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Foreword Review

The London Monster: A Sanguinary Tale

Jan Bondeson
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“The Monster has struck again” became an expected headline in London’s racy newspapers during 1788?90, appearing over fifty times and filling the minds of respectable women with fear, expectation, or hope. Though the Monster was not a precursor of the murdering Jack-the-Ripper, his habit of thrusting a stiletto into the buttocks of unsuspecting women led to near hysteria among the helpless Bow Street magistrates, charged with policing the city. “Policing the city” was something of forlorn hope. London had a population of well over a million, a total that included every sort of penniless discharged soldier and seaman, con-men and vagrants of every type, and a roistering low-life rife with alcoholism and prostitution. Crime and its reporting came perilously close to being accepted public entertainment.

Bondeson, a physician, has written previously on individuals with physical abnormalities, describing their troubled interactions with the normal world. In The London Monster, focusing on the hunt for and the capture and trials of the Monster, he has made a major foray into serial crime and its psychological climate. In addition to being a compelling crime story, the book is rewarding history. Bondeson provides an excellent survey of London’s social and sexual life, the interactions within and between classes, and the acute limitations of strictly amateur criminal investigations and police work.

As the author demonstrates, many things don’t change in city life. The pressure for an arrest—any arrest—becomes an obsession whenever crimes against the person take on a serial form. Dubious identifications of possible perpetrators are egregiously buttressed; the authorities endlessly prevaricate and ever more clumsily attempt to cover their tracks when their flawed procedures are denounced.

What gives Bondeson’s book additional interest is his analysis of the roles played by socially prominent individuals, including, in this case, the wealthy banker-collector John Julius Angerstein. As in today’s political campaign contributors, the price for financial help is access to the inner circle, to the key players. Angerstein was not alone in expressing keen interest in the exact positioning and nature of the stab wounds suffered by the Monster’s victims; the press eagerly joined him. The belated apprehension of the mild Rhynick Williams, a seemingly cultured artificial flower maker, as the suspect has all the elements of a farce. Frugality led him to share single beds with other men in lodging houses, which gave rise to “the apprehension of horrid propensities.” These received a field day in the press.

Bondeson’s accounts of Williams’ two trials offer significant insights into late-eighteenth century England’s legal and judicial systems and the social forces that all too often distorted them. These included stretching the facts, the testimony, and the law. The public, as always, had to be served. While the crowd cried for blood, Williams (if convicted), was likely to be guilty only of misdemeanors, not of felonies, which would significantly limit the severity of the sentence but not the anger of the public. Obscure criminal law statues were imaginatively examined in the hope that Williams’ actions could be prosecuted as felonies.

The jury found Williams guilty, a decision that propelled the matter toward judicial review and renewed public interest. An influential pamphlet by the ever-interested Angerstein questioned the verdict and suggested that not one but a

number of “monsters” had been stalking women through London’s streets. Bondeson is at his best in detailing how a Papierkrieg by the intelligent but not entirely reputable lawyer Theophilus Swift (a collateral descendant of the famous Jonathan Swift) influenced public opinion in favor of Williams.

Sober judicial review found the statute-stretching first indictment invalid and a second trial ensued, in which Swift vigorously defended Williams. In bringing out the dynamic interplay of examination and cross-examination, Bondeson demonstrates that the courtroom-as-theater has a respectable history; it is clearly not a modern American invention. Despite Swift’s efforts, Rhynwick Williams received a six-year jail term—and had the unlikely mid-term pleasure of being joined in jail by his lawyer. Once released, Williams began his own pamphlet war, but soon dropped from sight leaving but faint trace in the public record.

In his final three analytical chapters, Bondeson examines the phenomena of the imagined-attack syndrome, panic and hysteria, and, in the alleged Monster’s case, factors promoting improper police work. Well-reproduced contemporary illustrations and notes that include bibliographical references add to this engaging book.

PETER SKINNER (January / February 2001)