



Article

# A new front in the history wars? Responding to Rubenhold's feminist revision of the Ripper

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## Abstract

Hallie Rubenhold's *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed By Jack the Ripper* has drawn the criticism of the community of amateur sleuths dubbed 'Ripperologists' for its revisionist perspective, which claims that the canonical five victims of Jack the Ripper were not all sex workers. Rubenhold's victim-centred approach has opened a new front in the history wars, as Ripperologists accuse her of historical denialism in pursuit of a feminist agenda. This article assesses Rubenhold's methods, and her contribution to historical criminology, as well as considering why dominant historical narratives of crime prove so resistant to reinterpretation.

## Keywords

Historical criminology, history wars, Jack the Ripper, methodology, revisionism

## Introduction

The late nineteenth century was a time of constant fear for the destitute women of London's East End. These women were forced to contend with the conditions of endemic poverty that characterised the East End in the Victorian era, a period when mass migration triggered by the industrial revolution had resulted in the formation of densely populated slums where crime was rife (Beames, 1852). It was in this environment that the 'Autumn of Terror' occurred – a period from August to November 1888 when a serial murderer dubbed 'Jack the Ripper' killed at least five women in the Whitechapel district (Gray, 2018). The Ripper murders were never definitively solved by the Metropolitan

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Police, contributing to the mythologising of the case that has taken place in the intervening years. More than other unsolved historical mysteries, the Ripper case has captured the attention of amateur sleuths – ‘Ripperologists’ – who have turned research on Jack the Ripper into a life’s work, and (in some ways) a distinct branch of historical criminology.

Ripperology’s traditional focus has been speculating on the identity of the Ripper, and the motives that drove the murder spree. Most of this theorising derives from the analysis of an incomplete or otherwise unreliable historical record, and yet the community of Ripperologists have developed normative standards for the field that guide what research is considered valuable and what is not. It is into this fray that British-American historian Hallie Rubenhold stepped with her 2019 book *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper*. Rubenhold, best known for her work on Georgian era prostitution, courted controversy with this foray into Ripperology which dramatically reframes the context of the Ripper murders. Rubenhold’s central purpose in *The Five* is to tell the story of the canonical five victims of the Ripper – a feminist victimological perspective that is not a traditional focus of Ripperology. The main contribution of her research comes from her exploration of the victims’ lives *before* coming to the East End, which Rubenhold contends shows that (contrary to popular opinion) several of the women killed during the Autumn of Terror were not sex workers (Rubenhold, 2019). Instead, Rubenhold argues that it is highly probable that the canonical five were rough sleeping at the time they were killed, and were victims of opportunity rather than ‘risky lifestyle choices’ (Rubenhold, 2019; Turanovic et al., 2015). Rubenhold’s contention puts a dramatic new spin on our understanding of the Ripper murders, and essentially calls into question over a century’s worth of assumptions made by Ripperologists.

The purpose of this article is to understand the resistance of conventional Ripperology to accept, or even engage with, Rubenhold’s research. Rubenhold has been treated as an interloper in the field of Ripperology. Her research methodology has been derided as ineffective, and her contentions that the canonical five were sleeping rather than soliciting at the time they were killed has been met with scorn (Gray, 2019). Effectively, Rubenhold’s feminist approach to the Ripper murders has opened a new front of the history wars between traditionalist Ripperologists and those open to a revisionist interpretation of the historical narrative. Examining the theoretical causes of the hostile outbreak of a history war in the Ripper case has major implications for historical criminologists. It assists in understanding the problematic territory that researchers enter into when revisiting established narratives, and the potential resistance that comes when applying new theoretical perspectives to explain historical crime.

## Methodology

In assessing Rubenhold’s research (and the public response to it), this study reviews *The Five* through the prism of both historical and public criminology. While largely narrative in its style, Rubenhold’s *The Five* engages with the natural preference for temporal continuity that historical criminology inherently champions. In his early arguments for a revised approach to historical crime studies, David Churchill (2019) critiques traditional ‘stadial frameworks’ that work to divide history into rigid chronological epochs that can

be more easily categorised. Importantly for Rubenhold's work, Churchill sets out the problems in working with this form of periodisation, especially when it comes to processing evidence that does not fit the predefined narrative of that era. As Churchill notes, and the Ripperologist response to Rubenhold (2019) bears out, when evidence is produced that is contrary to anticipated patterns, researchers often treat this material as an exception or aberration, 'deliberating situat[ing it] outside the basic arc of the narrative' (p. 482). Instead, Churchill (2019) champions a historical criminology methodology that sees past the arbitrary parameters of periodisation and 'profit[s] from a keen revisionist impulse' (p. 487). In another article advocating the 'explanatory power of the past', Paul Lawrence (2019) supports Churchill's argument for a 'more nuanced' historical criminology that rejects arbitrary periodisation in favour of longitudinal continuity (p. 493). Here, Lawrence argues that the past has an instructive power to offer insight into contemporary criminological concerns – a perspective also championed by Rubenhold in *The Five* as, in some ways, the primary purpose of her work.

Rubenhold's central focus on sociological push-factors that caused the Ripper victims to be in the vulnerable position to be killed is a revisionist approach (like that promoted by Churchill) that shifts attention from the myopic question of who the Ripper was to criminological issues with more relevance to the contemporary: instead of a murder mystery, the Ripper story becomes a study of the links between socioeconomic conditions and victimisation with considerable implications for modern practice. By drawing on both Churchill and Lawrence's definitions to construct Rubenhold's work as a case of popular historical criminology, the implications of her work become clearer, especially in contrast with dominant trends in Ripperology. The resistance of Ripperology to these revised (or, more accurately, redirected) interpretations is a clear case of what Ian Loader and Richard Sparks (2011) identify as a perceived absence in robust public criminology in recent years. Loader and Sparks refer to this as a paradoxical 'successful failure . . . [Criminology's] dramatic growth inside the academy has coincided with its waning influence outside of it' (p. 8). Loader and Sparks (2011) support a public criminology that 'does not seek to stay within the boundaries of the specialist community while studying the rest of society from outside' (p. 1). Instead, they argue the importance of 'expert' criminologists intervening in the public discourse and sharing the knowledge of their research with the general public in order to dispel popular or resistant myths about crime and society. When combined, there is a clear argument for both historical and public criminology in the Ripper case, where the reluctance of specialist criminologists to insert themselves into public discussions of the case results in the persistence of popular (and, in Rubenhold's argument, false) narratives. As this article shows, dealing with the Ripperologist narrative inherently requires researchers to move out of the usual confines of the academy, and engage with the popular mediums that Ripperology works through: Internet forums, social media like Twitter or popular 'true crime' magazines, all of which are used as evidence here. By interpreting Rubenhold's work as a relatively rare case of public criminology on the Ripper myth contextualises *The Five* and its role in the criminological discourse. In addition, this interpretation also explains the reaction to her work in Ripperology which, if Loader and Sparks are right, can be at least partly attributed to the absence of a public criminology to refute now 'canonical' myths promoted in that community.

## Literature review

The nature of Ripperology as a mostly amateur endeavour means that it has often been treated as a pseudo-division of historical criminology by professional scholars, with none of the same scholarly rigour found in more traditional fields of research. Even so, a number of respected researchers have emerged from within Ripperology as preeminent scholars in the discipline. Foremost among these researchers is Donald Rumbelow, a former London police officer and curator of the City of London Police's Crime Museum. Rumbelow's work has been cited as providing a definitive coverage of the Ripper murders. His book *The Complete Jack the Ripper* (2004) is regularly updated with new information, and serves as an aggregation of existing research in Ripperology.

While most see Rumbelow's work as definitive, the Ripper case is a naturally contentious topic and, as such, a diversity of work exists that both complements and challenges Rumbelow's interpretation. Paul Begg has emerged in recent years as a potential successor to Rumbelow's role as the preeminent researcher in Ripperology. Begg has written a number of books on various aspects of the Ripper case, including titles like *Jack the Ripper: The Definitive History* (2004) and *Jack the Ripper: The Facts* (2006). His book with John Bennett, *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims* (2014), is one of the few aside from Rubenhold's to turn attention specifically to the Ripper's victims, using a similar structure to *The Five* in dedicating each section to a different 'victim' of the Ripper. Where Begg and Bennett's book differs, however, is that its purpose is to speculate on a dozen other unsolved cases that could be attributed to the Ripper – in discussing these 'forgotten victims' it does not adopt the same feminist, victim-centric focus that Rubenhold does in her work on the subject. Begg has been one of the most outspoken critics of Rubenhold's contribution to Ripperology, defending Ripperology against her claims that it is inordinately focused on 'suspectology' and arguing in opposition to her view that the Ripper victims were not sex workers (Begg, 2019). Begg is an authoritative figure in Ripperology and a central combatant in the history wars that have arisen over *The Five*. He represents a traditionalist perspective on the topic, and his opposition to Rubenhold's work has proven in many ways to be a rallying point for anti-revisionist sentiment in the field.

Martin Fido (1993) is another key contributor to modern Ripperology who sought to identify the Ripper. Fido's work is reflective of the state of Ripperology which, for much of its existence, has been (as Begg acknowledges) bogged down in suspectology, and attempting to 'solve' the case. Begg is correct, however, that recent trends can be observed towards applying a sociocultural context to the Ripper case, rather than being concerned with naming a suspect. Some, like Bell (2014) and Bleakley (2016) have applied a historic lens to the police investigation into the Ripper and analysed the contextual factors that influenced the investigation itself, rather than the killer. Gray's (2011) 'Contextualising the Ripper murders: poverty, crime and unrest in the East End of London, 1888' is one of the few pieces of academic literature focusing on the same social issues that Rubenhold does in *The Five*. In a subsequent article Gray (2018) calls for 'exorcising [the] demon' of the Ripper myth, arguing that a 'paucity of academic research' on the case has left 'an unwanted vacuum that has been filled (and exploited) by amateur history and the entertainment industry' (p. 52).

### *Non-traditional and victim-centric perspectives in crime histories*

Despite the key role that women have historically assumed as both perpetrators and victims of crime, there has traditionally been a limited focus on the feminist history of crime. Arnot and Osborne (1999) trace the origins of feminist crime history to the mid-1980s, when a 'cross-fertilisation between the new social history of crime and women's history [proved] beneficial to both subjects' (p. 3). Combining the two areas of study, historians sought to understand the influence that gender relations and gendered power structures had on women's interaction with the criminal justice system. Central to this feminist history was an examination of crimes that criminal justice historians did not consider 'significant' – crimes rooted in gender, like prostitution or sexual assault, that were (in the past) 'unevenly policed, even sometimes tacitly condoned' (Arnot and Osborne, 1999: 3). Understanding the lack of importance afforded to these female-oriented crimes in the historical discourse is central to the radical nature of Rubenhold's book. Historically, there has been an absence of nuance in the analysis of such crimes. Sex workers have been arbitrarily grouped in a homogeneous category of 'fallen women' without consideration for individual circumstances or sociocultural context. The implications of this dismissive approach on our understanding of women's crime history are significant: it creates a depiction of historical prostitution that essentially ignores the notion of female agency, and reduces sex workers like the canonical five to no more than caricatures of a Victorian era archetype (Scambler, 2007).

A primary function of feminist history is to correct the issue of 'the disappearing woman' – the idea that women have been intentionally and unintentionally excluded from historical narratives, particularly when it comes to conventionally male-dominated subfields like crime history (Spender, 1982). Cheryl Glenn (2000) calls the reintroduction of the 'disappeared woman' into the historical record an 'ethically and intellectually responsible gesture that disrupts those frozen memories in order to address silences, challenge absences, and assert women's contributions' (p. 387). While Glenn could be referring to any woman neglected by history, no matter what class or social standing, her words are highly resonant when it comes to the sex workers of London's East End. Largely, the canonical five have been double-disadvantaged by virtue of their position as women living in poverty, resulting in their stories being marginalised in the historical record. Their state of double-disadvantage is acknowledged by Rubenhold in *The Five*, where she attempts to (as Glenn argues for) 'address silences, [and] challenge absences' (Glenn, 2000: 387). Rubenhold's version of victimology is motivated by addressing this historical marginalisation. Whereas some forms of victimology are driven by the desire to create a profile of an offender by better understanding their targets, Rubenhold mostly avoids the temptation. Aside from advocating the theory that the Ripper targeted rough sleepers, Rubenhold generally adheres to the primary goal of the feminist historian, as expressed by Glenn – to provide a more complete, holistic depiction of women who have been otherwise neglected by the existing historical record.

Whether the stated intention or not, the majority of conventional Ripperology works fall into the trap of what Lisa Downing (2013) refers to as constructing the murderer as 'Superman . . . a subject so special that everyday morality does not apply to him' (p. 12). As Downing (2013) notes, the notion of murderer as Superman has been persistently

pursued by writers 'obsessed by the idea of a perfect, pure crime committed by a superior subject' (p. 13). The position of the Ripper at the genesis of this sociocultural phenomenon has always had a gendered element to it, as both Downing and Jane Caputi argue: in Caputi's (1988) words, 'the myth of the Ripper . . . was collective male invention, a product of the criminal, press and public' (p. 22). This lionisation of the Ripper as an exceptional 'master criminal' who was never caught came at the expense of his victims, a trend Caputi notes as being replicated in other cases where the myth was invoked, such as that of 'Yorkshire Ripper' Peter Sutcliffe in the 1970s. When such a person is identified, their actions become mythologized so as to reinforce their singularity in the pantheon of lesser murderers. Even if their biographer is openly opposed to the crimes they are writing about, the simple act of pointing out their 'perfection' transforms a murderer into an exceptional subject in a way that often edges into the realm of hero-worship. The fact that the Ripper got away with the Whitechapel murders without ever being identified has proven alluring to Ripperologists who, in Mark Seltzer's (1998) words, can perceive the case as a 'projective surface for all sorts of stories' or theories as to the murderers identity and motives (p. 48). In the rush to use the Ripper story as a cypher for theoretical narratives, however, the basic facts of the case – that the Ripper was a killer of vulnerable women – is often forgotten, seen as secondary to his or her mythologization as the 'perfect' killer.

Rubenholt's *The Five* differs from conventional Ripperologist narratives in the sense that it is openly unconcerned with mythologizing the Ripper or speculating on their identity, preferring to tell the life stories of the Whitechapel victims. This is a surprisingly unique approach in historical narratives around the murder of sex workers, even outside of the misogyny of Ripperology. As Hilary Kinnell argues in *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*, the structural causes of violence against women are routinely ignored, even in some sectors of radical feminism. Kinnell (2008) argues that many analyses of crimes where the victims are sex workers marginalise the victims in a way that 'diverts attention from other kinds societal violence . . . the violence of a society which drives sex workers into the most dangerous situations, which denies them protection and deliberately makes them homeless' (p. 31). While Kinnell is not referring explicitly to the Victorian period of the Ripper crimes here, the point made about structural violence is highly relevant when considering the routine mischaracterisation of the Whitechapel victims in popular Ripper narratives.

Judith R. Walkowitz (1980) has written extensively on sex work in Victorian London and notes that the legal repression of prostitution (both streetwalking and brothels) in the late nineteenth century 'would directly affect the structure of the market for prostitution as well as the character of the women's relationship with the laboring-poor community' (p. 31). In Walkowitz's (1980) view, sex workers in the period turned to prostitution as a way to free themselves from 'an oppressive work regime . . . [but] they were still operating within the narrow constraints imposed on them by a class-stratified and patriarchal society' (p. 31). Moreover, Walkowitz argues that the distinctive female subculture of full-time sex workers in Victorian Britain inherently 'set them apart from the rest of the laboring-poor community . . . [however] prostitutes' exclusion from a general working-class life was never complete' as, for many, sex work was a transitional phase before being reintegrated into their previous social stratum (Walkowitz, 1980: 15). Far from the

romanticised portrayal of the Victorian sex worker promulgated in Ripper media, Walkowitz asserts that sex workers (especially in poor areas like the East End) were engaged in 'survival sex work'. When adjusting for this historical reality, the interpretation of the Ripper crimes shifts considerably: instead of the 'Superman' characterisation Downing describes, what is revealed is a killer preying on society's most vulnerable, with implications for the Ripper myth as well as our understanding of the social conditions that paved the way for these crimes in the first place. Though one of the main theses of Rubenhold's work is that the canonical five Whitechapel victims were *not* all sex workers, Kinnell's (2008) argument is highly relevant in relation to how they have been conventionally treated in the literature that accepts their 'prostitute' status as an established fact. In telling the stories of the women behind the crimes, Rubenhold sets out to correct traditional narrative focuses in a way that has largely alluded Ripperologists to this point.

## Discussion

### *The history wars – revisionism or denialism?*

Interdisciplinarity in academic research is, ordinarily, a positive approach that draws on multiple fields of study to render a thorough, more complete analysis of a given topic (Aram, 2004). On occasion, however, interdisciplinarity can lead to *intradisciplinary* conflict from one subject area bleeding into another. In many ways, this has been a key factor in Rubenhold's negative experiences with Ripperology since releasing *The Five*. Rubenhold's foray into writing crime history and, to an extent, historical criminology has seemingly opened a new front in the history wars that have plagued some sectors of the discipline. The term 'history wars' emanates from Australia, where debates over the inclusion of Indigenous experience in the official narrative of Australian colonialism have divided historians since at least the 1960s (Veracini, 2006). While the term is most often used in reference to this initial (and ongoing) conflict, the label of history wars can be used to refer to any historical debate where conventional narratives are at variance with a revisionist account. The history wars are inherently tied to processes of decolonisation – the goal of revisionism is, after all, to correct the gaps and silences that have developed over time and, in turn, fostered the creation of a version of history that reflects the experience of a historically dominant, usually patriarchal sociocultural hierarchy (Veracini, 2006; Yonetani, 2004). Whereas the original wars intended to reassert the experiences of Indigenous Australians in the historical discourse, the conflict that has developed around *The Five* centres on another silenced, historically marginalised group: the impoverished, Victorian woman.

Subjectivity of historical interpretation acts as a major barrier for intradisciplinary dialogue in the history wars, with participants in the debates categorised as taking either a 'three cheers' or 'black armband' perspective on history (McKenna, 1997). Three cheers historians, often traditionalists, are seen as champions of the established narrative and support the social structures that such a narrative reinforces; black armband historians, however, are typically revisionists who are criticised for problematising history to present events in a more negative way than is warranted (Parkes, 2009).

The drivers of this debate are, as is the case with similar disputes in other disciplines, political. When revisionism is underpinned by a feminist approach, it is usually perceived by traditionalists as an attack on the patriarchal system and, further, on men as a collective. Interestingly, both Rubenhold and the Ripperologists who criticise her have laid claim to the same moral ground in the debate over *The Five* – each argues that they represent a ‘feminist’ perspective, while the other reinforces patriarchal social structures. Rubenhold asserts that *The Five* treads new ground in Ripperology, which she claims is sexist and driven by a ‘misogyny that fed the Jack the Ripper myth’ (Wilson, 2019). Conversely, Ripperologists claim that Rubenhold’s central premise is disrespectful to women. It has become a common interpretation in Ripperology that Rubenhold’s book is based on the idea that the canonical five were not sex workers and, thus, ‘innocent’ (Casebook, 2019). They argue that Rubenhold’s implication is that the victims would be more culpable in their own deaths if they *were* sex workers, an inherently non-feminist position. Neither is willing to self-conceptualise as ‘black armband’ historians, though Rubenhold comes nearest to this position, albeit by way of her critique of Ripperology rather than the subjects of *The Five* themselves.

The term ‘revisionist’ is contested in history wars like that currently taking place between Ripperology and feminist historical criminology. In common vernacular, ‘revisionism’ has assumed a negative connotation based on the idea that it is a wilful misrepresentation of events to suit a sociocultural or political agenda (Weiser, 2017). From a practical standpoint, this is sometimes true, but in a pure form revisionism is no more than the challenging of conventional history by uncovering new evidence, or reinterpreting the existing record (Haynes, 2007). Without doubt, Rubenhold’s research is revisionist in the sense that it adds to the discourse of the Ripper case with new source material that fundamentally counters the prevailing historical narrative. From a traditionalist Ripperology perspective, though, a key distinction exists between revisionism and denialism, which Rubenhold has been widely accused of. While both revisionism and denialism set out to challenge dominant historical narratives, denialism does so by intentionally omitting or ignoring evidence that contradicts the historian’s predetermined position (De Haan, 2015). Prominent Ripperologists have gone so far as to indirectly compare Rubenhold to notorious Holocaust denier David Irving, asserting that (like Irving) she purposefully omitted evidence that would undermine the argument that she was making in *The Five* about the probability that the Ripper did not target sex workers (Leatham, 2019). Claims of denialism and omission are a challenge in historical research, particularly considering the blurred lines around source analysis. Like much of the ‘evidence’ used by Ripperologists, the material that Rubenhold has allegedly omitted in *The Five* is questionable. As with all historical sources, it must be assessed for bias and errors of fact. While other Ripperologists perceive this evidence as canon, Rubenhold has not reached the same conclusion, putting more stock in her own primary evidence collection than the existing cache of sources. While this is a legitimate approach to historical research, it has been an inciting factor in the history wars between Rubenhold and Ripperology, a field which has proven resistant to researchers who question the veracity of the evidence that many in the community have relied on over the years.

### *Challenging the Ripper ‘myth’ – why is Ripperology so resistant?*

More so than other ‘special interest areas’ in historical crime, this field has proven resistant to research that challenges the accepted narrative – especially when it comes from *outside* the community of Ripperologists. At first, this seems unusual, since it could be argued that speculating over the identity or motivations of the Ripper is a core aspect of the field. Despite being built on a foundation of conjecture, however, there is a set of unwritten principles that underpin Ripperology and preclude interlopers from participating in the dialogue without first understanding the key debates within the community. For example, while Ripperologists disagree on whether George Chapman or Montague John Druit was the culprit, there is a broader consensus on other issues, including the foundational principle that the Ripper’s victims were sex workers (Smith, 2010). The majority of theories on the case are built on these accepted ‘truths’ before departing into niche arguments about favoured suspects. Ripperology is accustomed to a diversity of opinion when it comes to interpreting the evidence, but what it is unable to sustain is a revision of the essential ‘facts’. To dispute that the victims were sex workers presents an existential threat to the field, given that so much of the existing research is predicated on the murderer targeting victims *because* they were sex workers.

Rubenholt’s promotion of this theory in *The Five* strikes at the romanticised depiction of the Ripper as a Victorian gentleman in a deer-stalker hat and overcoat, emerging from a thick East London fog (Odell, 2006). Instead, Rubenholt (2019) suggests a more banal (and plausible) explanation: a faceless murderer who preyed on the East End’s homeless community, targeting defenceless victims as they slept. There is no doubt that in this theory Rubenholt makes a reasonable proposition. Rough sleepers are prime targets for opportunistic, predatory crime because of their vulnerability, and are far more likely to face violence – up to and including being murdered – while living on the streets (Davies, 2019; Kelleher, 2019; Sandoval et al., 2019). There are opportunity structures that help to facilitate this predatory behaviour: as Routine Activity Theory suggests, most crime occurs in situations where there is (a) a suitable target, (b) a motivated offender and (c) no effective guardian (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Rough sleepers most certainly meet criteria (a) and (c) – all that remains is for a motivated offender to decide, for whatever reason, to target them with violence. There could be a range of potential motivations for this decision, which Rubenholt does not speculate on in *The Five* due to her intentional focus on the victims, and on avoiding the speculation that is common to Ripperology. Though Rubenholt does not speculate, more recent violent crimes committed against rough sleepers have registered diverse motivations from mental illness to theft (Davies, 2019; Owoseje, 2018).

In not naming a suspect, Rubenholt does not stake out a position in Ripperology in a traditional sense. She does not claim to have ‘solved’ the case by introducing her theory of the Ripper targeting sleeping homeless women, which raises questions about the dismissive way that Ripperology has treated her research. Rubenholt’s argument is widely referred to on prominent Ripperology websites like *Casebook* as ‘the nap theory’ – a derisive term intended to emphasise the implausibility of the canonical five being rough sleepers (Casebook, 2019; Rubenholt, 2019). Dismissive, almost jocular, discussion of Rubenholt’s theory can be observed across the *Casebook* forum, generally considered a

virtual hub for contemporary Ripperology. Some, like user *Sam Flynn*, assess Rubenhold's views more seriously, arguing that it 'stretches credulity' that the Ripper would 'find a victim in the quiet, near-deserted and damp Mitre Square' (Casebook, 2019). Others, like user *rjpalmer*, criticise the feminist approach to the case more generally for 'yammering about the "patriarchal society" when, in reality, the Queen was a woman' (Casebook, 2019). As with most cases of online crowdsourcing, each member of the forum brings a small snippet of information to the discussion, contributing to a collective dismissal of Rubenhold's research. Some of these comments effectively contradict those that came before. In one example, a user comments that it was unlikely that the fourth canonical victim, Catherine Eddowes, would willingly lay down on the cobblestones of Mitre Square to sleep without a pillow; another user almost immediately points out that 'many rough sleepers slept over the blow holes [from the London underground railway] as the steam kept them warm' (Casebook, 2019). Analysis of the *Casebook* forum shows that whenever a criticism of 'the nap theory' was contradicted in this way it was almost universally ignored by users, who immediately returned to nit-picking Rubenhold's work. The lack of engagement with commentary in defence of Rubenhold's research is indicative of an overarching agenda to marginalise *The Five* in Ripperology and, in turn, re-establish the mythologised foundations that the Ripper case is built on.

### *Critiquing Rubenhold's The Five – does the research hold up?*

The defence of the Ripper myth is not solely based on a self-interested desire of Ripperologists to reinforce their existing pantheon of theories and literature. Amid the derisive discussion of Rubenhold's theory is a genuine academic debate over the methods that she used to come to the conclusions she did. Ripperologists have criticised Rubenhold for cherry-picking and misrepresenting evidence to suit her theory that the Ripper victims were homeless rather than sex workers, and making speculative leaps to fill the existing gaps in the victims' stories, creating a complete – yet not entirely accurate – version of their lives (Gray, 2019). Indeed, Rubenhold herself admits to the need to make such speculative leaps: at a talk given at the National Archives in Kew in October 2019, Rubenhold explained that her approach to research often required her to take a position of extrapolation, rather than drawing on explicit documentary evidence to support her assertions. As she explained, to trace first victim Polly Nichols's early life it was first necessary to learn about her father's employer (a printer on Fleet Street), from which she learned that employee's children were eligible to go to school nearby, where she was able to trace Polly's educational background and, thus, make calculated assumptions about other aspects of her life. Ripperologists argue that this is no more than guesswork, and that the reason this is the 'first' real account of the victims' lives is that it is based on supposition, whereas previous attempts to do so have been stymied by a deficit of concrete evidence (Begg, 2019; Casebook, 2019; JtRFForums, 2019). A popular argument in Ripperology is that Rubenhold's claim that several of the victims were never involved in prostitution is based on life histories that have been, in part, fabricated by the author herself.

While it is true that Ripperology is perhaps more reluctant to accept contrary opinions than other areas of research on crime history, its critique of Rubenhold's speculative approach is certainly worthy of consideration. Whether in criminological or historical

research, filling information gaps with speculation is treated critically, no matter how educated or seemingly reasonable the researcher's assumptions are. This is because both history and criminology are predominantly human sciences and, as with all research concerned with human behaviour, there are innumerable variables to be considered when ascribing motivations to individuals. In his discussion of how to deal with gaps in the archival record, James E. Fogerty (1983) notes that 'the actual reasons behind important decisions may bear startlingly little relation to the apparent facts', making it impossible to use deductive reasoning to make logical connections that fill the gaps in a piecemeal personal history (p. 151). When it comes to the canonical five, the problem of filling archival gaps varied from woman to woman. For those who came from a higher status background like Annie Chapman, born into a military family and whose husband was a coachman for an aristocratic family, the record is somewhat more complete and, therefore, less inferential analysis was required on Rubenhold's behalf (Webb et al., 1984; Rubenhold, 2019).

For others, like Mary Jane Kelly, greater extrapolation was required in order to present a coherent narrative. Rubenhold (2019) admits that Mary Jane's story as presented in *The Five* is largely speculative, in part due to Mary Jane herself was reportedly guarded about her past with even her closest associates. The archival record on Mary Jane prior to her murder is incomplete to the extent that a traditional researcher would likely determine that there was not enough material to be able to make any determinations about her life story before she appeared in Whitechapel – Rubenhold was unable to even clarify if Mary Jane was Welsh or Irish, making tracing her backstory near impossible. It is in her section on Mary Jane that Rubenhold naturally makes the most speculative leaps, claiming that the Ripper's final victim was sex trafficked to France before escaping to Whitechapel, and intentionally obfuscated her identity to avoid being located by her captors (Rubenhold, 2019). Again, there is little to support this aside from Rubenhold's own inferences, based on relatively minor anecdotal evidence. Taking this kind of logical leap, though possible, positions Rubenhold to be criticised from sensationalism by Ripperologists, who dismiss her research on the basis that her method is fundamentally flawed and purposefully constructed to sell books, rather than authentically engaging with the Ripper narrative.

### *The Five as historical criminology – implications for contemporary researchers*

The conclusions that Rubenhold reaches by speculatively filling the gaps in her research may be treated by Ripperology as lacking a methodological rigour, but her work in *The Five* nevertheless serves as an example of the utility of historical criminology to reshape even the most resistant narratives of crime. It is a common refrain of anti-Rubenhold researchers that Rubenhold has 'ignored' details in the historical record that did not support her contention that the canonical five were not all sex workers (Gray, 2019). From a historical methods standpoint, these omissions do not necessarily mean that Rubenhold has set out to intentionally revise the Ripper story – indeed, Rubenhold herself admits in the introduction of *The Five* that the project was initially intended to serve as a corollary to her earlier research on Georgian era sex workers before the research led her to the

realisation that the common understanding of the Ripper case did not have a firm historical foundation (Rubenhold, 2019). Rather than engaging in methodological acrobatics to shape a narrative, the opposite is true: Rubenhold set out to write a story about the lives of Victorian era sex workers only to be led by the research in a different, more controversial direction.

Ripperologists refer to more than 130 years of ‘research’ on the case that supports the contention that the canonical five were at the very least casual sex workers, but a rigorous process of source analysis quickly disavows the notion that this ‘evidence’ is concrete. Much of it is the product of the sensationalist journalism of the late Victorian era, which relied on unverified witness statements and speculative conjecture to sell newspapers. Other ‘evidence’ supporting the sex worker theory is purely circumstantial, like the assumption that because victim Polly Nichols told a friend she was going out to make some money for her shelter it naturally meant she intended to solicit (Begg, 2004; Casebook, 2019). As Rubenhold found, there is no objective archival record proving that any victim aside from Elizabeth Stride and Mary Jane Kelly were ever involved in prostitution. Any Ripperologist speculating otherwise could be perceived as being guilty of the same logical leaps that Rubenhold is accused of, albeit in service of the dominant narrative. Rubenhold acknowledges the limitations of her research, and is clear that (as is the case with many Victorian women from underserved communities) the historical record around the canonical five is incomplete. To account for this, Rubenhold uses a lateral approach to historical research that, when necessary, shifts focus from her subject (the canonical five) to the sociocultural context in which they lived. *The Five* takes a holistic stance on its subjects, considering both what the archival record tells us about each woman *and* the structural factors that would have influenced or guided their lives. Rubenhold assumes the position that, throughout history, women – and, particularly, poor women – have been at the mercy of structural forces beyond their control (Bennett, 2006; Glenn, 2000). With this in mind, Rubenhold has been able to broaden the scope of her research, filling narrative gaps by making logical inferences that are guided by the historical context of events and how this context would have impacted women facing the same hardships as the canonical five.

In taking on a well-established narrative like the Ripper myth, Rubenhold has modelled the way in which historical criminology cannot just change our interpretations of the historical record, but the way in which we approach such prominent cases as researchers as well. From the outset, Rubenhold (2019) rejects the concept that the Ripper case will ever be solved, and makes clear that she does not intend to proceed with an inquisitorial approach to the case. Instead, she adopts a sociological standpoint, using the canonical five as an entry point into a discussion of the varied experiences of Victorian women who all, for one reason or another, found themselves living in one of London’s most destitute areas. A sociological approach like this is not entirely unique to Ripperology, but is certainly not the norm in a field that has primarily been dominated by mythologising violence and suspect-driven speculation (Begg, 2014; Cornwell, 2003; Marriott, 2007). It is a brave decision to not discuss the Ripper murders in research on the canonical five victims, yet it does not undercut the purpose of *The Five*: to humanise the Ripper’s victims and belatedly restore the personal identity stripped from them when

they inadvertently became a participant in the Ripper lore. Interestingly, Rubenhold's unwillingness to involve herself in the often-obsessive tendency to 'solve' the Ripper case may have provided Ripperology with its single most important contribution of the modern era – by *not* actively prosecuting a case against a chosen suspect, Rubenhold is able to apply a wider historical lens that allowed for a more objective reinterpretation of the basic foundational concepts underpinning Ripperology.

For historical criminology to achieve its full potential, there should be some effort to draw implications from the past that can be applied to contemporary practice (Churchill, 2018). The Ripper case was in no way a singular historical event: few offenders have assumed the position in the cultural zeitgeist that the Ripper has, but the basic concept of a serial murderer preying on the destitute is not an abnormal occurrence. From a victimological standpoint, it gives insight into the many potential points of intervention which could have prevented the Ripper victims being forced onto the street – a practice that continues to place all rough sleepers, but especially women, at a high risk of violence (Kelleher, 2019; Sandoval et al., 2019). Each of the women Rubenhold has researched in *The Five* come from a distinct background, with the only thing that bonds them together being their victim-status. In essence, Rubenhold's book showcases the many pathways that individuals can take before they end up living on the street. For Annie Chapman, it was alcoholism and a failed marriage that forced her out of her life of comfort; for Catherine Eddowes, it was an itinerant gypsy-lifestyle that she chose for herself (Rubenhold, 2019). Through a historical lens, *The Five* contributes to our appreciation for what a 'victim' is and, in turn, assists historical criminologists to identify the common factors that made each member of the canonical five susceptible to meeting the same violent end.

## Conclusion

With the release of *The Five*, Hallie Rubenhold disrupted the very foundations of Ripperology. Her assertions that not all of the canonical five were sex workers was considered by many leading Ripperologists as a direct attack on the Ripper myth, a case of historical denialism resulting from the purposeful application of contemporary feminist sensibility to a case more than a century old. No doubt, this is partly true: Rubenhold's approach to research is unapologetically feminist in its methodological design, with her explicit intention to give voice to the canonical five Ripper victims a clear reflection of the mission of the feminist historian to fill the gaps and silences around women permeating the historical record (Arnot and Osborne, 1999; Smith, 2010). Rubenhold's research has had unintentional repercussions. In stating a revisionist position on the case, she has triggered a new front of the history wars that pits traditional Ripperologists against those who believe that Rubenhold's thorough historical research requires a re-evaluation of the previously assumed 'facts' of the case. The Rubenhold debate highlights two overarching aspects of historical criminology: the resistance of dominant historical narratives and the potential that revisionist research has to challenge such narratives.

The allegation that Rubenhold's research amounts to a speculative history as asserted by Ripperologists is hypocritical, considering the field's renowned tradition of

propagating tenuous conspiracy theories. However, just because Ripperology is also guilty of such fictionalising does not absolve Rubenhold. Even so, there is a distinct methodological argument for speculation in the form that Rubenhold adopted. The fact is that archival records, especially those related to underserved communities, are notoriously subject to gaps and silences that make tracing an individual's personal history almost impossible. It is unfeasible, and only serves to perpetuate these silences, to not make any attempts to fill these gaps in the record, and Rubenhold's method of periodising and using lateral research to make logical deductions is a valid way of approaching this problem. What separates Rubenhold's speculation from that of many Ripperologists is that it is grounded in the principles of historical criminology – it is not conjecture, it is the application of broader historical knowledge to inform an interpretation of her focal subject (Churchill, 2018; Rubenhold, 2019). Rubenhold's victimological approach shifts the discourse of Ripperology from inquisitorial to sociological, simultaneously providing greater insight into the lives of the canonical five and a newly revised understanding of the context underpinning one of history's most prolific crime stories. Rubenhold has used historical criminology to add new dimensions to the Ripper case, courting the ostracism of Ripperologists to reassert the primacy of victims in the historical narrative and, in turn, shift our approach to crime history.

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