

The dark side of Victorian London

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‘I am what you would call a Fallen Woman, but I assure you I did not fall – I was pushed’
(Faber, p. 336).

Meet Sugar, a 19-year-old prostitute and protagonist of Michel Faber’s novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Forced into prostitution at the tender age of 13, Sugar plies her trade at Mrs Castaway’s, a brothel in the St Giles area of London. Set in 1875, the fictional Sugar exists in a world that has not yet witnessed the brutality and depravity of Jack the Ripper – the focal point of *London’s Shadows* by Drew Gray – the second book of this review.

Gray begins *London’s Shadows* by stating that he is neither a Ripperologist nor does he intend to contribute to this already vast body of work. Instead, Gray uses the Ripper murders as a focal point for his investigation, arguing that this spate of brutal murders refocused public attention, primarily within the urban middle class, to the social problems of poverty and vice that existed on the streets of London’s East End.

Defining this area of London is not an easy task; contemporary social commentators and modern historians, like Paul Begg and Alan Palmer (1), disagree over its exact geographical boundaries. Gray overcomes this difficulty by arguing that we should focus less on these details and more on the ever-changing and evolving social construction of the East End. From industrialisation to EastEnders, Gray argues that the East End, like Jack the Ripper, has evolved into a semi-mythological entity, coloured by images of the 'plucky cockney', rhyming slang and the music hall. For the middle classes, it was here in the East End – amid the hotchpotch of cultures and races, the smog and the slaughterhouse – that crime, poverty and sexual deviance, including incest and prostitution, festered and flourished.

Working-class neighbourhoods were the subject of numerous articles, investigations and exposés (Gray, p.1) from as early as the 1830s. In *London's Shadows*, Gray relies heavily on such reports, like *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* by the Rev. Andrew Mearns (1883) and *East London* by Charles Booth (1889), but warns against taking these sources at face value. Instead, Gray argues that these reports should be seen as evidence of a cultural, social and economic chasm that existed between the middle and working classes, characterised by ignorance and notions of superiority. This also manifested itself in the social construction of the working class as a 'different race' (Gray p. 125).

If *London's Shadows* exposes these problems then it is Michel Faber's novel, *Crimson Petal*, that truly brings them to life. Rightly considered as a 'Dickensian novel for our times' (2), Faber's descriptions of Victorian London are about as vivid as they come. St Giles, for instance, is described as a place at the 'very bottom' where 'prosperity is an exotic dream' (Faber, p. 8), where hansom cabs are looted by children (Faber, p. 10) and the ground is covered in human and animal excrement.

While the residents of St Giles can only dream of escape, there are some men, like William Rackham, that just can't keep away. Heir to the great Rackham Perfumeries, William reads about Sugar in the pamphlet, *More Sprees in London*, an extensive guide to the capital's ladies of the night. Described as an 'eager devotee of every known pleasure' and 'a fit companion for any True gentlemen' (Faber, pp. 83–4), Sugar, it seems, is worth navigating the filthy streets of St Giles for.

Just as the *More Sprees* pamphlet drives the plot in *Crimson Petal*, the media also played a role in fuelling middle-class anxieties about poverty and vice in the real East End. The last quarter of the 19th century witnessed the emergence of sensationalism – a new style of journalism (Gray, p. 95). Under intense competition to attract readers, editors needed to find new ways of presenting stories that would keep the public hooked. Crime reporting, in particular, was one way that newspapers could achieve this aim. Focusing less on information and more on entertainment, this 'new journalism' became a powerful force in society (Gray, p. 115). Using Stanley Cohen's theory on moral panics and the garrotting scandal of 1862, Gray convincingly demonstrates the power of the late Victorian press. From a few cases of wildly-exaggerated street robbery came soaring arrest rates and changes in penal policy (the Security Against Violence Act of 1863) (p. 114). Could Cohen's theory be applied to the Whitechapel murders? Gray thinks not and urges us to remember that the Ripper was so brutal, media exaggeration was unnecessary. Furthermore, despite the public outrage and significant police investigation, the murders never resulted in additions or changes to criminal legislation.

But there were many journalists in Victorian London that were not just interested in boosting sales figures through sensationalist reporting. Away from the authoritative, patriarchal and often judgemental tone of newspapers like *The Times*, Gray draws our attention to William Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, who believed that the influence of the press could be harnessed and used for the greater good. The 'Maiden tribute of modern Babylon', for example, was Stead's attempt to uncover child trafficking in the capital and force parliament to raise the age of consent for girls from 13 to 16. In 1885, with the help of a former madam, Rebecca Jarrett, Stead procured a young girl, the 13 year-old Eliza Armstrong. Although Stead's intention was to show that he could easily buy a child for the 'purposes of sexual exploitation' (Gray, p. 155), the breaking of the story resulted in scandal, public outrage and Stead's imprisonment in Holloway for

three months. It did, however, contribute to the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act and a series of measures to protect young women and girls from exploitation. Gray places the Maiden campaign in the context of an ongoing class war, characterized by the gulf between the middle and working classes. Like the treatment of working women by the CDA (Contagious Diseases Act), Stead's campaign began from the viewpoint that women were the passive victims of lustful males instead of 'a consequence of a deeply unequal capitalist society'. As a researcher interested in female sexuality in this era I would like to have seen more on the trafficking of young women both in and out of the capital, but coverage of the 'Maiden tribute' is a welcome addition nonetheless.

Crimson Petal does not shy away from the issue of trafficking and under-age sex either. Prior to his first meeting with Sugar, William heads to the 'good, cheap brothels of Drury Lane' to meet Claire and Alice, the twins recommended by *More Sprees*. After arriving in London 'as innocents' and promised help with securing lodgings and employment, the girls were robbed and installed in a brothel (Faber, p. 70). Faber presents the encounter with no holds barred but dispels the myth of young women as sexually passive victims when the twins refuse to succumb to William's unconventional requests.

In agreement with Judith Walkowitz's landmark study into Victorian prostitution, both Gray and Faber view sex workers as 'independent and assertive' women. Rather than portraying prostitutes as the victims of their male seducers, the authors see them as victims of circumstance. Caroline, the first character that we meet in *Crimson Petal*, for example, turned to prostitution as a means of paying for her dying son's medical care (Faber, p. 15). Similarly, Jack the Ripper's victims generally fell into prostitution as a result of 'failed marriages, lost children', or the inability to find paid work in a more respectable profession (Faber, pp. 164–5). Attempting to reconstruct the experiences of these women and understand city life through their eyes is a highlight of both books, especially considering the scarcity of primary source evidence.

That prostitutes were frequently targeted by Christian reformers, missionaries and do-gooders has been well-documented.⁽³⁾ The middle-class need to 'raise up, rescue and reform' these fallen women led hundreds of individuals, particularly women, to enter the slums, roll up their sleeves and attack this Great Social Evil (Gray, p. 62). Reformers weren't always sure how best to tackle the issue and Gray deals with this dilemma in chapter five. He identifies individualism and collectivism as the two competing reform ideologies of the later Victorian era, espoused by the likes of Beatrice Webb and Helen Bosanquet. He makes no attempt to tell the story of this 'intellectual war' in any great detail. Rather, Gray places this ideological battle in the context of the country's journey towards the welfare state. His comparison between this Victorian reform dilemma and the modern preoccupation with 'benefit scroungers', notably within the tabloid press, is an interesting point. Returning to prostitution, the one criticism of this section is that Gray could have focused more on specific prostitution reforms, outside of the Contagious Diseases Acts which have been extensively documented.

The devout widow, Emmeline Fox, is *Crimson Petal's* spirited reformer. Working daily with the Rescue Society, Fox views reform as a crusade to cleanse the streets and save the souls of the fallen women of St Giles. Armed with her Bible, Fox is driven by apocalyptic fears where the souls of St Giles become the property of the devil. Technological progress, like the factory or the Underground, has moral consequences and is responsible for tempting people away from God. But Fox and her mission are rarely taken seriously by others of her class. Even Henry Rackham, her confidant, is more interested in forming a romantic liaison than in her work at the society. Despite her efforts, Fox encompasses the ignorant attitude described by Gray – that judges and condemns the behaviour and culture observed in St Giles rather than attempting to understand it.

Merging the themes of gender, sex and religion, it is with the character of Agnes Rackham that I became most intrigued when reading *Crimson Petal*. In complete contrast to other female characters in the novel and to contemporary domestic ideologies, Agnes is the mad woman locked away in her bedroom and hidden from public view. While the omniscient narrator informs us that Agnes' mental health problems are caused by a brain tumour the size of 'quail's egg' (p. 218), Dr Curlew has identified her troublesome womb as the

culprit. Though Agnes has no idea about the internal workings of her body, she is still expected to perform as a wife through intercourse and bearing a child. Ironically, it is these acts that have caused much of her psychological damage. For Dr Curlew, Agnes is, for the most part, a lost cause. Along with leeches, laudanum and internal examinations, his advice to William is to pack Agnes off to the asylum – lest her madness infect the rest of the household.

Faber should be applauded for bringing Victorian constructions of female sexuality, reproduction and mental illness into the wider public arena through his characterisation of Agnes. While she retreats deeper and deeper into her imaginary world (where she is cared for by nuns from the Convent of Health), Faber draws the reader's attention to the patriarchal ideas and practices, from rape to the 'wandering womb', that have controlled and determined the fate of her life.

Returning to *London's Shadows*, Gray tackles the Victorian construction of the so-called criminal class in chapter 7. Standing below the respectable working class and existing entirely from crime, this underclass first emerged in the writings of Henry Mayhew. This idea was further developed by the prominent psychologist, Henry Maudsley, who argued that 'heredity and environment' were factors in determining deviant behaviour rather than an individual choice. This belief was also echoed on the Continent where Cesare Lombroso began developing a criminal classification based on physical features. This biological theory of crime affected the way that contemporaries viewed and dealt with the criminal, from the old days of reform, through education and religion, to a new era of taking photographs and measurements to determine the specific attributes that made him behave in this way (p. 200). But what sort of crimes did this class commit?

To answer this question, Gray has compiled criminal statistics from London's Central Criminal Court between 1850 and 1899. The historian's work in compiling this type of data is made far easier with the Internet's greatest resource on the history of crime, the *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*. From his analysis, theft, including burglary and simple larceny, was the most commonly committed crime at 49 per cent. Gray brings this section of the book to life by recounting tales from the proceedings that give some idea of the opportunistic nature of these crimes. (Faber also echoes this sentiment of opportunism in his description of the hansom cab looting in *Crimson Petal*). As ideas about criminals changed and the keeping of records and statistics increased, it was much easier for the authorities to identify and label habitual offenders. Running parallel to these developments came debates about the nature and purpose of prison, most notably the introduction of a more regimented system, led by Edmund Du Cane. Despite these changes, Gray believes that internal management issues and ever-increasing costs prevented the Victorians from successfully dealing with recidivism. Furthermore, the concept of a criminal class prevented them from ever truly understanding the motivations of offenders.

In chapter eight Gray deals specifically with the police hunt for Jack the Ripper. Although the failure of the police to catch the killer has attracted criticism, both in the past and more recently, Gray takes a more sympathetic view of the Victorian police. With limited resources and criminal detection techniques still in their infancy, it is hardly surprising that they were unable to bring Jack to justice. Added to this were a number of hoaxes, false leads and other crimes to attend to.

Like the Ripper's victims, there is no happy ending for the women in the *Crimson Petal*. Without revealing too much, Sugar may escape St Giles but she finds that life is no more pleasurable as William's mistress or as governess to his daughter, Sophie. Extremely well-researched, clearly informed by current historiography and described in almost painstaking detail, this tragic story keeps the reader hooked to the very last page. Combined with the recent BBC television adaptation, *Crimson Petal* should be applauded for bringing to life and into public focus the harsh realities of this period.

Gray is not the first historian to investigate the darker side of Victorian London but his book is well-researched and accessible, making it a welcome addition to this existing historiography. Both Gray and Faber highlight the tremendous social cost of industry that contemporaries recognised but could not remedy.

Though the streets of London may be cleaner and the slums replaced by modern redevelopments, the then-and-now approach of *London's Shadows* offers a stark reminder that poverty, deprivation and inequality are as problematic today as they were in the 1880s.

Notes

1. See Paul Begg, *Jack the Ripper: The Definitive History*, (London, 2004) and Alan Palmer, *The East End: Four Centuries of London Life*, (New Jersey, NJ, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Kathryn Hughes, 'Whores, Porn and Lunatics', *The Guardian*, 28 September, 2002 < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/sep/28/fiction> [3]> [accessed 8 August 2011]. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, Paul McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform*, (London, 1980), Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*, (Cambridge 1980) and Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860–1914*, (London, 2000). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/sep/28/fiction> [3]

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