

INSPECTOR BUCKET CALLS

THE INVENTION OF MURDER: HOW THE VICTORIANS REVELLED IN DEATH AND DETECTION AND CREATED MODERN CRIME

★
By Judith Flanders
(HarperPress 558pp £20)

BRUTAL KILLINGS IN London's East End provide both the curtain raiser and final act for Judith Flanders's insightful and dramatic staging of the story of Victorian Britain's love-hate relationship with murder: the slaughter of Timothy Marr and his family on Ratcliff Highway in 1811, and Jack the Ripper's notorious rampage through Whitechapel in 1888.

Unlike George Orwell who, in *Decline of the English Murder*, dated the apogee or 'Elizabethan period' of the perfect English homicide to between 'roughly' 1850 and 1925, the more sociological Flanders courses through the long nineteenth century to investigate something a bit different – how the British learnt to 'savour the thrill of murder'.

Over this time frame, she argues, it became acceptable to show enthusiasm for killing. Executions had always been spectacles, but now the emerging media – initially old-fashioned broadsides, but increasingly the press, theatre and book trade – began not merely to reflect but to pander to this insatiable taste for gore. As a result, the authorities were forced to sit up, particularly by improving policing and detection. Flanders is very acute in picking up the trail of this interactive process in wider Victorian, particularly popular literature.

Her ur-text comes from another essayist, Thomas de Quincey, who in 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts' (1827) wrote that most people 'are very bloody-minded; and all they want in a murder is a copious effusion of blood'. Responding particularly to the Ratcliff Highway murders, de Quincey presented John Williams, the putative perpetrator, as a sublime actor, playing to a theatre audience that revelled in murder.

Williams's guilt was never proven – he committed suicide in jail – but this only damned him further in the eyes of the baying public, and the authorities were forced to react by demonstrating that there was no

escape from the law. This meant staging a grotesque mock execution in which his manacled dead body was put on a cart and taken in procession to the edge of the city, where a stake was driven through his heart.

A parliamentary select committee soon followed, together with changes in the police regime that led to the formation of the Metropolitan Police in 1829 and a separate detective department in 1842. But even at this early stage, there were dissenting voices such as the Earl of Dudley, who felt that he 'would rather half a dozen people's throats should be cut in Ratcliff Highway every three or four years than to be subject to domiciliary visits, spies and all the rest of Fouché's contrivances' (this was a reference to Joseph Fouché, Napoleon's draconian Minister of Police). Dudley's comment was not just aristocratic silliness; it expressed a concern felt by many that, given greater powers, the police would invade their homes and compromise their privacy and freedom.

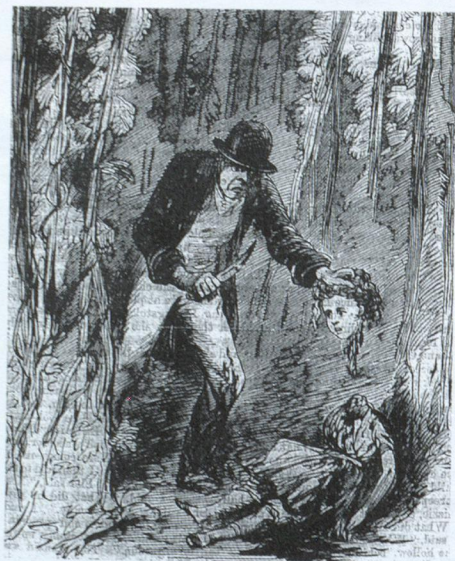
This 'security versus liberty' split would prove an enduring theme. Fast-forwarding through the details and cultural afterlives of several grisly murders (from the body snatchers

Burke and Hare to the minxy Marie Manning, who caused a fashion sensation – and impressed the youthful Thomas Hardy – when she went to the gallows in black satin), Flanders arrives at the Road Hill House murder in Wiltshire in 1860, a true-life locked-room mystery in which the child of a prosperous household was inexplicably killed overnight. (This case was the subject of Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, a 2008 bestseller which sparked widespread interest in Victorian murder – Flanders's is the third book on this subject I have reviewed this year.)

The Road murders featured a new type of professional detective in the form of Inspector Whicher from Scotland Yard. But his intervention added a class dimension to the secu-

rity versus liberty debate: Samuel Kent, the father of the victim, worried about the intrusive presence of a working-class detective in his comfortable middle-class family – a theme taken up in different ways in Mrs Oliphant's *Salem Chapel* (1863), Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) and Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868).

Flanders suggests that class was an important feature in the sensation novels of authors such as Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Criminal activity no longer needed to centre on obvious dens of iniquity, but took place in ordinary homes, where all sorts of hatreds and passions made play with gothic staples such as madness, forgery



On mischief bent

SARAH WISE

LIVING THE LOW LIFE

LONDON LABOUR AND THE LONDON POOR: A SELECTED EDITION

★
By Henry Mayhew
Edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst
(Oxford University Press 472pp £12.99)

'A PICTURE OF life so wonderful, so awful, so piteous and pathetic, so exciting and terrible, that readers of romances own they never read anything like to it.' This was Thackeray in 1850, on reading Henry Mayhew's 'Labour & The Poor' columns in the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper. City life had coerced the poor into adopting elaborate strategies for scavenging a bare living; the ingenuity of their entrepreneurship, the tenuous nature of their hold on life, their suffering and stoicism but also the regular belly-laughs of their world, tumble from every page of Mayhew's reports, which he expanded in 1861 into a book in four volumes.

The corn-salve seller exhibits what he claims is a large corn 'from the honourable foot of the late-lamented Sir Robert Peel' – 'a Free Trade corn', he calls it during his patter. Dick the Dollman hides the legs of his substandard wares as he touts them, because they make the dolls look gout-ridden, being 'rather the reverse of symmetrical'. The man reputed to have invented writing that runs the length of a stick of confectionery sells one that reads 'Do you love me?'; another, less romantic, reads 'Do you love sprats?'. 380 false eyes gaze Mayhew into perplexity as the false-eye maker reveals the details of his trade. Non-existent crimes, such as the Scarborough Tragedy and the Chigwell Row Murder, keep a vendor of cheaply printed 'news' from cold and hunger, while another admits that he has earned good money by killing off, in print, the Duke of Wellington (twice), breaking Prince Albert's arm and having the Queen give birth to triplets.

This is a world of the fake, the phoney, the substandard and the unregulated. It's also a world of extreme recycling, where any object can be scavenged, patched up and sent out into the world to earn a not-necessarily-honest penny. Even dog faeces had their price (sold by lucky finders to tanners), while the velveteen-coated 'toshers' roamed the sewers in search of items to salvage and sell on.

The question does have to be asked – to what extent did Henry Mayhew polish up dull testimonies? In his introduction to the new OUP selection from Mayhew, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst decides that little varnishing took place, and that Mayhew's survey is 'at once a towering historical record and a suggestive inquiry into cultural myth-making'. Human beings are storytelling creatures, and it was the interviewees, rather than Mayhew, who incorporated

and bigamy.

Poisoning featured in several sensation novels, reflecting a concern which was fanned into hysterical panic by the broadsides and other media. Ever the careful historian, Flanders notes how the abolition of the newspaper tax in 1855 boosted the circulations of newspapers that looked to murder trials to retain readers (the more respectable newspapers such as *The Times* were often the most bloodthirsty). These vied for custom with more obviously melodramatic plays and exhibitions, including Madame Tussauds, as well as middle-class family magazines, such as *The Argosy*, edited by Mrs Henry Wood, author of the sensation novel *East Lynne* – all keen to show they could be as bloodthirsty as the next.

Poisoning cases were routinely proletarian, reflecting widespread arsenic abuse among working families. But the most notorious featured the well-born Glaswegian Madeleine Smith, who was accused of murdering her lover after her father wanted her to marry a respectable family friend.

Her trial resulted in the Scottish verdict 'not proven', thus providing Wilkie Collins with a plot line for his novel *The Law and the Lady*. Like his friend Dickens, Collins drew heavily on true crime stories. The Road murders were played back in *The Moonstone*, not merely in the spectacle of the outsider detective floundering in a household of a higher class, but in the role of the stained garment at the centre of the story.

However, in Flanders's estimation, *The Moonstone* is only a halfway house in the sensation novel's progress to becoming full-blown detective fiction. The crucial difference, she argues, is that the former suggested that everyone had a rackets secret life, while the latter turned on the fact that only one person did, and would be found out by the end. Again, in sensation fiction anyone could be a detective, like Robert Audley in Mrs Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, while in proper crime fiction (or drama, starting with Tom Taylor's *Ticket-of-Leave Man* in 1863), the detective is a professional, or at least a dedicated individual, such as Sherlock Holmes, calling on modern techniques of medicine and forensics.

And so Judith Flanders continues, through more murder, mayhem and media bombast, to the debacle of the Ripper slayings. In putting Victorian murder in cultural context, she blends strong narrative drive with the fruits of outstanding research. Trust her to know that Thackeray gave Becky Sharp a law firm called Burke, Thurtell and Hayes, the names of three cut-throats. Or to suggest that a true measure of a murderer's notoriety was if he or she was remembered with a racehorse, such as the Earl of Burlington's gelding, which ran in the 1834 Derby bearing the name of a convicted killer, the Oxfordshire innkeeper Jonathan Bradford. This is intelligent social history to stand beside her earlier studies of home and leisure in Victorian times.

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