Homicide Fair

... a criminal under sentence of death, or in great peril of death on the scaffold, becomes, immediately, the town talk; the great subject; the hero of the time.

—Charles Dickens, letter to the Daily News, 28 February 1846

The special British passion for sensational murder cases cannot easily be explained or explained away. An attractive theory would have it that this law-abiding people (whose total annual murders are fewer than those of many American cities) is fascinated by its murders precisely because they are such rare phenomena. The trouble with this proposition is that the English and the Scots have not always been notably peaceful, and yet for centuries they have continued to read and talk about murders. Gallows sermons and pamphlets on murders, capital trials and executions began to appear in England in the violent seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century readers avidly read encyclopedic collections of criminal cases, which were named “Newgate Calendars” after London’s Newgate Prison. The mild-mannered Londoners who now consume both scholarly and lurid accounts of modern English crimes are inheritors of an old habit.

The great appetite for crime journalism and fiction in nineteenth century England is sometimes blamed on the low level of the public’s literary sophistication; it is suggested that simple and bloodcurdling crime narratives were in effect a primitive substitute for literature. There is considerable merit in this theory for not only were the uneducated an eager clientele for crime reports but they found ready means of transmitting their passion to respectable middle-class households. An important
agent in this dissemination of popular literary taste was the nursemaid, who fed her young bourgeois charges murder stories along with their milk. Two Victorian murder-fanciers, in entries in the English periodical of literary and historical miscellanies, *Notes and Queries*, trace their first memories of crime sensations to the enthusiasm of nannies. Henry Gibbs recalled (seventy years after the fact) “a nursemaid reading in a winter evening of 1824, from a broadsheet which she had bought from the twopenny postman, a versified account [of the murderer Thurtell].” In 1911, mourning the impending destruction of “The Swiss Cottage,” an old London tavern, W. F. Prideaux reminded readers that the Hocker murder was committed within its walls in 1845; one of his earliest recollections, he added, was of being taken by his nurse “to view the scene of the murder on the day following the tragedy.” It was the fervor of domestics such as these that Dickens immortalized in his sketch “Nurses’ Stories” in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, where the narrator recounts his nurse’s diabolical bedtime tale of “Captain Murderer.”

Nevertheless, the mass dissemination of crime journalism among the semiliterate cannot fully account for the British preoccupation with violent crime, for the puzzling fact remains that Britain’s great writers have always equalled or even surpassed the general population in their attraction to murder cases. The murder obsession of British writers was plain even before Victorian times. In 1828 Sir Walter Scott made a detour on his route from London to Scotland for the express purpose of visiting a tourist attraction that cannot have been in the contemporary guidebooks—the pond where the murderer John Thurtell had thrown his victim four years before. And when William Hazlitt and a circle of literary friends exchanged names of great men from the past whom they would like to have met, Charles Lamb asked for the group’s favorites among men who had been hanged.

Britain’s history was certainly bloody, but King Henry VIII’s beheadings seem small stuff when compared with France’s St. Bartholemew’s Day Massacre. It will not do, then, to attribute the preoccupation of the British with crime to their history. Yet
they have treasured the monuments of historical crimes with the same love Scott had for Thurtell's pond. This odd attach­ment did not escape the perceptive eye of a French critic, Francis Wey, who paid a number of visits to England in the 1840s and 1850s. He wrote: “The historical monuments of this country, I notice, are popular in proportion to the horrors committed within their walls. Every self-respecting castle has a legend of bloodshed and murder. . . . So inured did we become to these macabre anecdotes that as we entered any building we asked with serene assurance: ‘And who was murdered here?’”

The devotion of the British to their crimes must remain as great a mystery as many of the cases they treasure. It is possible, though, that this national trait that struck the Frenchman Wey as so peculiar is related to other more significant aspects of British culture. The appeal of murder cases draws to some extent on violent instincts, but certainly it also responds to the love of drama and exciting and suspenseful narrative. Fascination with murder cases may proceed from the same facet of the British genius that created the Elizabethan drama and gave birth to the eighteenth-century novel of adventure.

The early years of Victoria’s reign produced a series of classic murders that suited the most discriminating taste. In 1837, the year of the queen’s coronation, James Greenacre was convicted and hanged for the murder of his fiancée, Hannah Brown; and Greenacre’s mistress, Sarah Gale, was transported as an ac­cessory after the fact. Mrs. Brown’s body had been pieced together by police from portions severed by Greenacre and scattered over outlying districts of London. The torso was discovered first on a building site in Edgeware Road, the head was fished from the floodgate at the tail of a lock in the Regent’s Canal, which ran through Stepney Fields, and a laborer came across the legs in a drain in Camberwell. In addition to the clumsy, horrifying dismemberment, the case had a number of features bound to win the fancy of a large public—none more grotesque than Greenacre’s story that he had wrapped the head of his victim in a silk handkerchief and calmly carried it on his knee as he rode a London omnibus on his way toward the Regent’s Canal.
Greenacre maintained to the end that he had not intentionally killed Mrs. Brown, though he finally confessed striking her in rage over her misrepresentation of her wealth as a marriage bait. The mutilation and concealment of the body he admitted and regretted. He also contended ardently that Sarah Gale knew nothing about the death of Mrs. Brown or the disposition of her body. It was rumored that Sarah had inspired Greenacre to do away with her rival, but the prosecution limited the indictment against her to the charge that she had assisted in the concealment of the murder. The case against her began with the conceded fact that she was sent away from Greenacre's lodgings on 24 December 1836 to make room for Mrs. Brown, who thought, poor woman, that she was to be married to Greenacre the day after Christmas. When the house was vacated two weeks later, neighbors who came in to look (as neighbors do) found that the floors appeared to have been carefully scrubbed and that the house had been fumigated. Sex roles being what they were at the time, everyone assumed that Sarah Gale had been the housecleaner. Her own loose tongue may have hurt her, for people came forward who claimed they had heard her make comments indicating knowledge of the murder. It was unquestionable that she had at least shared the fruits of the crime. When Sarah was arrested, earrings belonging to Mrs. Brown were found in her pocket.

Despite this chain of circumstances, at least a slight doubt about Sarah's guilt seemed to be left in the mind of the judge. At the time of sentencing he contemplated the possibility that she might have been at fault only in allowing her "attachment to the prisoner" to keep her at his side "notwithstanding his possession of the property of the deceased under circumstances which I should think must at least have excited suspicion in [her] mind."

The year 1840 brought a new sensation—the murder of Lord William Russell in Park Lane, London, by his Swiss valet, François Bernard Courvoisier, whom his master may have come upon in the act of taking off with the household plate. Courvoisier's trial produced a legal controversy that was still being discussed in the newspapers at the end of the decade: the
defendant's counsel, Charles Phillips, in his closing argument to
the jury, accused the police of fabricating evidence, and he was
understood by some listeners to have expressed a personal
belief in Courvoisier's guilt and to have cast suspicion on a
housemaid, even though his client had just confessed the murder to
him.

The next case to startle the early Victorians began as a
suspected shoplifting and ended as a torso murder to rival
Greenacre's crime. On 26 April 1842 Daniel Good, a philander­ing
coachman known for his violent temper, stopped at a
pawnbroker's in Wandsworth, a southwestern suburb of
London, and purchased a pair of kneebreeches on credit. After
he left, a shopboy told the pawnbroker that Good had also
picked up a pair of trousers and had hidden them under his
greatcoat. The pawnbroker complained to the nearest police­
man, Constable Gardner, who proceeded to the stable at Putney
where Good was employed, but was cautious enough to enlist a
stableboy for the dangerous task of knocking on the stable door.
Good opened the door, with his eleven-year-old son behind,
and had his famous temper well under control. When Gardner
accused him of the theft, Good pretended to misunderstand.
He would pay for the kneebreeches, he said, if the pawnbroker
had changed his mind about giving him credit. Gardner per­
sisted in the charge of theft and demanded to search the stable.
Good refused, and the constable forced his way through the
doorway. However, he overran his quarry, who neatly side­
stepped him and fled, locking him inside. At least Gardner
could now search to his heart's content, but he did not find the
trousers. Instead he discovered, hidden under a bundle of hay,
a nude female body without head, arms, or legs.

The victim, it turned out, was Jane Jones, alias Jane "Good,"
the last in a series of Good's mistresses, whom he had got rid of
to clear the way for Susan Butcher, perhaps the only girl he had
ever met who insisted on marriage. The hunt for Good was
bedeviled by the blunders of his pursuers, none of whom did
much better than poor Constable Gardner, and also by short­
comings in the organization of the police force. The authority
of each local police division stopped at its territorial boundaries,
and even hot pursuit of a fleeing criminal into the next zone was regarded as an intrusion. Training in detective methods was also lacking because the police commissioner, Colonel Charles Rowan, had little use for detective work. Despite the failures of the police, fortune intervened, and Good was ultimately captured due to a tip from a construction laborer in Tonbridge who recognized Good when the fugitive joined the work crew. The laborer, the fates would have it, had once been a police constable at Wandsworth. Good was convicted and hanged. Molly “Good,” a former mate of his whose legal status was equivocal (Good’s little boy called her “Mother”), was originally charged as an accessory for assisting his flight, but the charge against her was eventually dropped on the ground that as his “wife,” lawful or bigamous, she had promised to love, honor, and obey him, presumably even in murder.

The stumbling police efforts in Good’s case had a happy outcome: within two months after Good’s arrest, Colonel Rowan reluctantly agreed to the foundation of the Detective Department. Daniel Good had become the godfather of Scotland Yard.

It did not take long for 1849 to declare itself a vintage year of crime. On the first night of the year, Poole and Nightingale pulled off their double robberies of the Great Western mail trains. A murder sensation was waiting in the wings—the trial of James Blomfield Rush that opened at Norwich on 29 March for the massacre at Stanfield Hall. On the evening of 28 November 1848, Rush loaded a pistol, left his farmhouse at dreary Potash Farm, and set out on foot for nearby Stanfield Hall, the residence of Isaac Jermy, his creditor and landlord. Rush knew Jermy’s habits and waited for him to take his usual walk after dinner. When Jermy came out on the porch, Rush shot him at short range through the heart. He entered the side door of the house and, meeting Jermy’s son, shot him in the chest. The young man fell dead in the hall, and Rush continued on his hurricane path into the dining room looking for the rest of the family. He found no one there, but as he left the dining room he came upon the young Jermy’s wife and her maid, who in terror was holding her fast by the waist. He fired twice,
wounding the servant in the leg and Mrs. Jermy in the arm, and escaped.

The Rush murder case aroused feverish public interest. Why this should have been so is not plain from the turgid trial record. Certainly the multiple shootings lent an element of horror. Rush had not, like Greenacre and Good, contented himself with a single victim whose elimination would benefit him, but had vented his hatred—or perhaps irrational ferocity—on an entire household. It was an added attraction that Rush, who was no fool except in thinking himself wiser than he was, conducted his own defense—a rarity in capital cases. In the vain hope that he could minimize the period of his absence from Potash Farm on the night of the murders, he subjected his mistress Emily Sandford, who appeared for the prosecution, to a rigorous cross-examination that reviewed almost minute by minute how they spent the early part of the evening together at the farmhouse. The case was also spiced by journalistic suggestions that Rush's fierce hatred of the landowner Jermy had been fired by study of the teachings of radical agitators, and the public, whose memory of the Chartist riots was still fresh, indulged in a special shudder.

Certainly the overt motivation of Rush held no great fascination. Rush feared that his landlord would eject his family from certain farmlands they held under lease. He was also worried that Jermy would foreclose the mortgage he held on Potash Farm. Nobody could have blamed him if he had, for Rush had undertaken to purchase the property for Jermy as agent but treacherously bid it in for himself; then, despite his betrayal of his principal, Rush had the gall to persuade Jermy to finance the purchase price. Always a lover of conspiracy, Rush tried to defend his farms by inserting himself into the midst of a battle within the Jermy family over the ownership of Stanfield Hall and its lands. He made complicated maneuvers intended to provide security whichever party won. He forged contracts with his enemy Jermy that purported to extend his leases and spread out or forgive his mortgage payments. Since Jermy would have denied the authenticity of these documents, they would be worthless to Rush unless Jermy were dead. Rush also signed a
genuine contract with Jermy’s rivals that also protected his leases, in return for Rush’s promise to assist their claims. However, he proved to be a false ally of the claimants, dropping crudely fabricated notes at the scene of the crime that sought to pin the blame on those who were trying to oust Jermy from Stanfield Hall. He persisted at the trial and thereafter in attributing the plot against Jermy to three mythical emissaries of the rival party whom he could never identify by names more precise than “Dick, Joe and the lawyer.”

It is hard to think of another murder cause célèbre that is so enmired in complexities of title conveyancing and conflicting rights of inheritance; the trial documents read like a law student’s nightmarish memories of lessons in medieval property law. Yet the Rush case closely rivaled the Bermondsey murder in the favor of the murder enthusiasts of 1849. Charles Dickens even paid a special visit to Potash Farm early that year. He found that the search for the murder weapon was in progress but was critical of the lack of professional competence shown by the police: “We arrived between the Hall and Potash farm, as the search was going on for the pistol in a manner so consummately stupid, that there was nothing on earth to prevent any of Rush’s labourers from accepting five pounds from Rush junior to find the weapon and give it to him.” Dickens found Norwich a disappointment except for its “place of execution,” Norwich Castle prison, which he found “fit for a gigantic scoundrel’s exit.”

Greenacre, Courvoisier, Good, Tawell, Rush. The roll of the “great” murders continued to unfold, and each new case, by varying degrees of intrinsic interest and commercial exploitation, whipped the public into greater preoccupation and frenzy. Thoughtful observers had worried about the phenomenon of murder mania for many years. In 1839 and 1840 the journalist and budding novelist William Makepeace Thackeray had led a critical assault on novels that glamorized crime and the low life and drew their heroes from the Newgate Calendars and other criminal annals. In 1849, however, it appeared that the public had been far from immunized against the lure of murder cases. So it was with good reason that the satirical journal *Punch*, then
in its first decade when its social concerns were still strong, mounted an unrelenting campaign against excesses in the commercialization of crime.

Wherever the scornful Mr. Punch turned his eyes, he saw murder cases appealing to profiteers, sensation makers, and, worst of all, victims of their own morbid fancies. Even the celebrated criminal court of London, the Old Bailey, had not lost the opportunity to turn crime into pounds, shillings, and pence. *Punch* took deep offense when the Old Bailey began the "open and undisguised" practice of charging a fixed price for admission to the galleries of the courtroom. This seemed only the latest evidence, if that was needed, that the dignity of the law had fled from the criminal courts and that the Old Bailey had been converted into a place of entertainment and theatrics. In a March article entitled "Theatre Criminal, Old Bailey," *Punch* published a mock program for the coming Old Bailey season in the form of a theatre prospectus. It promised that the judges would include "stars too numerous and too brilliant to number" and that the trial counsel, including Ballantine and Wilkins (later to have leading roles in the Manning trial), would "prosecute and defend with their accustomed ability; and abuse, and tear, and twit, and expose, and badger one another with their usual strength, violence, sharpness, impartiality, and eloquence." A graduated tariff was shown for trials of various offenses, ranging from one shilling for larceny to two shillings for the ordinary murder. However, the entrepreneur could fix no price for a murder "if under extraordinary circumstances, and by an interesting individual of either sex, whose portrait is likely to appear in the newspapers." *Punch* sympathized with the entrepreneur's difficulty, for how was it possible beforehand "to put a price upon a Greenacre?" Later in March *Punch* pursued the same theme in a column headed "Old Bailey Dramas." Now that a charge was being made for admission to the Old Bailey, the writer thought that "the speculators have a right to demand the enjoyment of the usual facilities for going publicly to a place of entertainment open to the public in general." He proposed the use of a poster picturing a vigorous cross-examination and surrounded by claims reading "GREAT HIT, Genuine Pathos,
Legal Jokes, and Real Criminals!!!” An usher should pass through the galleries peddling apples, oranges, nuts, bills of indictment, and ginger beer. If the system worked as it should, the writer would not be surprised to hear of a barrister being called for a curtain speech or “smothered alive in a shower of bouquets.”

As for the criminals tried at the Old Bailey, *Punch* found that they had become so popular and the details of their daily life so engrossing that there was no less reason for the newspapers to publish an “Old Bailey Court Circular” than to continue the time-honored chronicling of the doings at Buckingham Palace. In a piece in early October, *Punch* gave a “foretaste” of how the new circular might read: “Yesterday morning Mr. Sikes [the murderer in *Oliver Twist*] rose at 7. Asked if there was anything new in the papers? Wished to write an Ode to Liberty, and desired to be denied to everybody who might call, except to Madame Tussaud or representative.”

*Punch* leveled its heavy guns at the national madness unaccountably inspired by the Rush murder case. Its major piece on Rush, “Homicide Fair,” appeared in April 1849 in response to an article in the *Observer* on a remarkable fair that was held outside Norwich Castle, where Rush was held waiting to be hanged. According to the *Observer*, one of London’s sensationalist Sunday papers, an “itinerant showman” had engaged an actor to portray Rush. One of the shows was a Punch and Judy pantomime in which Rush appeared in the part of Pantaloon. The *Observer* had expressed great indignation that this exhibition “is one of the most revolting character, but at the same time the most remunerative in the fair” and also deplored its accompaniment of drums and trumpets, and the sounds of revelry proceeding from “the degraded people who are its principal supporters.”

To the editorial writer of *Punch*, all England had become a Homicide Fair, and the *Observer* was fully as culpable as “the humble vendor of excitement” whom that paper had rebuked in its article. *Punch* found it no less reprehensible for the *Observer* to drive its vans all day long in the stream of London traffic advertising the latest details of the Rush case together
with the “Portrait of the Assassin” than it was for the rustic troupe to raise its din of drum and trumpet against the wall of Rush’s prison. *Punch* made a fresh assault on the *Observer* and the other Sunday gossip sheets in a full-page cartoon published in September. The cartoon, captioned “Useful Sunday Literature for the Masses; or Murder Made Familiar,” showed a father of a poverty-stricken family reading his wife and children a lurid description of a cutthroat from a newspaper called *The Murder Monger*.

The Norwich exploiters of the Rush case did not stay in their native fields but exported their wares to London. A Mr. John St. Quentin of Norwich built models of Stanfield Hall and Potash Farm (on the scale of three-eighths of an inch to the foot) “for the gratification of the sight-seers and loungers of intellectual, benevolent London,” to borrow the words of a *Punch* article from April 1849. Just as there had once been a project espoused to remove Shakespeare’s house in its entirety and ship it across the Atlantic, *Punch* had no doubt that if Stanfield Hall and Potash Farm could have been moved to London, the “spirit of the day would have made them a most profitable investment, adapted and laid out as tavern, tap, and tea-gardens.” In the meantime, English ladies had to be content with the miniature “murder models” that Mr. St. Quentin had installed on Regent Street where, “‘twixt the mercer’s and the confectioner’s,” they “may now step in and see a little murder—take just a preliminary taste of horrors before the cheesecake.” In view of Mr. St. Quentin’s display in the heart of the metropolis, *Punch* thought it a little too hard that the management of the Eastern Counties Railway had been condemned by some for wanting to turn a shilling by arranging a “railway gibbet trip” to transport tourists to the hanging of Rush.

But beyond its contempt for the exploiters of crime, *Punch* reserved some of its barbs for the public who consumed it. It observed of the national taste for murder: “We are in truth a very domestic people. No sooner is an atrocious murder perpetrated, than the wretch becomes an object of the greatest social interest. His birth, education, early habits, are all a matter of daily import. It is a pity that art is not criticised with the same
minuteness as homicide.” *Punch* clearly saw that “murder-worship” was not limited to the uneducated but was in fact nondenominational and classless. In November a sonnet composed by “our own Poet-Laureate” asked how the uneducated could be blamed for a passion that writers shared and prompted:

And who shall blame the unschool'd mob, whilst we,
The scholars, Law's grim Tragedy allow,
Nor interest in its actors disavow!
We chronicle the foul minutiae
Of their dark deeds of crime;—nay! stop not here,
But sift their very prison-life, and draw
The veil from off their hidden histories:
We crowd to see their waxen effigies;
We make their portraits household gods, and rear
Them shrines, where Murder-worship is allowed by Law.

In such a favorable climate the Bermondsey Horror was bound to win a great following. There is no doubt that, bursting on the scene less than four months after the execution of Rush, it inherited the mass audience that the Stanfield Hall massacre had built to unprecedented proportions. But the new case undeniably had its own attractions. The Londoners and their newspapers dearly loved a London murder. It may seem odd to modern readers, who identify murder with metropolitan living, to realize how many of England’s most shocking crimes in the nineteenth century took place in provincial towns or rural areas. But when a London murder with a special flavor occurred, whether in the time of Greenacre and Good or during the bloody ten weeks of Jack the Ripper, London knew no other theme for reading or conversation. Though promotion by newsmen of the metropolis played a part in selling these cases to their readers, real emotions were stirred among Londoners. They felt the characteristic urban fear of the “murderers among them,” a fear that was most intense when a murderer was still at large but was never wholly dissipated by his capture and conviction. A dreadful new insight was also given them into the violence that might at any moment be erupting without
their knowledge on familiar streets or behind the closed windows of the house next door.

Thackeray expressed this mood in an 1861 essay on the “Northumberland Street encounter.” The case he described was bizarre. Mr. Roberts, a moneylender, calmly took daily pistol practice in his dusty office in a building a few steps away from the busy Strand. When he was satisfied with the accuracy of his aim, he invited Major Murray in to do business. The unlucky Murray did not know that Roberts was in love with Murray’s mistress and was insanely jealous of him, particularly after he caught sight of the major happily visiting the Crystal Palace with his mistress, child, and maid. When Murray called at the Northumberland Street office, a borrowing was quickly arranged, but as he sat waiting for Roberts to bring him the loan proceeds from an inner room, the major received, instead of the cash he hoped for, a bullet in the back of his neck. Despite Roberts’s target practice, and his close range, the shot was not fatal. A terrible struggle followed, in which the major dispatched his bewildering enemy with a makeshift arsenal of fire tongs, a bottle, and a vase.

The case destroyed Thackeray’s belief in London’s peace: “After this, what is not possible? It is possible Hungerford Market is mined, and will explode some day. Mind how you go in for a penny ice unawares... After Northumberland Street, what is improbable? Surely there is no difficulty in crediting Bluebeard. I withdraw my last month’s opinions about ogres. Ogres? Why not?”

The Bermondsey Horror was a case worthy of frightening Thackeray. Minver Place was not in the heart of the metropolis like Northumberland Street, but O’Connor was shot, clubbed, and buried on a populous suburban street while the neighbors saw and heard nothing. The burial in quicklime under the kitchen floor gave the case a macabre touch that Londoners had always fancied, and the speed with which the body came to light created a sense of wonder, or even, some were to say, signaled the working of divine providence. The efficiency of the police and their use of the telegraph were widely admired and
probably won the Manning case a great following among people who would not ordinarily have paid much attention to the murder headlines.

The relationship of the Mannings with O'Connor must also have sharpened the public's appetite. It is commonplace for a husband or wife to conspire with a lover to dispose of an unwanted spouse, but when a married couple, such as the Mannings, is charged with murdering the wife's reputed lover, the case definitely belongs in the man-bites-dog category. The principal "human interest" of the case, however, was provided by the personality of Marie Manning, who was ready-made for newspaper celebrity. Marie was foreign, and "foreign murderesses" were greatly favored. She was physically impressive, if not handsome, and well dressed, had served the nobility, had often seen the queen herself. There was something else in Marie that caught the public's eye, something that set her apart from what the Victorians expected women (even murderesses) to be: from the moment of her capture Marie was resolute, silent, and "game."