

HALLIE RUBENHOLD

THE
FIVE

THE UNTOLD LIVES
OF THE WOMEN KILLED BY
JACK THE RIPPER

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Hallie Rubenhold

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[Map](#) by Liane Payne, based on 1851 edition of *Reynolds's Map of London*

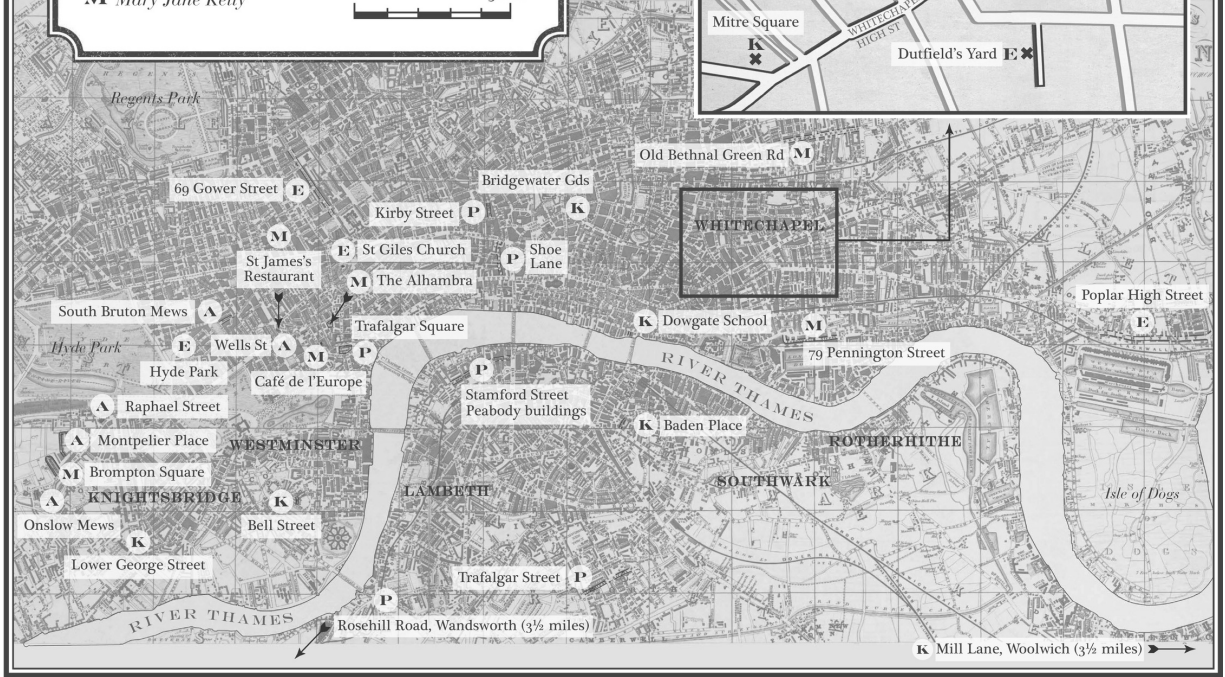
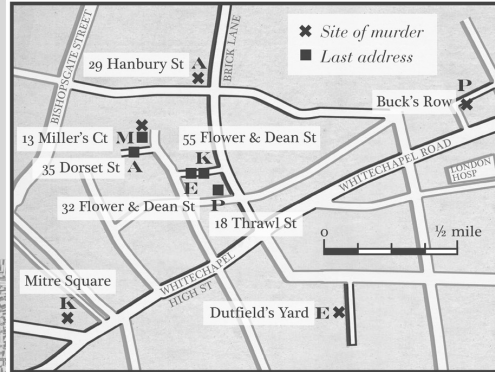
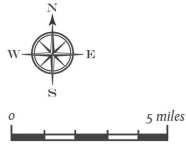
For
Mary Ann “Polly” Nichols,
Annie Chapman,
Elisabeth Stride,
Catherine Eddowes
&
Mary Jane Kelly

I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't.

—AUDRE LORDE

THE FIVE'S LONDON

- P** Polly Nichols
- A** Annie Chapman
- E** Elisabeth Stride
- K** Catherine "Kate" Eddowes
- M** Mary Jane Kelly



INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

There are two versions of the events of 1887. One is very well known, but the other is not.

The first version, more frequently featured in history books, is the one that those who lived in late-nineteenth-century Britain wished to recall, the version they recounted to their grandchildren with a wistful smile. It is the story of Queen Victoria and a summer of celebrations for her Golden Jubilee. No more than a teenage girl when the nation's weighty crown was placed upon her head, she had become, a half-century later, the embodiment of empire, and a suitably grand series of events had been planned to commemorate her fifty-year reign. On June 20, the precise day she had first mounted the throne, the crowned heads of Europe, Indian princes, dignitaries, and representatives from all corners of the empire, and even the Hawaiian queen, Lili'uokalani, converged upon London. West End shopkeepers adorned their windows in red, white, and blue; Royal Standards and Union Jacks, festoons of flowers, and colored garlands could be seen hanging from every somber stone edifice. At night, the embassies and clubs, the hotels and institutions throughout St. James and Piccadilly threw the switches on the electric lights and turned on the gas jets, illuminating the giant crowns and the letters *V* and *R* affixed to their buildings. Her Majesty's loyal subjects came to the center of the city from the suburbs and tenements; they punched their rail tickets from Kent and Surrey and pushed their way into the crowded streets, hoping to catch a glimpse of a royal coach or a princess in diamonds. They placed candles in their windows when the long summer twilight faded away, and toasted their monarch's health with beer and champagne and claret.

There was a service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey, a state banquet, a military review at Windsor, and even a children's fete in Hyde Park for twenty-five hundred boys and girls. They were entertained by

twenty Punch and Judy puppet shows, eight marionette theaters, eighty-six stereoscope displays, nine troupes of performing dogs, monkeys, and ponies, as well as bands, toys, and “gas inflated balloons,” before being treated to a lunch of lemonade, cake, meat pies, buns, and oranges.

Throughout the summer there were commemorative concerts, lectures, performances, regattas, picnics, dinners, and even a yacht race. As the jubilee corresponded with the traditional London “season,” there were also lavish garden parties and balls. Ladies dressed up in that summer’s fashions: lace-trimmed, bustled dresses in black-and-white silk, and hues of apricot yellow, heliotrope, and Gobelin blue. A magnificent ball was held at the Guildhall, where the Prince and Princess of Wales entertained their visiting regal relations, as well as the prince of Persia, the papal envoy, the prince of Siam, and the Maharaja Holkar of Indore. All of high society danced beneath banners and cascading arrangements of perfumed flowers. Tiaras and tie pins sparkled in the mirrors. Young debutantes were introduced to suitable sons. The whirl of Victorian life spun round and round to the dreamy melody of a waltz.

Then there is the other version.

This is the tale of 1887 that most chose to forget. To this day, only a scant number of history books recount it, and surprisingly few people know that it occurred. Yet in that year, this story filled more newspaper column inches than did the descriptions of royal parades, banquets, and fetes put together.

That jubilee summer had been exceptionally warm and rainless. The clear blue skies that presided over the season’s carefree picnics and al fresco parties had shriveled the fruit harvest and dried out the fields. Water shortages and an absence of seasonal jobs in agricultural labor exacerbated an already growing employment crisis. While the wealthy enjoyed the fine weather from beneath their parasols and from under the trees of their suburban villas, the homeless and poor made use of it by creating an open-air encampment in Trafalgar Square. Many had come to the center of town, looking for work at Covent Garden Market, where Londoners bought their produce, but a drought meant fewer boxes of plums and pears to lift and haul. With no money for lodgings, these migrants slept rough in the nearby square, where they were joined by an increasing population of unemployed workers who would rather live on the street than face the deplorable and demeaning conditions of the workhouse. Much to the horror of more fortunate observers, these campers could be seen making their morning

ablutions and scrubbing their “vermin infested” clothing in the fountains, directly beneath the nose of Lord Nelson, high atop his column. When the autumn chill began to move in, so too did the socialists, the Salvation Army, and various charitable organizations, handing out Bibles, admission tickets to lodging houses, coffee, tea, bread, and soup. Tarpaulins were erected to create makeshift bivouacs; each day, impassioned speakers declared their messages from between the paws of the square’s mighty bronze lions. The excitement, the sense of community, and the free refreshments swelled the number of outcast Londoners, which attracted the police, which in turn brought the journalists. The newspapermen roamed among the square’s bedraggled population, collecting their names and stories.

“Mr. Ashville” called himself “a painter and glazier by trade.” Out of work for twelve months, he had spent thirty-three nights sleeping on the Embankment until the weather grew too cold. Then he moved to Trafalgar Square, hoping it might prove a bit warmer. Dejected and visibly worn down by his experience, he attempted to remain positive about his prospects of finding employment again one day.

A soldier’s widow circled Trafalgar Square, selling matches to support her young son, but she hadn’t always lived like this. After failing to pay the final installment on her rent-to-own sewing machine, she lost her livelihood and the single room she had called home. She knew that going into the workhouse meant that her child would be separated from her. It seemed a better option to rough it in the square each night, with the boy curled up under her shawl.¹

An “elderly couple,” who had never before faced adversity, now slept on a stone bench in the square.² The husband had been employed as a musical director at a theater, but an accident had left him unfit to work. With no savings, the couple soon fell behind on their rent and eventually were forced to make their bed under the stars. The thought of throwing themselves upon the mercy of their local workhouse was too shameful and frightening to consider.

Hundreds, each with a similar tale to tell, came to Trafalgar Square to lay their head against the paving stones. It did not take long for political agitators to recognize that this congregation of the downtrodden was a ready-made army of the angry with nothing to lose. Londoners had long realized that Trafalgar Square sat on an axis between the east and west of the city, the dividing line between rich and poor; an artificial boundary,

which, like the invisible restraints that kept the disenfranchised voiceless, could be easily breached. In 1887, the possibility of social revolution felt terrifyingly near for some, and yet for others it did not seem close enough. At Trafalgar Square, the daily speeches given by socialists and reformers such as William Morris, Annie Besant, Eleanor Marx, and George Bernard Shaw led to mobilization, as chanting, banner-waving processions of thousands spilled onto the streets. Inevitably, some resorted to violence. The Metropolitan Police and the magistrate's court at Bow Street, in Covent Garden, worked overtime to contain the protesters and clear the square of those whom they deemed indigents and rabble-rousers. But like an irrepressible tide, soon after they were pushed out, they returned once more.

On November 8, the police made a fatal decision. Sir Charles Warren, the commissioner of police, banned all meetings in Trafalgar Square. Those who had come to see this site, in the heart of London, as a rallying place for the common man and a forum for political action interpreted this as a deliberate act of war. Plans were made for a demonstration on the thirteenth of the month. Its pretext was to demand that the Irish MP William O'Brien be released from prison, but the grievances expressed by the protesters extended far beyond this particular cause célèbre. More than forty thousand men and women gathered to make their point, and two thousand police, along with the Queen's Life Guard and the Grenadier Guards, were there to meet them. Almost immediately, clashes erupted. The police, wielding truncheons, fell on the protesters. Those participating in the march had been advised to demonstrate peacefully, yet many had come equipped with lead pipes, knives, hammers, and brickbats. Forty protesters were arrested, more than two hundred were injured in the riot, and at least two were killed. Unfortunately, Bloody Sunday, as it came to be known, did not signal the end of the conflict. The tinkling sound of smashing glass and the outbursts of public rage continued well into the start of the following year.

Through these two disparate scenes moved two women whose lives and deaths would come to define nineteenth-century Britain; one was Victoria, who gave her name to the years 1837–1901. The other was a homeless woman called Mary Ann, or "Polly," Nichols, who was among those encamped at Trafalgar Square in 1887. Unlike the monarch, Polly would be largely forgotten, though the world would remember with great fascination and even relish the name of her killer: Jack the Ripper.

Roughly twelve months lay between the Queen's Golden Jubilee summer and Polly Nichols's murder on August 31, 1888. She would be the first of Jack the Ripper's five "canonical" victims—those whose deaths the police determined were committed by the same hand in the district of Whitechapel, in London's East End. A few days later, on September 8, the body of Annie Chapman was discovered in a yard off Hanbury Street. In the early morning hours of the thirtieth of that month, the Ripper managed to strike twice. In what became known as "the double event," he claimed the lives of Elisabeth Stride, who was found in Dutfield's Yard, off Berner Street, and Catherine "Kate" Eddowes, who was killed in Mitre Square. After a brief pause in his spree, he committed his final atrocity on November 9: a complete mutilation of the body of Mary Jane Kelly as she lay in her bed at 13 Miller's Court.

The brutality of the Whitechapel murders stunned London and newspaper readers around the world. The Ripper had cut the throat of each victim. Four of the five were eviscerated. With the exception of the final killing, these violent deaths occurred in open places, under cover of darkness. In each case, the murderer managed to abscond, leaving not a trace of his or their or her identity. Given the densely populated district in which these killings occurred, the public, the press, and even the police believed this to be remarkable. The Ripper always seemed one ghostly, ghoulish step ahead of the authorities, which bestowed upon the murders something extra terrifying and almost supernatural.

The Whitechapel-based H Division of the Metropolitan Police did the best they could with their resources, but having never before faced a murder case of this scale and magnitude, they quickly found themselves overwhelmed. House-to-house inquiries were conducted throughout the area and a wide variety of forensic material was gathered and analyzed. The police were besieged with statements and letters from those who claimed to be witnesses, those offering assistance, and others who just liked spinning tales. In all, more than two thousand people were interviewed and more than three hundred were investigated as possible suspects. Even with assistance from Scotland Yard and the City of London Police, none of these efforts yielded anything useful. Genuine leads were certain to have been lost among the swirling wash of paper that the investigators had to process. In the meantime, as the constables scribbled into their notebooks and

followed potential malefactors down dark alleys, the Ripper continued to kill.

As the “Autumn of Terror” wore on, Whitechapel filled up with journalists. They hovered over this seam of sensationalist gold with pencils sharpened. Their presence amid the ongoing police investigation and an East End population living in a state of fear proved explosive. In the absence of any conclusive information offered by the police, the newspapers posited their own theories about the killer and his *modus operandi*. As the papers continued to fly off the newsstands, journalists became hungry for more content and new angles on the story. Inevitably, embellishment, invention, and “fake news” found their way onto the page. However, printing rumors and hotheaded opinion pieces that disparaged the efforts of the police did little to quell the anxiety of those who lived in Whitechapel. By the middle of September, residents were described as “panic-stricken”; most were too terrified to leave their homes at night. “Hooting and shouting” crowds gathered outside the police station on Leman Street, demanding the arrest of the killer, and local tradesmen, eager to take matters into their own hands, founded the Whitechapel Vigilance Society. All the while, the press speculated wildly about the identity of the culprit: he was a Whitechapel man; he was a wealthy “swell” from the West End; he was a sailor, a Jew, a butcher, a surgeon, a foreigner, a lunatic, a gang of extortionists. The inhabitants of the neighborhood began to attack anyone who fit these descriptions; doctors toting medical bags were set upon, and men carrying parcels were reported to the police. Sickened by the grotesque events, many people nonetheless found themselves compulsively intrigued by them. Just as crowds grew outside Leman Street police station, so they also gathered around the sites of the murders. Some stood staring at the places where the vicious deeds had been committed in the hope of finding answers, while others were simply entranced by the horror of the spectacle.

Because the police failed to apprehend and charge a suspect for any of the five murders, the itch to see justice meted out in the form of a trial was never salved. Instead, that which served to offer a few answers and a degree of closure was the series of coroner’s inquests, one for each killing. These were held publicly in Whitechapel and in the City of London in the wake of each murder and covered extensively by the newspapers. At a coroner’s inquest, as at a criminal trial, witnesses are called before a jury to give an

account of events; the objective is to piece together a clear and official picture of how a death occurred. Most of the information that currently exists about Jack the Ripper's five victims appears in witness statements given during the inquests; however, these accounts are problematic. The examinations lacked thoroughness, the juries asked few follow-up questions, and inconsistencies and vagaries in the testimonies were rarely challenged. Ultimately, the information disclosed over the course of the inquests only skims the surface of a far deeper and murkier well of potential answers.

Investigations into the Whitechapel murders did, however, explicitly and convincingly expose a disturbing set of facts: the poor of that district lived in unspeakably horrendous conditions. The encampment and riots at Trafalgar Square were a conspicuous manifestation of what had been chronically ailing in the East End and other impoverished parts of London. It was a cough hacked in the face of the establishment. The emergence of Jack the Ripper was a louder and more violent one still.

For most of Victoria's reign, journalists, social reformers, and Christian missionaries had been decrying the horrors that they observed in the East End, but the situation grew even more acute during the 1870s and '80s, as "the Long Depression" bore down on the economy. What work there was for London's vast army of unskilled laborers—those who sewed and laundered the textiles, carried the bricks, assembled the goods, peddled in the streets, and unloaded the ships—was poorly paid and insecure. Casual work on the docks might pay no more than fifteen shillings a week; "sandwich board men" who carried advertisements through the streets might make one shilling, eight pence per day. To worsen matters, rents had been steadily climbing and lodgings were harder to come by. Large areas of lower-income housing across the capital had been destroyed to make way for railroads, and the creation of broad new thoroughfares, such as Shaftesbury Avenue, decanted London's poor into fewer and more densely packed spaces.

Whitechapel was one of the most notorious of these, but was by no means the only sink of poverty in the capital. As the social reformer Charles Booth's extensive study of London's impoverished areas in the 1890s revealed, pockets of destitution, crime, and misery flourished throughout the metropolis, even within otherwise comfortable areas. Still, Whitechapel's reputation trumped even Bermondsey, Lambeth, Southwark,

and St. Pancras as the most sordid. By the end of the nineteenth century, seventy-eight thousand souls were packed into this quarter of common lodging houses, “furnished rooms,” warehouses, factories, sweatshops, abattoirs, pubs, cheap music halls, and markets. Its overcrowded population represented diverse cultures, religions, and languages. For at least two centuries, Whitechapel had been a destination for immigrants from many parts of Europe. In the late nineteenth century, a large number of Irish, desperate to escape the rural poverty of the mother country, had arrived. By the 1880s an exodus of Jews, fleeing the pogroms of eastern Europe, joined them. In an era highly suspicious of those of other nationalities, races, and religions, integration, even within the slums, did not occur naturally. Nevertheless, Booth’s social investigators regarded these various residents as fairly uniform in terms of their social class. With a number of middle-class exceptions, a significant percentage of the inhabitants of Whitechapel were identified as “poor,” “very poor,” or “semi-criminal.”

The throbbing dark heart at the center of the district was Spitalfields. Here, near the fruit and vegetable market and the soaring white spire of Christ Church, some of the worst streets and accommodations in the area, and perhaps in all of London, were situated. Even the police feared Dorset Street, Thrawl Street, and Flower and Dean Street, and the smaller thoroughfares contiguous to them. Lined with cheap, vice-riddled lodging houses (known as “doss houses”) and decrepit dwellings, whose crumbling interiors had been divided into individual “furnished rooms” for rent, these streets and their desperate inhabitants came to embody all that was rotten in England.

Those who strayed into this abyss from the safety of the middle-class Victorian world were struck dumb by what they encountered. The broken pavement, dim gaslights, slicks of sewage, stagnant pools of disease-breeding water, and rubbish-filled roadways foretold the physical horrors of what lay within the buildings. An entire family might inhabit one vermin-infested furnished room, eight by eight feet in size, with broken windows and damp walls. On one occasion, health inspectors found five children sharing a bed alongside a dead sibling awaiting burial. People slept on the floors, on heaps of rags and straw; some had pawned all their clothes and owned barely a scrap to cover their nakedness. In this circle of hell, alcoholism, malnutrition, and disease were rife, as was domestic violence—along with most other forms of violence. Girls, having barely reached

puberty, turned to prostitution to earn money. Boys just as easily slipped into thieving and pickpocketing. It appeared to moral, middle-class England that in the face of this level of brutal, crippling want, every good and righteous instinct that ought to govern human relations had been completely eroded.

Nowhere was this state of affairs more apparent than in the common lodging houses, which offered shelter to those too poor to afford even a furnished room. The lodging houses provided temporary homes for the homeless, who divided their nights between the reeking beds on offer here, the oppression of the workhouse casual wards, and sleeping on the street. They were the haunts of beggars, criminals, prostitutes, chronic alcoholics, the unemployed, the sick and the old, the casual laborer, and the pensioned soldier. Most residents would fit into a number of these categories. In Whitechapel alone there were 233 common lodging houses, which accommodated an estimated 8,530 homeless people.³ Naturally, those on Dorset Street, Thrawl Street, and Flower and Dean Street bore the worst reputations. Four pence per night could buy someone a single hard, flea-hopping bed in a stifling, stinking dormitory. Eight pence could buy an equally squalid double bed with a wooden partition around it. There were single-sex lodging houses and mixed lodging houses, though those that admitted both sexes were acknowledged to be the more morally degenerate. All lodgers were entitled to make use of the communal kitchen, which was open all day and late into the night. Residents used this as a gathering place, cooking meager meals and quaffing tea and beer with one another and anyone else who cared to drop in. Social investigators and reformers who sat at these kitchen tables were appalled by the rude manners and the horrific language they heard, even from children. However, it was the violent behavior, degrading filth, and overflowing toilets, in addition to the open displays of nakedness, free sexual intercourse, drunkenness, and child neglect to which they truly objected. In the “doss house,” everything offensive about the slum was concentrated under one roof.

The police and reformers were especially concerned about the link between common lodging houses and prostitution. As long as a “dosser” could pay the pence required for a bed, the lodging-house keeper asked few questions. Many women who regarded prostitution as their main source of income lived in or worked out of lodging houses, especially in the wake of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, which saw the enforced closure of

many brothels. The result of this meant that a large number of prostitutes were forced to ply their trade in places separate from where they lived. A lodging house with eight-penny doubles was a convenient place to take a man who had been solicited on the street. Other prostitutes chose to sleep in a cheaper four-penny single but see to their customers in dark corners outside, where quick sexual encounters, which frequently did not involve full intercourse, took place.

Lodging houses provided shelter for a wide variety of women facing an assortment of unfortunate circumstances. While some resorted to what has been called “casual prostitution,” it is categorically wrong to assume that all of them did so. These women were inventive when it came to scraping together their “doss money.” Most took on poorly paid casual labor, doing cleaning and laundering or hawking goods. Generally, they supplemented the little money they earned by borrowing, begging, pawning, and sometimes stealing. Pairing up with a male partner also played an essential role in defraying costs. Often these relationships, formed out of necessity, were short-lived; some, however, endured for months or years without ever being sanctified in a church. The nonchalance with which poor men and women embarked upon and dissolved these partnerships horrified middle-class observers. Whether or not these unions produced children also seemed to be of little consequence. Obviously, this way of life diverged considerably from the acceptable moral standard and threw another layer of confusion over what exactly it was that the female residents of these wicked lodging houses were doing in order to keep a roof over their heads.

During the Ripper’s reign of terror, newspapers, eager to scandalize the nation with graphic details of slum life, regularly asserted that Whitechapel’s lodging houses “were brothels in all but name” and that the majority of women who inhabited them, with very few exceptions, were all prostitutes. In the grip of such terrible events, the public were willing to believe it. Hyperbole became enshrined as fact, although some within the police had come to perceive the situation in another light. An altogether different perspective is offered in a letter written by Sir Charles Warren, the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, at the height of the murder spree. After doing some rough calculations, Warren estimated that approximately 1,200 prostitutes inhabited Whitechapel’s 233 common lodging houses. More importantly, he qualified this statement by admitting that the police “have no means of ascertaining what women are prostitutes and who are

not.”⁴ In other words, the newspapers were in no position to make this determination when even the police found distinguishing a prostitute from among her sisters an impossibility. Warren’s figures present another intriguing prospect. If the lodging-house population was comprised of 8,530 people and a third, or 2,844, of those residents were female, and if it were to be accepted that 1,200 of these women could be identified as prostitutes, that would still indicate that the majority of them, or 1,644, were not engaged in any form of prostitution at all.* Much like the inhabitants of Whitechapel’s common lodging houses, the victims of Jack the Ripper and the lives they led became entangled in a web of assumptions, rumor, and unfounded speculation. The spinning of these strands began over 130 years ago and, remarkably, they have been left virtually undisturbed and unchallenged. The fibers that have clung to and defined the shape of Polly, Annie, Elisabeth, Kate, and Mary Jane’s stories are the values of the Victorian world. They are male, authoritarian, and middle class. They were formed at a time when women had no voice, and few rights, and the poor were considered lazy and degenerate: to have been both of these things was one of the worst possible combinations. For over 130 years we have embraced the dusty parcel we were handed. We have rarely ventured to peer inside it or attempted to remove the thick wrapping that has kept us from knowing these women or their true histories.

Jack the Ripper killed prostitutes, or so it has always been believed, but there is no hard evidence to suggest that three of his five victims were prostitutes at all. As soon as each body was discovered, in a dark yard or street, the police *assumed* that the woman was a prostitute killed by a maniac who had lured her to the location for sex. There is, and never was, any proof of this either. To the contrary—over the course of the coroner’s inquests, it became known that Jack the Ripper never had sex with a single victim. Additionally, in the case of each murder there were no signs of struggle and the killings appear to have taken place in complete silence. There were no screams heard by anyone in the vicinity. The autopsies concluded that all of the women were killed while in a reclining position. In at least three of the cases, the victims were known to sleep on the street and on the nights they were killed did not have money for a lodging house. In the final case, the victim was murdered in her bed. However, the police were so committed to their theories about the killer’s choice of victims that

they failed to conclude the obvious—the Ripper targeted women while they slept.

Unreliable source material has always been the obstacle to discovering the truth about these murders. Although a handful of police records exist, the coroner's inquests provide most of what is known about the actual crimes and the victims. Unfortunately, in three of the five cases, the official documentation from these inquests is missing. All that remains is a body of edited, embellished, misheard, reinterpreted newspaper reports from which a general picture of events can be teased. These documents have been approached with care on my part, and nothing contained within them has been taken as gospel. Similarly, I have also refrained from using unsubstantiated information provided by witnesses who did not know the victims personally prior to their deaths.

My intention in writing this book is not to hunt and name the killer. I wish instead to retrace the footsteps of five women, to consider their experiences within the context of their era, and to follow their paths through both the gloom and the light. They are worth more to us than the empty human shells we have taken them for; they were children who cried for their mothers, they were young women who fell in love; they endured childbirth, the death of parents; they laughed, and they celebrated Christmas. They argued with their siblings, they wept, they dreamed, they hurt, they enjoyed small triumphs. The courses their lives took mirrored that of so many other women of the Victorian age, and yet were so singular in the way they ended. It is for them that I write this book. I do so in the hope that we may now hear their stories clearly and give back to them that which was so brutally taken away with their lives: their dignity.