

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

The case of Aaron Kosminski: was he Jack the Ripper?

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The Whitechapel murders of 1888 attributed to Jack the Ripper were, like many of the crimes of multiple-victim killers, well-publicised, bizarre and dramatic (Lunde & Sigal, 1990). Although in the public mind at the time the murders of at least seven women in and around the Whitechapel district of London's East End were believed to have been carried out by Jack the Ripper. However, according to police and forensic evidence his victims, all prostitutes, numbered only five, beginning with Mary Ann Nichols, found murdered on 31 August 1888, and ending with Mary Jane Kelly, whose mutilated body was discovered on 9 November 1888.

Apart from one case in which there is evidence the killer was disturbed while attacking his victim, the murders were characterised by extensive mutilations, with the uterus being particularly singled out. For example, in an interview given by her landlord (*The Times*, 1888), the following description was given of the scene that confronted the police when they broke into the room where lay the body of the Ripper's last victim: "She had been completely disembowelled, and her entrails had been taken out and placed on the table . . . The woman's nose had been cut off, and her face gashed and mutilated so that it was quite beyond recognition. Both her breasts, too, had been cut clean away and placed by the side of her liver and other entrails on the table". So mutilated was the body that it was stated in at least one newspaper that the identification of the victim by her ex-lover was by means of her ear, although it may be that he used the word 'hair' and was misreported (Harrison, 1991).

A Jack the Ripper suspect by the name of Kosminski is known from two important police sources. The first is a confidential report written in February 1894 by a senior policeman, Sir Melville Macnaghten, who was Assistant Head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). His report is believed to have been written for the then Home Secretary, and was intended to refute newspaper reports identifying Jack the Ripper with a Broadmoor inmate named Thomas Cutbush. Two versions of the

report are now in the public domain; one through Macnaghten's descendants, and the other among Metropolitan Police papers on the case opened in the 1970s. In both versions the same three suspects are named. One of these, Kosminski, is described thus: "Kosminski . . . who lived in the very heart of the district where the murders were committed. He had become insane . . . He had a great hatred of women, with strong homicidal tendencies. He was (and I believe still is) detained in a lunatic asylum about March 1889. This man in appearance strongly resembled the individual seen by the City PC near Mitre Square" (Begg, 1988).

The second source is the writings of Sir Robert Anderson, who was head of the CID at the time of the murders. In a book published in 1907, he referred to Jack the Ripper being "safely caged in an asylum" (Anderson, 1907). More importantly, on some pages referring to Jack the Ripper in Anderson's autobiography (Anderson, 1910), a colleague who had overall supervision of the murder investigations, Detective Chief Inspector Donald Swanson, pencilled some of Anderson's comments concerning the suspect Anderson had identified as Jack the Ripper. These marginalia came to light when Anderson's grandson revealed their existence to the *Daily Telegraph* (19 October 1987). They were reproduced in full in public for the first time by one of the authors of this paper (Begg, 1988) and include the following words: ". . . after the suspect had been identified at the Seaside Home where he had been sent by us with difficulty in order to subject him to identification, . . . he knew he was identified. On suspect's return to his brother's house in Whitechapel he was watched by police (City CID) by day and night. In a very short time the suspect . . . was sent to Stepney Workhouse and then to Colney Hatch . . . – Kosminski was the suspect – DSS." An analysis of public and psychiatric records has revealed only one man, Aaron Kosminski, who both had this surname and fitted the known facts concerning Jack the Ripper, including the chronology of the crimes (Fido, 1987; Begg, 1988).

Aaron Kosminski

Aaron Kosminski was born in Poland in 1865. He had two sisters and one brother, Woolf. There was no known family psychiatric history. At the age of 17, in 1882, Aaron Kosminski moved to England, where he lived in the East End of London. He never married and his next of kin is recorded as being his brother, Woolf Kosminski, of 8 Sion Square, Commercial Road East, London. (Woolf Kosminski was 21 years older than Aaron and died on 6 April 1930 at the age of 86.) Aaron Kosminski worked as a barber in the Whitechapel area.

Case-notes written in 1890 imply that Aaron Kosminski started to become ill six years earlier, at the age of 17, at around the time of his move to England. This culminated in his being "two years insane" from 1888 to the time of writing in 1890 when he was admitted to the Mile End Old Town Workhouse on 12 July. He was discharged to the care of his brother three days later. In February 1891 he was readmitted to the Mile End Old Town Workhouse and three days later transferred to the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum in Colney Hatch.

Details of his psychotic symptomatology were recorded as follows: "He declares that he is guided and his movements altogether controlled by an instinct that informs his mind, he says that he knows the movements of all mankind, he refuses food from others because he is told to do so, and he eats out of the gutter for the same reason. Jacob Cohen . . . says that he goes about the streets and picks up bits of bread out of the gutter and eats them, he drinks water from the tap and he refuses food at the hands of others. He took up a knife and threatened the life of his sister. He is very dirty and will not be washed. He has not attempted any kind of work for years."

A history of seizures was excluded; he is not mentioned as suffering from syphilis (then relatively common) and a diagnosis was made of 'mania'. The aetiology was first given as 'unknown' but later amended to 'self-abuse', that is, masturbation. It has been mentioned above that Aaron Kosminski was noted to have a hatred of women, and the episode of threatening the life of his sister is clearly consistent with this.

Observations during the course of his stay at Colney Hatch, until 1894, confirmed that he was suffering from delusions and auditory hallucinations. He tended to speak only German, and refused to work.

On 19 April 1894 he was transferred to Leavesden Asylum under Section 25 of the Lunacy Act (1890) on the grounds that he had not recovered and was a proper person to be kept in a workhouse as a lunatic.

During his admission to Leavesden Asylum there was further evidence of auditory hallucinations and he continued to deteriorate; he was found to weigh

just 7st 8lb 10oz in May 1915. It was noted that he was dull and vacant: "Patient does not know his age or how long he has been here." The diagnosis was changed to one of 'dementia, secondary'. In early 1919 his physical condition worsened, his food intake became very poor, and there was further weight loss, to 6st 12lb, by 5 February 1919. Aaron Kosminski died on 24 March 1919.

Comments

Multiple-victim killers can be divided into those who kill several people at the same time, that is, 'mass murderers', and those like Jack the Ripper who kill multiple victims, usually individually, over a period of time, and who are known as 'serial killers'. In a study of ten multiple-victim killers in the United States it was found that eight were serial killers, all of whom were white males (Lunde & Sigal, 1990). Both the remaining mass murderers were overtly psychotic at the time of the killings, as was one of the serial killers. The psychotic serial killer was a single man, aged 25 at the time of his arrest, who exhibited clear symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia by the age of 24. He believed that Californian earthquakes could be prevented by sacrificing humans. Between 1972 and 1973 he 'sacrificed' 13 random victims as a result of command hallucinations (Lunde & Morgan, 1980).

The most famous British serial killer of recent years is Peter William Sutcliffe (born 2 June 1946) who, between July 1975 and January 1981, left 13 women dead and seriously wounded seven; many, but not all, of his victims were prostitutes. His case bears many resemblances to that of Jack the Ripper, and indeed Sutcliffe came to be known as the Yorkshire Ripper by the media. As with the circumscribed geographical area of the Whitechapel murders, Peter Sutcliffe carried out his brutal killings and woundings exclusively in Northern English cities inside the West-Yorkshire/Lancashire quadrangle (Ward Jouve, 1986).

After his arrest evidence of his overtly psychotic state emerged. Sutcliffe claimed he had heard the voice of God address him from a grave in Bingley cemetery and that the voice had repeatedly instructed him to kill prostitutes. The fact that the police had let him go after questioning on no less than nine occasions was also incorporated into his delusional system as evidence of divine protection for his sacred mission. Even when confronted with the fact that not all his victims had been prostitutes, Sutcliffe initially believed that the media were lying, since he was certain that the divine voice he heard could not have been mistaken (Beattie, 1981; Ward Jouve, 1986). As with the Jack the Ripper murders, those carried out by Peter Sutcliffe involved acts of heinous savagery,

such as multiple stabbings with a knife or screw-driver, skull fractures, eye piercing and attempted decapitation (Gee, 1984; Ward Jouve, 1986).

The information presented above strongly suggests that Aaron Kosminski was Jack the Ripper and, if so, the case bears some resemblance to that of the American psychotic serial killer discussed above, and even more so to that of Peter Sutcliffe. As mentioned above, Kosminski was named privately by both Macnaghten and Anderson, two very senior members of the police force. He lived in the area where the crimes took place and resembled the suspect seen by the City PC on one occasion. His psychotic illness was consistent with the development of paranoid schizophrenia beginning at the age of 17 and reaching a peak at the time of the murders. He suffered from auditory hallucinations and disliked women, which might partly account for the fact that the uterus was usually dissected out in the victims. Indeed, before his detention he is known to have threatened the life of his sister with a knife. Following his detention the Whitechapel murders attributed to Jack the Ripper came to an end. In summary, the evidence points to the serial killer Jack the Ripper being Aaron Kosminski.

References

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"Short demonstrations of the methods of oral-manual training for lower-grade defectives by the Lower Boy's School, Guide drill and ambulance work by the adult company, drill dancing and singing by the Upper Boy's School were given in one of the class-rooms, followed by gymnasium displays by the women's and men's teams and semaphore signalling by the Upper Girl's School". (A description of the main social event at the South East division meeting, 1928).

"Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen, I rise, I am sorry to say, with a grievance. But a grievance usually has its antithesis. My grievance is that I scanned the menu very closely – it is before me now – and there is no reference to Bovril, which I consider a serious omission, as its delectable, stimulating, uplifting and health-giving qualities are known the world over". (Sir Robert Armstrong-Jones on Bovril, 1931).