

Murder in the First-Class Carriage: The First Victorian Railway Killing

Kate Colquhoun

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Before forensic science was widely accepted, police relied on experience, intuition, tips, concrete clues, and patient footwork rather than on microscopic samples. This distinguished account of the 1864 crime that shook Victorian England begins with scant objects—a forgotten hat and stolen watch—as well as circumstantial evidence that quickly traced a path toward the suspect, a German tailor whose cross-Atlantic escape was stopped by the legendary Scotland Yard.

London-based author Colquhoun (author of *The Busiest Man in England: A Life of Joseph Paxton, Gardener, Architect & Victorian Visionary*) contextualizes the murder of Thomas Briggs in an era that proliferated with “sensation” novels (which often depicted unsavory events in commonplace settings) and the fear of change wrought by industrialization. At that time, compartments on British trains were isolated and passengers had no means of communicating with the conductor. That a respectable banker could be attacked while traveling, and that it might have been prevented, especially struck the public, as criticism had already surfaced regarding railway safety, and news reports further heightened concern.

Colquhoun masterfully chronicles the chase, extradition, and trial. She reveals a man who repeatedly proclaimed his innocence until the last moment, a system determined to convict him despite the absence of a clear motive and weapon (among other telling details), and a public divided between grim spectators and supporters who doubted that enough proof existed. The result is uncannily prescient in its portrayal of the media. Much like the notorious crimes of today, the Briggs murder made headlines even on distant shores. It also became a source for commercial exploitation, from inclusion of the suspect in Madame Tussaud’s House of Horrors to unauthorized reproductions of his photo.

More than a well-spun tale of searching for justice amid hype, *Murder in the First-Class Carriage* reveals the underside of Victorian life, where interest in the macabre flourished alongside the propriety modern readers may expect. Fans of true crime and the general reader alike will appreciate Colquhoun’s talent for enlivening facts with everyday moments. The story is especially noteworthy for its balance between highlighting the case itself and the atmospheric, gas-lit city in which it occurred.

KAREN RIGBY (Winter 2012)

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