



**Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (London: Doubleday, 2019), ISBN 9780857524485, 416 pages, £16.99**

Reviewed by

Nicola Lambert  
(Birkbeck, University of London, UK)

*The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* by Hallie Rubenhold is a fresh look at the stories of the women known as the canonical five victims of the serial killer called 'Jack the Ripper' in 1888. Rather than focussing on these women's murders, Rubenhold's attention centres on their lives instead: this book recovers Mary Ann 'Polly' Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine 'Kate' Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly from simply being murder victims and questions the assumptions about their lives, deaths, and characters that have continued to be made and reinforced since they were murdered. By investigating these women's lives Rubenhold has demonstrated that there is no evidence to suggest that Polly Nichols, Annie Chapman, and Kate Eddowes were ever prostitutes. While Elizabeth Stride and Mary Jane Kelly had been prostitutes, there is no evidence that they were working at such at the time they were murdered. In this way, Rubenhold challenges the assumption often made about the Whitechapel murders, that Jack the Ripper targeted prostitutes. Instead, she reveals a new potential understanding of the murders: that the Ripper was killing women while they slept.

Rubenhold presents quite a different picture of these murders by highlighting, firstly, the fact that the assumption that the victims were all working in the sex trade was erroneous and, secondly, that four of these women were at least partially homeless, spending several nights a week sleeping on the streets to avoid the casual wards of workhouses. She points out that witnesses who saw these women shortly before their deaths reported that most were very drunk, while Annie Chapman and Elizabeth Stride were also very sick. In addition, the victims' bodies showed no signs of a struggle, and that no one nearby at the time of the murders heard a sound. Based on this evidence, Rubenhold argues that it is more likely that Jack the Ripper had found the five women asleep when he killed them.

*The Five*, however, does more than question these five well-known murders. It gives a voice to these women, demonstrating how they were more than simply victims of a famous serial killer. It presents them as daughters, wives, and mothers, who were also struggling with alcoholism, homelessness, losing family, or serious illnesses. They came from various backgrounds and from different places in Britain and Sweden. Rubenhold's investigation of these women's lives, from birth to death, makes them into case studies which allow us to learn much about life in mid-nineteenth century Britain and, through Elizabeth Stride, Sweden. Rubenhold's history brings to life the difficulties that women faced in this time period: these five women who led very different lives demonstrate how assumptions about gender and sex at the time affected their opportunities as well as the struggles that they faced.

The book is separated into five parts, each one dedicated to one of the canonical five, ordered in the sequence they were murdered. We learn much about who they were as women and how they lived their lives, and although in many ways they lived quite differently, there are certain key points that seem to appear again and again. Polly and Annie perhaps led the most similar lives, both experiencing tragedies in their childhoods that forced them to grow up quickly. This is particularly true for Polly who, before she was seven years old, took on the household responsibilities of her mother who died from tuberculosis. Polly and Annie also both married respectably and led, for a while at least, quite comfortable and happy lives as wives and mothers. After their marriages fell apart, however, they were faced with many of the same challenges as most unmarried women in the Victorian period. Rubenhold shows that even without a husband it was necessary to find a man who could protect them and provide them with security that they could not find alone.

Elizabeth and Kate differ in how they reached this point. Elizabeth was already a 'fallen woman' before she married, having had a paramour in Gothenburg by whom she became pregnant, and through whom she also probably contracted syphilis. Once she moved to London as a domestic servant it is believed that she had another paramour in the form of her employer's brother. In Gothenburg, furthermore, she had been forced to register as a prostitute once her pregnancy was discovered. Registered prostitutes were subjected to humiliating genital examinations by a doctor twice a week in an attempt to control venereal disease. Women who were discovered to have a sexually transmitted illness were forced to stay in a hospital to receive treatment until they were deemed 'cured'. After all of this, Elizabeth eventually married, yet, like Polly's and Annie's, her marriage eventually broke down. Kate, on the other hand, never married but lived for many years with a common-law husband, Thomas Conway, whose surname she used.

All of these women cohabitated with men who were able to provide some form of security against the dangers of the Victorian streets. Rubenhold poignantly demonstrates the necessity of finding a man earning a breadwinner's salary for women who faced extreme difficulties in earning enough money to support themselves. These complex situations, Rubenhold indicates, were strongly linked to social class. In working-class communities there was greater flexibility and understanding when marriage was not possible, although the decision to cohabit still led women to be labelled 'fallen'. Polly, Annie, and Elizabeth, who were already married, could not marry anyone else once their marriages ended. For Kate and Tom, who travelled from town

to town with no guarantee of even finding something to eat that day, the cost of marriage meant that it was not an option. For Mary Jane, the want and need to get out of prostitution was more of a priority than waiting for a marriage proposal and cohabiting was an improvement on street soliciting.

Alcohol was also a continued theme for all of these women. Although they had become dependent for different reasons, all of them were alcoholics by the time they were killed. *The Five* follows each of their descents into alcoholism and notes that, by 1888, they were all struggling day-by-day with the choice between buying alcohol and paying for their lodging, and most were homeless at least some of the time. Rubenhold has tracked down where they had been staying in the local lodging houses and casual wards of the workhouses and confirms that the first four had no money for a lodging house and so were sleeping on the streets on their final nights.

Rubenhold's rediscovery of these women's lives also gives insight into various other aspects of life in poverty in Victorian London, such as the workhouse. Although staying in a workhouse was certainly always a harrowing and humiliating experience, not all workhouses or their casual wards were the same. Rubenhold demonstrates that some of the casual wards were far more flexible about enforcing the required stay of two nights that ensured inmates worked a full day in return for their lodging. Many long-term workhouses attempted to break the pattern of pauperism and dependency on the state by providing inmates with new skills and finding them jobs, while some workhouse schools provided a useful education for children in the hope of preventing them from becoming dependent on support as adults.

Mary Jane's story also reveals important details of the human trafficking problem between Britain, Belgium and France in the Victorian period. Although much attention has been given to W. T. Stead's 1885 articles, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', which focussed on child prostitution and trafficking, Mary Jane's life shows that it was not just teenage girls who were abducted or bought. Many women who were already working as prostitutes in London were also tricked and taken to brothels in Belgium known as *maisons closes* where they were kept and forced to work by a form of debt bondage. Mary Jane's experiences reflect the danger women faced when they attempted to escape this world, explaining why she left her life and high-paying clients in the West End when she returned to Britain and moved to the East End where she was forced to work much more for much lower pay.

*The Five* raises important questions about the concept of the 'fallen woman'. If these women could be easily categorised as 'fallen', why were they not referred to as such in the press and by the police? Considering that the press frequently discussed fallen women, a lack of knowledge or awareness cannot explain this. Just three years before, for example, the newspaper coverage of the court trial that followed 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' referred to ex-procuress and prostitute Rebecca Jarrett, who helped Stead and the Salvation Army to procure a child for the articles, as a fallen woman. In contrast, Polly, Annie, Elizabeth, Kate, and Mary Jane were not; instead, they and their families were identified with the shame and humiliation attached to prostitution. It also cannot be a coincidence that the term seemed to be going out of fashion as a discussion topic in the Victorian newspapers at the time of the murders.

The book questions why the terms 'unfortunate' or 'prostitute' were used to describe these women. Rubenhold has proved that these terms were not a complete fit for these women. Rather than being an identity for those working in prostitution, it was instead an expedient label to explain women that did not fit cleanly into the binary categories of the respectable woman nor the sinning prostitute. This label also allowed many commentators to further separate the murders from the experience of the respectable middle classes, giving them a sense of security while reading about the horrific crimes. Meanwhile it also played into the sense that degradation and terror were seemingly leaking out of London's deprived areas, which reinforced campaigns to sanitising the East End. These questions suggest that the use of the term 'prostitute' for these murder victims reflects a complex agenda. While Rubenhold's sources include many who were actively trying to find evidence that they were prostitutes, many others were well aware that the label did not fit, printing the stories of these women from those that knew them who clearly stated that they were not prostitutes.

The book overall is fascinating and provides a long awaited and brilliant insight into these women's personal histories. At the same time *The Five* can be read as five case studies which explore what life was like in general for women living in the Victorian period. It is designed as a popular history book, extensively researched and written in a way that makes it accessible to a broader range of readers while also providing a fascinating social history into Victorian Britain between the 1840s and the 1880s. *The Five* will be interesting for those interested in the Victorian period and its gender history as well as in the Whitechapel Murders specifically.

### **Note on Contributor**

Nicola Lambert is a PhD student in history at Birkbeck, University of London. Her doctoral research focuses on examining the seducers of fallen women in the Victorian period; her work centres on aspects such as how societal attitudes towards male sexuality impact the men that were involved with fallen women and sexually active men's experiences. Her research touches on questions of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century and adds to preceding scholarly work in both history and literature. She is also currently the Events Officer intern at the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies at Birkbeck. She holds a master's degree in Gender, Sexuality and Culture from Birkbeck and her dissertation explored the way that fallen women were represented and discussed in the press. This research used the recently available digitised newspapers within the British Library database to provide a broader analysis of discourse surrounding fallen women than was previously possible.

### **To Cite this Article**

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