Comics an der Grenze

COMICS AN DER GRENZE

SUB/VERSIONEN VON FORM UND INHALT

9. Wissenschaftstagung der
Gesellschaft für Comicforschung (ComFor)

herausgegeben von
Matthias Harbeck,
Linda-Rabea Heyden
und Marie Schröer

CH. A. BACHMANN
VERLAG

Bibliographische Informationen der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.dnb.de abrufbar.

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Titelillustration Copyright 2014 Paul Paetzel, Berlin
Herstellung: docupoint GmbH, Barleben
Printed in Germany
Print-Ausgabe: ISBN 978-3-941030-68-8
E-Book-Ausgabe: ISBN 978-3-96234-012-4
1. Auflage 2017

Roger Sabin

Ally Sloper Meets Jack the Ripper

Comedy and Fear in the 19th Century

Abstract | In Britain in the late 1880s, two pop cultural icons had an extraordinary meeting: one, Ally Sloper, the fictional star of comic books and stage productions and the other Jack the Ripper, the real-life serial killer who was instantly fictionalised on page and stage as the bogeyman of the moment.

The aim here is to explore the way in which this dynamic developed, with a focus on a single issue of *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* (October 20, 1888), which appeared at the point in time when it was first realised that the killings were being done by a lone individual, and when panic was at its peak. What was at stake politically in the comic's reaction? What can it tell us about Victorian attitudes to fear, death, and poverty? About the status of women? Finally, about law and order, and the social contract that existed between citizen and police?

Zusammenfassung | Im Großbritannien der späten 1880er-Jahre trafen zwei Ikonen der Pop-Kultur aufeinander: Ally Sloper, der fiktive Star aus Comics und Bühnenproduktionen, und der reale Serienmörder Jack the Ripper, der umgehend als Horrorfigur der Stunde für Bühne und Literatur entdeckt und fiktionalisiert wurde.

Hier soll diese Dynamik untersucht werden und zwar anhand einer einzigen Ausgabe von *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* (20. Oktober 1888). Diese erschien genau zu dem Zeitpunkt, als erstmals erkannt wurde, dass die Morde von einer einzelnen Person begangen wurden und die Panik damit ihren Höhepunkt erreichte. Welche politischen Reaktionen konnte der Comic hervorrufen? Was verrät er uns in Bezug auf das Verhältnis zu Angst, Tod und Armut im viktorianischen Zeitalter? Über den Status von Frauen? Und was sagt er über Recht und Ordnung bzw. die gesellschaftlichen Beziehungen zwischen Bürgern und Polizei aus?

The theme of the 2014 Berlin ComFor conference was ›crossing boundaries‹ and this essay seeks to address that in two ways: crossing boundaries of taste, specifically in terms of humour, and crossing boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Thus, in Britain in the late 1880s, two pop cultural icons had an extraordinary meeting: one, Ally Sloper, the fictional star of comic books and stage productions, whom readers were encouraged to think was ›real‹; and the other Jack the Ripper, the real-life serial killer who was instantly fictionalised on page and stage as the

bogeyman of the moment. Sloper's main comic, entitled *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*, had a special relationship with the East End of London, the area in which the Ripper murders were taking place, yet it had no problem with making jokes about the killings, even as they were happening. This black humour performed three main functions: providing a release valve (not least for the local population); offering entertaining speculations on the identity of the killer; and satirising police efforts to catch him - in a manner that suggested a larger agenda.[1]

The aim here is to explore the way in which this dynamic developed, with a focus on a single issue of *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* (October 20, 1888), which appeared at the point in time when it was first realised that the killings were being done by a lone individual, and when panic was at its peak. What was at stake politically in the comic's reaction? What can it tell us about Victorian attitudes to fear, death, and poverty?[2] About the status of women, and, especially, prostitutes?[3] Finally, about law and order, and the social contract that existed between citizen and police?

To begin with an overview, it's worth making the obvious point that the reputations of Ally Sloper and Jack the Ripper have varied widely since the 1880s. Sloper has been virtually forgotten outside of a small coterie of comics scholars, while the Ripper's infamy as some kind of ›ur-serial killer‹ has grown.[4] Sloper first appeared in 1867, and faded from public view in the 1910s: his comics were not reprinted, and his look became an anachronism. By contrast, the Ripper has become a modern icon: there have been hundreds of Ripper movies, novels, computer games, and toys, usually picturing a tall man in a cape and top hat lurking in the fog. In terms of Ripper comics per se, a quick Google search elicits dozens of hits, including a manga story and the most famous example of them all, *From Hell*

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1 | For readers unfamiliar with Ally Sloper, please refer to the essays by Sabin and Banville in this bibliography, but also the pioneering work of Peter Bailey and David Kunzle. Ideas from this essay will form the basis of a chapter in my forthcoming ›biography‹ of the character, due from the University Press of Mississippi in 2018.

2 | The question of whether the *Half-Holiday* can be defined as a ›comic‹ in the first place depends on definitions. If a comic is something that is mass-produced on a regular basis, contains as a significant proportion of its content cartoons and strips, and stars recurring characters, then it counts; the fact that it often referred to itself as ›a comic‹ is not insignificant.

3 | In this essay, I have chosen to use the term ›prostitute‹ in favour of ›sex worker‹ because it was in common parlance in the 1880s; yet it should be noted that there is currently a campaign by activists to rebrand the former as the latter in media stylesheets.

4 | He wasn't the first serial killer, but his status as pre-figuring examples from the 20th and 21st centuries, and indeed pre-figuring pop culture's fetishisation of the serial killer post-the Silence of the Lambs movie (1991), is now fixed in the public imagination.

(1999) by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell.[5] However, until now, there has been little interest among comics historians in how the Ripper was portrayed in comics that were contemporaneous with his deeds.

Sloper had debuted in the magazine *Judy*, a rival to *Punch*, and had acquired his own comic, published by the same firm, the *Half-Holiday*, in 1884, which quickly became a bestseller.[6] The Sloper character was a slightly stupid working class con-man, a drunkard and ne'er-do-well, and as his adventures progressed they increasingly commented upon topical events. This commentary often took the form of Sloper being dressed in the garb of a pillar of the establishment – a judge, an army officer, a cop – and adopting an essentially conservative viewpoint.[7] At the same time, readers were encouraged to think of Sloper as ›real‹: he edited the comic and presided over competitions; he was written about as if he was involved with real events; and readers were invited to write to him, for publication on the letters page. His audience was mainly working class, predominantly male, and his ubiquity in popular culture was unprecedented; not least because new technology had made the mass circulation of comics possible. Actors would imitate him on the music hall stage, and he spawned a thriving merchandising mini-industry – both official and bootleg.[8]

Sloper's connections with East London were manifold. Most obviously, the comic was bought by the area's inhabitants, and although geographical distribution statistics do not exist, there is anecdotal evidence that the penny papers were within reach of the poorest of the poor, and that Sloper was a local hero (we can speculate that the Ripper's victims may have been among his readership, and similarly the Ripper himself).[9] In the *Half-Holiday*, many of the stories referenced

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5 | On one occasion (October 9, 1886) Sloper comes down with the flu, only to be tended by the Royal Physician, Dr William Gull: the same William Gull identified as Jack the Ripper in *From Hell*. See Alan Moore / Eddie Campbell: *From Hell.* London 1999.

6 | The publishers claimed sales of 350,000 per week, which dwarfed those of *Punch* and other rivals. If each copy was ›passed around‹, as was custom, then the comic was being read by a large percentage of the country's population.

7 | Other readings of the politics of the comic are possible: see, for example, Scott Banville: »Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday: The Geography of Class in Late-Victorian Britain«, in: *Victorian Periodicals Review* (2008: 41,2), pp. 150–173.

8 | See Roger Sabin's essays »Ally Sloper on Stage,« in: *European Comic Art* (2009: 2,2), pp. 205–225, and »Ally Sloper: The First Comics Superstar?«, in: *Image and Narrative* (2003: 7) at: http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/graphicnovel/rogersabin.htm (publ. Oct. 2003, cit. 30.03.2016).

9 | Comics and penny papers were often discarded in coffee houses, pubs and in railway carriages, and therefore were read ›for free‹. Also, there was a thriving trade in secondhand editions, especially in markets like the one down Petticoat Lane. It should also be noted that despite the often wordy nature of the penny press (and of the *Half-Holiday*), literacy rates

East End life, for instance featuring workers of all kinds (›costers‹, dockers, washerwomen, etc.), the unemployed, and immigrants into the East End (mainly the Irish and East European Jews, though with some reference to the Chinese population). Along with this, the East End music hall scene was celebrated: the fare at the halls in Hoxton and Mile End in particular was subject to being illustrated and reviewed. In his stage incarnation, Sloper was always assumed to be a cockney (i.e. from the East End) and his biggest triumph as a ›live act‹ was at the Britannia Theatre (a large music hall) in Hoxton in 1885.[10]

Elsewhere in Sloper's comic, the East End was a feature. For example, ›poverty drives‹ were encouraged, whereby readers were asked to donate small sums in the cause of alleviating urban poverty – which in this case was code for East End poverty. It should be noted that this part of London had ›special problems‹, at a time when the welfare state did not exist.[11] Overcrowding, slum tenement housing, and a lack of sanitation went hand in hand with disease, crime, and prostitution, meaning that life expectancy was shorter than in other regions of the country.[12] (As a corollary, violent death in east London was not news: violent death at the hands of a serial killer was.) The *Half-Holiday* poverty drives were effective, with large sums of money being raised, and donors' names being printed in a list: Sloper himself was pictured handing out the money vouchers to the poor. (It is indicative of the comic's place in society that rival funny papers would only join in the fashion for poverty drives after news of the Ripper killings had alerted their readers to the terrible conditions in the area.)[13]

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among the working class were high, spurred on by the 1870s Education Act, which made a certain level of schooling compulsory.

10 | Sloper's place of origin could be ambiguous. In the *Half-Holiday*, he comes from south London, specifically Battersea. Before that, he'd been given many habitats, including rough-sleeping on the banks of the Thames. However, critics and readers often assumed he was an East Ender. For example, famed critic Hume Nisbet took him for the quintessential ›shady cockney‹, see Hume Nisbet: »Illustrative Art: Past and Present«, in: *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1892: 272), pp. 258–272, p. 267.

11 | Useful background texts include Alex Werner: *Jack the Ripper and the East End.* London 2008; and Julie-Marie Strange: *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914.* Cambridge; New York 2005.

12 | Police estimated the number of prostitutes in the Whitechapel area at a staggering 1,200. (Police report dated 25 October 1888, MEPO 3/141 ff. 158–163, quoted in Stewart Evans / Keith Skinner: *The Ultimate Jack the Ripper Sourcebook*. London 2002, p. 283.) Prostitution was not illegal, and indeed had not been regulated until the Contagious Diseases Acts were introduced in the 1860s.

13 | It could even be argued that this kind of peer-to-peer giving offered a new model compared to the one based on top-down philanthropy (gentry and middle class giving to the poor), and therefore constitutes one possible inspiration for the welfare state.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the proximity of the *Half-Holiday* editorial offices to the East End. These offices were located at Shoe Lane, off Fleet Street, less than a mile away. Any employee could walk there easily, to visit the markets or shops (or maybe even to frequent the opium dens, brothels or prostitute houses), and, as we have seen, critics were routinely dispatched to review performances in the halls. Similarly, beggars from the East End made their way to the environs of Shoe Lane, and poverty would have been visible from day to day. In the case of the above-mentioned poverty drives, it was practice for the poor to make a walk over to the offices to pick up their money vouchers.

›Jack the Ripper‹ was a name given to the serial killer who terrorised the Whitechapel area of East London between roughly the years of 1888 and 1893.[14] His victims were women, and mostly prostitutes (depending on how the killings are defined). He had other soubriquets – ›the Whitechapel fiend‹ being one; and ›Leather Apron‹ another, because it was assumed he must have been a slaughterman or butcher. The years of his activity are vague because historians disagree about the number of victims – some put the figure at five, some at 11, and some at upwards of 20.[15] However, most historians agree that the peak of his notoriety was in October 1888 when it was first accepted that the murders were out-of-the-ordinary and seemed to be escalating: the thing that tipped mounting unease into open panic was that the Ripper struck twice in one night on 30 September (his victims were Elizabeth Stride and Catherine Eddowes) – referred to as ›the double event‹.

Why the Ripper became such a legend is not hard to explain: there was the goriness of his crimes (often mutilating victims), the fact that he was never caught, and the coincidence that his murders were concurrent with the first heyday of the sensationalist press. One subgenre of that press was illustrated periodicals, which revelled in depicting gruesome details – the covers of the *Illustrated Police News* being particularly noteworthy. Speculation about the Ripper's identity was predictably wild, ranging from assumptions that he must be an Irishman or a Jew, to theories that he could be an outsider, possibly a ›gentleman‹, based on the fact that middle and upper class men would ›slum it‹ in the East End, either for reasons typically having to with philanthropy or sex tourism (the idea of the ›toff killer‹

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14 | The name originated in a letter sent to the press claiming to have been written by the killer, but which is now believed to have been a hoax (some think it was sent by a journalist at *The Star* newspaper, more about which later). For anybody researching the Ripper, there are some good collections of primary material: as well as the above-mentioned *Sourcebook*, see *Casebook: Jack the Ripper*, produced by Stephen P. Ryder and ›Johnno‹, an online repository (of press cuttings, official documents, photos, etc.) available at: http://www.casebook.org/index.html.

15 | Some historians believe the killings started in April, others in August – for contested views, see *Casebook: Jack the Ripper*, op cit. and also Paul Begg and John Bennett *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims* (Yale University Press, 2013).

has since become the dominant trope in Ripper product, including *From Hell*).[16] Meanwhile, fictionalised stories were common, elevating the Ripper to the status of a folk devil. Such heirs to the penny dreadful tradition sometimes combined his story with vampire legend, and with the character ›Spring Heeled Jack.‹[17] The consequence of such hype was to ratchet up fear levels even further. Occasionally, this gave the police extra headaches: for example, many locals believed that the Ripper was Jewish, because the sensationalist press would emphasise both this theory and (what was perceived to be) the ›ritualistic‹ nature of the killings, which led to the police having to plan for full-scale riots against the Jewish population.

Our case study, the issue of *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* dated October 20, 1888, is one of the most remarkable in the comic's history, and was a lightning reaction to the crisis - the ›double event‹ had only just been made public by the police, and the idea of a ›serial killer‹ was by no means yet accepted by everybody. As ever, the comic was a jumble of cartoons, strips, illustrated stories, text stories, readers' letters, news items, competitions and classified adverts. Not everything was devoted to the Ripper by any means, and the bulk was concerned with routine slapstick humour and gently amusing commentary on manners (usually between the sexes). But certain key elements of the comic were Ripper- focused, and it is to these that we now turn.

Most conspicuously, the cover is a splash cartoon in the established manner, drawn by regular cover cartoonist WF Thomas, in which Sloper, dressed as a cop, arrests a Ripper suspect (fig. 1).[18] Straightaway the reader is made aware that Sloper is a ›real‹ figure in a ›real‹ scenario, and asked to accept that the unstable boundary between fact and fiction is being manipulated and has a weird logic.[19] The killer is given the name »Jack the Ripper« (as we have seen, a relative neologism), and this attests to the power of his swiftly-accruing fictionalised aura. Sloper-as-cop would have been amusing because Sloper, a drunkard and petty criminal, was the last kind of individual the police force would want to recruit (his bottle of gin is visible in what should be the holster for his truncheon). But at the same time

16 | See Seth Koven: *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London.* Princeton 2006.

17 | Spring Heeled Jack was a folkloric figure, who sometimes dressed like a bat and could make huge leaps into the air. He became the subject for several penny dreadfuls.

18 | Thomas did the drawing, but as for who came up with the concept, and wrote the surrounding text, this is less clear. There is some evidence of a process of collaboration between the editor (Gilbert Dalziel) and staffers.

19 | This is the first known example of a meeting between the Ripper and a fictional figure, though many others would follow; including with Dracula, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and perhaps most famously with Sherlock Holmes (best remembered in movies such as *A Study in Terror* (1965) and *Murder by Decree* (1979)).

(See 2nd Page.) **ALLY SLOPER'S ART UNION.** (See 2nd Page.)

This Copy of "ALLY SLOPER" carries with it the advantages of a **Railway Accident Life Policy for £150.**

Ally Sloper's Half Holiday

CONDUCTED BY GILBERT DALZIEL.

Vol. V.—No. 284.] SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1888. [ONE PENNY.

A SAD MISHAP.

"Of course it was not to be wondered at that Papa should place himself at the disposal of the Scotland Yard authorities. With the knowledge he possesses of the East of London, his help was readily accepted, and, disguised as a detective, my Parent has been prowling about Whitechapel for several nights past. An unfortunate occurrence took place, however, on Wednesday, when stupidly he arrested Sir Charles Warren himself. Poor Papa's theory is that it is not at all unlikely the murderer, to put people off the scent, gets up like well-known men. Bloodhounds are not in it with Snatcher."—Tootsie.

THE DREADED MINOR ASSERTS HIMSELF.

HUNG IN CHAINS.

Fig. 1 Cover, *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*, October 20, 1888. Art for main cartoon: WF Thomas.

this positioning was in line with previous incarnations of Sloper as a constable, and underlined that by this point in the comic's evolution he was symbolic of the kind of conservative values that were more commensurate with the opinions of sections of the ›respectable working class‹ that lived in the East End than with the lumpenproletariat, with whom he might previously have been associated (the caption informs us that »the knowledge he possesses of the East of London« makes him indispensible to the police). In other words, the image sees Sloper trying to do his duty and serve his peers: he may be mocked by them, but at least he is ›on their side‹.

As Sloper makes his move, he cries, »I am Hawkshaw the Detective«, which is a reference to a play from earlier in the century about a celebrated sleuth, and which therefore exposes Sloper's delusions of competence.[20] When he does catch the Ripper, it turns out to be none other than the Chief of Police, Sir Charles Warren, dressed, as it happens, in full ceremonial regalia. This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it is a commentary on the perception (shared by the penny papers) that the police were being slow to catch the Ripper and to clamp down on murderous crime in general: something which would be returned-to again inside this issue of the *Half-Holiday* and in subsequent issues. Secondly, the image suggests that the Ripper might be an outsider to the East End; indeed, that he might be of upper class bearing. The depiction of Warren in his finery is therefore pointed, and serves as an early illustration of the ›toff‹ theory.

The background detail in the cover image is extensive – Thomas's covers, like those of his predecessor WG Baxter, were designed to be ›inspectable‹. Most strikingly, there is a butcher in a leather apron, sharpening his knives. This un-missable image could be interpreted as a depiction of the ›real‹ Ripper – who, as we've seen, was widely believed to be a butcher because of the nature of his crimes, and was nick-named by some ›Leather Apron‹.[21] If this is correct, then Sloper is apprehending the wrong man just as the right man is laughing at him a few feet away. (Indeed, was the butcher himself about to be apprehended by Warren?) What is doubly interesting is that the butcher is not depicted in a way that is ethnically stereotyped. If this is the Ripper, then he is not Jewish and he is not Irish.

To make the scene even more grotesque, and taking it in an almost Hogarthian direction, there are cuts of meat visible on the butcher's stall, and a joint has fallen to the floor, to be eagerly chewed-upon by Sloper's dog, ›Snatcher‹. This is clearly

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20 | *The Ticket of Leave Man* (1863), by Tom Taylor.

21 | In another cartoon, in the October 13 edition of the *Half-Holiday*, the Ripper is depicted being pursued by a member of the public, with the caption ›Tapping Old Leather Apron‹. The Ripper here is very similar to the butcher in the cover cartoon: he is corpulent, has whiskers, and carries long (butchers') knives. However, he is also smartly dressed, so the similarity is not complete.

a reference to the fact that some of the victims of the Ripper had been mutilated: to be exact, had various parts of their innards removed, rather than been dismembered; but to the panicked and rumour-fuelled public it would have made little difference. The apparent ›tastelessness‹ of this humour to modern eyes will be discussed in a moment. Snatcher's presence is also a reference to reports that Warren wanted to use bloodhounds in the search, a theme that would be emphasised later in the comic.

To the left of Sloper there is a boy who is a paper-seller. He proffers a copy of *The Star*, and has copies of the *Half-Holiday* under his arm. No doubt this is a dig at what was seen as the prurient sensationalism of sections of the press, and at *The Star* in particular, which existed at the more scurrilous end of the spectrum (and which, incidentally, often emphasised the ›Hebrew‹ appearance of the killer).[22] In the distant background of the image, a man is on a ladder, lighting a gas lamp. This is a comment on the fact that, despite electric lighting having been introduced to parts of London since 1878, the Whitechapel area was still served by a very rudimentary gas-lamp system (lit by somebody every evening), which was hardly effective at times of heavy fog. Part of why the public feared the Ripper had to do with the idea that he could operate with stealth in dimly lit streets; another trope that would become a part of the Ripper legend.

There is one final element to the image that requires analysis – the caption. Like most other previous splash cartoons on the cover the comic, it is narrated by an extra-diegetic voice; namely that of Tootsie Sloper, Sloper's daughter. What is particularly interesting about her relating a tale about the Ripper is that, first, she is female (the most prominent female character in the comic), and, second, she is a chorus girl. In the Sloper universe, Tootsie works at the Frivoli Theatre, and her pals are all similarly female and similarly employed – thus allowing plenty of scope for erotic strips and cartoons (the Victorian equivalent of ›Good Girl Art‹). However, the sub-text to being a chorus girl was that it was not an entirely respectable profession, and was linked in the public imagination to prostitution. Some of the performers were known to moonlight as prostitutes, and the impression was fortified by the fact that prostitutes would ply their trade at the entrances to theatres and music halls.

What does this mean in terms of Tootsie's voiceover about the Ripper (which, incidentally, would almost certainly have been written by a man)? Frustratingly for any historian looking for a hint of feminist outrage, there is none. The thrust of the commentary is about »Poor Pa's« idiocy, which is in tune with other previous captions, and there is no room for reflection on female solidarity, male violence, or the fate of the victims. The seeming invisibility and irrelevance of the latter is striking.

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22 | See Alexander Chisholm: »An Analysis of the Star's Coverage of the Ripper Murders«, at: http://www.casebook.org/dissertations/staranalysis.html (cit. 30.03.2016).

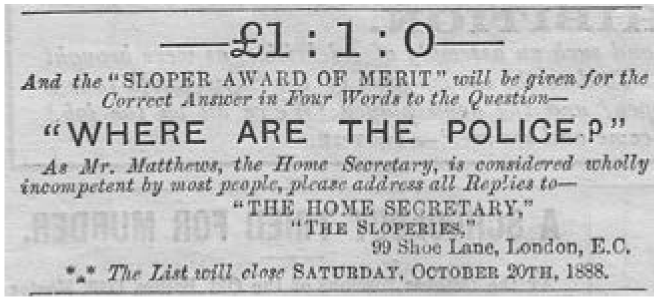
—£1 : 1 : 0—
And the "SLOPER AWARD OF MERIT" *will be given for the Correct Answer in Four Words to the Question—*
"WHERE ARE THE POLICE?"
As Mr. Matthews, the Home Secretary, is considered wholly incompetent by most people, please address all Replies to—
"THE HOME SECRETARY,"
"THE SLOPERIES,"
99 Shoe Lane, London, E.C.
_ *The List will close* SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20TH, 1888.

Fig. 2
Competition, *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*, October 20, 1888. P. 330. Anon.

Inside the comic, the Ripper content continues. On the first page, there is a competition, offering a £1-and-1-shilling prize for the best answer to the question »Where are the police?« (fig. 2) This rather blunt question is contextualised with the observation that, »…Mr Henry Matthews is considered wholly incompetent by most people…«. Matthews was the Home Secretary, the government minister responsible for the police force, and 'one up' from Sir Charles Warren. For the self-styled ›non-political‹ *Half-Holiday*, this was veering into surprisingly personalised satire. [23]

Next, there is a six-panel strip entitled: »The Mysterious Stranger – (A Tale of Whitechapel)« (fig. 3). It is light in tone, and indeed shockingly so from today's perspective. The story begins with a »strange figure« being spotted in »the East of London«, wearing a cloak. The narration speculates that »Hidden beneath the cloak, he, she or it carried something…« presumably meaning a knife. The overblown style of writing plays into the idea that the Ripper might have supernatural qualities – and might even be an »it«. As the story progresses, the figure encounters a woman, clearly positioned as a potential victim. She is a drunk, and poor, but not identifiable as a prostitute. On learning of the time, she throws away her bottle of booze and scurries off home to safety. At the end of the strip, the figure is apprehended by a cop, and turns out to be a local vigilante (»I go to seek the Whitechapel murderer!«).[24] However, the final caption gets in a jibe at the leadership of the police (importantly not the cop himself) by asking ironically whether the figure might be »Warren or Matthews«.

The strip just about works as a Ripper story, but there are odd things about it, and the tone is rather surreal. So, for example, the vigilante's hidden weapon is a watering can (the effect is to make the reader think that he is insane). This

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23 | Were the police, and by extension Warren and Matthews, really such a disaster? To be fair, they had little funding, and detection techniques were primitive (no forensic science, for example). Plus, there were a number of hoaxes (also commented-upon in the *Half-Holiday*) and false leads.

24 | Vigilanteism was not uncommon, as epitomised by the Mile End Vigilance Committee, set up by locals.

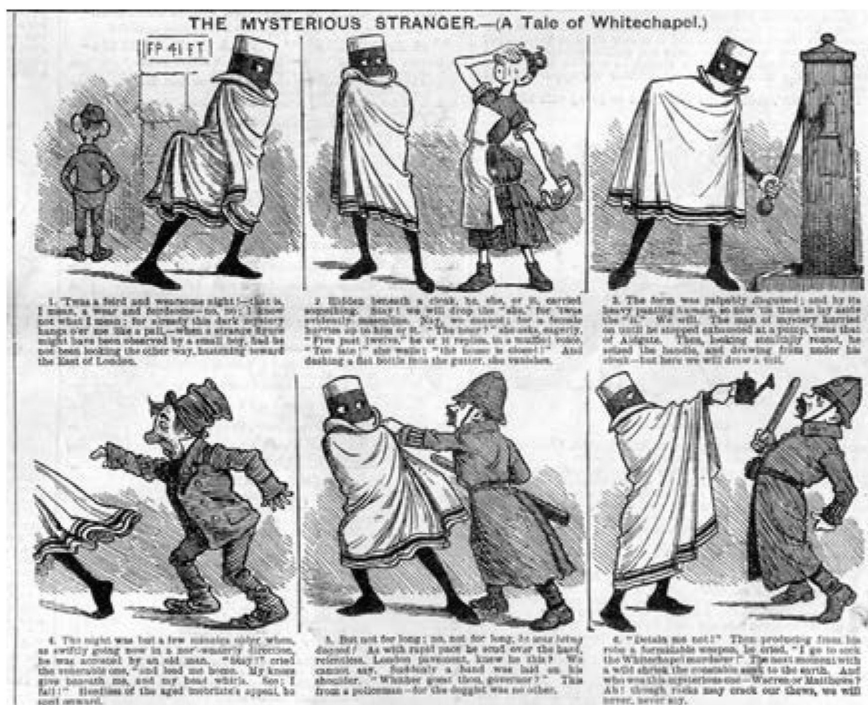

Fig. 3 ›The Mysterious Stranger – (A Tale of Whitechapel)‹ *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*, October 20, 1888. P. 332. Anon.

oddness can be explained by the fact that the strip had been re-purposed from an earlier version that used the same images, but was about an entirely different topic. This version had appeared in *Judy* magazine, which was a sister publication to the *Half-Holiday* (as we have seen) in the September 10 edition, and had originally been entitled: »The Great Primrose Hill Mystery«. Now, for the new version, an anonymous staffer at the *Half-Holiday* had written new text to bring it up to date. Such ›insider traffic‹ between *Judy* and the *Half-Holiday* was not rare, and indeed ›scissors and paste‹ borrowing was standard practice in the penny paper industry: but this is a particularly elaborate example, re-imagined with great care to reflect events.

Next is a cartoon about the police using bloodhounds in the pursuit – the foot just visible in the left-hand corner belongs to the Ripper (fig. 4). The caption tells us: »At last it is decided to Use bloodhounds to secure a clue« (sic), and the cartoon appears as part of the »Weekly Whirligig« selection of news items. There's a sense of desperation here, and the »at last« is a sideswipe at Warren, who was advocating the use of dogs, but taking far too much time about it in the opinion of many. In fact, Warren had private doubts about bloodhounds, who he felt would become confused by multiple scents in a crowded urban environment: but he, too, was

Fig. 4 ›On the Track‹, *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*, October 20, 1888. Part of ›Our Weekly Whirligig‹. P. 333. Anon.

desperate. In the end, the dogs were tested in Regents Park (probably a rough source for the cartoon), but never used in Whitechapel.

Finally, on the back page of the comic, the figure of Henry Matthews is revisited in even more vicious fashion, as the focus of a portrait cartoon (fig. 5). Here, Matthews is made a »Friend Of Sloper« (F.O.S.), but unlike the vast majority of other examples of the F.O.S. portraits, which were a weekly feature of the *Half-Holiday*, the title is bestowed ironically. For in the image, Matthews is being pelted with what might be fruit or stones, to the point where the window next to his head has been smashed. Clearly, he is a hate figure, and the caption even goes so far as to state »…Recently a series of murders has taken place in Whitechapel, in which our hero has taken an active part, rumour has it, the *principal* part…«. In other words, Matthews is being accused, albeit jokingly, of being the Ripper. This was remarkably bitter humour, and tested the limits of how far a ›funny paper‹ could go.

This particular issue of the *Half-Holiday* transpired to be the most Ripper-intensive of the comic's run. It even spawned unofficial ›entertainments‹. One of these was advertised in *The Era*, the trade publication for the theatre business, just a month later: »Jack the Ripper captured by Ally Sloper, Life-size Figures. Suitable for Fairs« (November 24). Another ad in a subsequent edition of the same paper proclaimed: »New Ball-Throwing Amusement. Ally Sloper Capturing Jack the Ripper. Great Success…« (January 12, 1889). Unfortunately, no more is known about this frankly terrifying-sounding game, but it is clear that making light of the situation took many forms – and that the boundary between real and unreal was being blurred even further.

Subsequent issues of the *Half-Holiday* stayed with the story, and indeed there was another front cover about the police (December 1, 1888). But over time, it went back to its old job of concentrating on more lightweight fare, and the Ripper was only alluded-to sporadically, mainly in the context of jokes about rewards being offered, content relating to fresh killings as they arose, and commentary on the police (which continued to as late as 1894[25]). Lack of space forbids a more

25 | In the issue dated May 5, 1894, the police were chided for not apprehending the Ripper, in a year that major reforms of the force were being instigated, partly in belated response to the case.

THE "F.O.S." PORTRAIT GALLERY.

No. 49.—Mr. Henry Matthews, F.O.S.

"Henry Matthews, Q.C. (Queer Cuss), is noted chiefly for the vagaries of his mind—indeed, so numerous are its changes, that he is known as the 'Mooney-Minded Cuss.' Among his intimate friends, our hero is known as the 'Artful Dodger,' and has well earned that title, as his dodging propensities are especially prevalent. Henry at present holds the position of Secretary of State for the *Home* Department, and in this capacity is supposed by many to have the doling out of mother-in-laws. Be this as it may, the fact remains that the applications for this article to our worthy subject are terrific. Recently a series of murders has taken place in Whitechapel, in which our hero has taken an active part—rumour has it, the principal part. We are unwilling to believe this statement, although the refusal to offer a reward looks exceedingly suspicious. Chiefly because there's no place like Home (Secretary), Henry was created F.O.S., and the 'Sloper Award of Merit' presented to him, August 14th, 1886."—*Debrett improved.*

Fig. 5
›The »F.O.S.« Portrait Gallery.‹ *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*, October 20, 1888. P. 336. Anon.

thorough survey, but it is true to say that coverage of the Ripper quickly tailed-off, as it did in other publications, as the *Half-Holiday* reverted to its yearly publishing cycle – November meant Guy Fawkes night; then the start of the pantomime season; then Christmas; and so on.[26]

How should we contextualise the October 20, 1888, comic? A close reading has revealed much, but some broader historicisation is necessary. In the weeks preceding it, the *Half-Holiday* was keeping an eye on the situation in Whitechapel (there

26 | Even *The Star* was noticeably less interested in the Ripper after November 1888.

may have been as many as four killings prior to the double event), with occasional jibes about the efficacy of the police. But October 20 represented ›going big‹ on the story: thereafter, and with the panic in full swing, the *Half-Holiday* became a kind of alternative, satirical, newspaper – commenting weekly in wry, humorous fashion on what was happening. This had become its *modus operandi* in relation to other topical events, and in this way it was fully a part of the ›New Journalism‹ revolution: by this point in time, the comic was capitalising on new printing technology and the turnaround time was as swift as any sensationalist newspaper.[27] Thus, cartoons, strips and text stories were generated at speed to address the Ripper story. This repetitive mode gave the coverage a certain quality: a serial comic dealing with a serial killer.

On the question of humour more broadly, and why the Ripper's grisly deeds should have been considered the subject for the *Half-Holiday* in the first place, this is complex. The publication was in tune with its age in the sense that jokes about death were not taboo, and it was not averse to including quite explicit commentary on atrocities abroad and sensationalist stories at home.[28] It also included content about animals that would be considered grotesque today – for example, flogging horses, shooting stray cats, and force-feeding geese for Christmas. When it came to everyday violence, there was similarly a lack of inhibition: jokes about corporal punishment in schools and prisons were common. This extended to the treatment of women, which is an important point in relation to the Ripper coverage. Thus, cartoons and strips routinely featured wives with black eyes, ›kept in line‹ by their husbands. All this was clearly considered to be part of Victorian life, and therefore fair game for humorous treatment.

However, at the same time, the *Half-Holiday* considered itself to be a ›respectable‹ publication, and a notch above its rivals. There were several reasons for this, not least that it was published by a family firm known for their quality engravings (the Dalziels) who kept standards high, and also that it was developing a relationship with advertisers who wanted to reach the broadest audience possible (entailing a need not to alienate anybody with unsavoury fare). Thus, the comic was often praised by contemporary critics of popular culture for dealing in ›gentle‹ humour that was removed from the ›grossness‹ of the previous print tradition.[29] When it

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27 | For more on New Journalism, see Howard Cox/Simon Mowatt: *Revolutions From Grub Street.* Oxford 2014, especially chapter 2.

28 | One recent example involved cats breaking into a mortuary and eating the faces of infant cadavers (September 1, 1888).

29 | See Roger Sabin: »Comics versus Books: the New Criticism at the ›Fin de Siecle‹«, in: Simon Grennan/Laurence Grove (Eds.): *Transforming Anthony Trollope. »Dispossession«, Victorianism and nineteenth-century word and image.* Leuven 2015 (Studies in European comics and graphic novels; 4), pp. 107–130, pp. 121–2.

came to Ripper humour *per se*, the *Half-Holiday* was competing with other comedy publications and with music hall comedians. For example, performers built entire routines around Ripper gags and songs, and such material was popular even in East End halls.[30] However, the ›quality‹ of the humour differed from medium to medium, venue to venue, and publication to publication. Thus, the *Half-Holiday* would never stoop to some of the more base material that was doing the rounds. By way of a quick reference, one of the popular jokes that would have been too outré for the *Half-Holiday*, was a variation on the following: Question: ›Why is Jack the Ripper likely to be a baker?‹ Answer: ›Because he enjoys cutting up tarts.‹[31]

Therefore, somehow a depiction of Snatcher chewing on joints of meat was above the threshold of respectability, but a joke in which prostitution is addressed directly was not. This kind of attitude extended to the treatment of the victims ›as people‹, and we have noted the strange absence of empathy, and the distancing from any consideration of their lives. In the print media in general, it was common to see opinion pieces blaming the women for their own fate, and occasionally this would translate into jokes. The argument went that if the women hadn't gone into prostitution, and if they hadn't decided to work in such a dangerous place as East London, then they would have avoided their demise.[32] But the *Half-Holiday* never succumbed to this point of view. We can infer that possibly this was because it had a loyal readership in the East End who might have been alienated by it, but also because the comic had a growing female readership. Similarly, its general views on poverty were of the Gladstonian variety, with the implication – never stated – that prostitutes were compelled into the profession by circumstance (indeed, research into the biographies of the Ripper victims proves this to have been the case). Its silence, therefore, should not necessarily be taken as callousness.

Moreover, the comic's attitude to sex was oblique, and it was often alluded-to and ›winked at‹ as a part of life that might be amusing, but which did not require

30 | Ripper-related songs included ›Who Killed Cock Warren?‹ (1888), and ›The Whitechapel Polka‹ (late 1880s).

31 | Dr Bob Nicholson (Edge Hill University) is currently researching the joke via online databases, and speculates that it could have originated in a real remark, e.g. »Did you hear what the lunching lady said the other day to Sir Charles Hardtop who was helping himself to apple pie? ›Look at Jack the Ripper cutting up his tart.‹« (*The Sporting Times*, 27 October 1888). Private correspondence, 28 June 2015 – with gratitude.

32 | For example, here is Anon, ›The East End Murders‹ in *The Saturday Review*, October 6, 1888: ›…No single one of the women who have been so shockingly murdered need have lost her life if she had not preferred the excess of degradation to entering the workhouse… If miserable women will put themselves at the mercy of casual strangers they will occasionally fall victims to outrage.‹ The culture of ›blaming the victim‹ continued into the 20th and 21st centuries, notably around the cases involving the ›Yorkshire Ripper‹ (1975–1980) and the Ipswich serial killer (2005). For a feminist perspective, see: Elizabeth A. Stanko: *Intimate Intrusions*: *Women's Experience of Male Violence.* London/Boston 2013.

detailed comment. The same went for prostitution. Readers would have to develop the knack of ›reading between the lines'‹ to pick up on some of the more nuanced stories and strips: for example, an image of a woman smoking could denote a prostitute, and one of Tootsie's friends at the Friv is called ›Tottie‹, a common word for a prostitute. Additionally, the *Half-Holiday* carried ›classified adverts‹ in the form of a personal column, where unattached people could contact each other. In Victorian Britain such adverts had become controversial because they were linked with prostitution, though whether this was actually the case with the *Half-Holiday* is impossible to tell simply by looking at the names. The fact that they existed at all is indicative of a certain stance, and it is doubly interesting that they were titled »Tootsie's Matrimonial Agency«.

Thus, the attitudes to violence against women in the comic, combined with those towards death in general, towards prostitution, and finally towards where the boundaries for humour lay, led to mixed messages about the Ripper. On the one hand, he is a bogeyman, sui generis, outside of the culture; but on the other there is a recognition of where misogynistic violence is coming from. The comic might suggest for the purposes of sensationalism that the Ripper's crimes were random and motiveless, but its other content points towards an acknowledgement of a deep-seated problem in Victorian society whereby eruptions of gendered violence could flourish. True, it did not go so far as to blame the victims, or to use humour that was ›too vicious‹, but at the same time, it is supremely revealing about the gender politics of its age.

Finally, what of the police? The sheer weight of emphasis in the *Half-Holiday* on police matters during the Ripper case is suggestive of something approaching a preoccupation. The police force was relatively new, having been formed in 1829, and by the 1880s there were expectations that it should be able to protect the populace.[33] With the rise of the new penny press, it was under scrutiny as never before, even though its reputation among the public was mixed. For example, though it was true that the force's personnel were drawn from among the working class (and paid at roughly the equivalent rate to unskilled workers), its dual purpose was to fight street crime, and to quell civil unrest as a representative of the government. Thus, in poorer areas, cops were despised as much as they were trusted: ›blue locusts‹ and ›rozzers‹ being terms of abuse.

The aspect related to civil unrest was particularly salient by the time of the Ripper murders. For Britain's bourgeoisie especially, the police were increasingly being seen as a bulwark against a rising tide of agitation fuelled by Marxist and anarchist ideas. The event that jolted the middle class more than any other was a particularly

33 | London policing was split into two, with the main force, the Metropolitan Police Service, responsible for the whole of what has become known as Greater London, and the City of London Police responsible for the ›square mile‹ of the City of London. The Ripper case was in the jurisdiction of the former, though the investigation itself saw much crossover.

violent riot in Whitehall in 1887 (so-called ›Bloody Sunday‹), during which the police had nearly lost control. It had involved workers from various occupations (notably dockers) and had been organised in part by East End ›agitators‹. From this point forward, fear of certain elements among the working class was at a zenith. Events around the Ripper case, therefore, saw the media asking questions about the police that had less to do with their ability to catch a serial killer than their efficacy as an agent of a beleaguered state.

This attitude was very much a current in the *Half-Holiday*. Its generally conservative stance had often manifested itself in caricatures of ape-like socialists in ›liberty caps‹, feral anarchists with banners proclaiming »Down with Everythink!«, and the police as a stalwart force of everymen representing the ›thin blue line‹ between civilization and chaos. The cops were seen as essentially trustworthy (never locusts), and Sloper, in his incarnations as a cop, was often pitched against the forces of anarchy, such as in the famous William Baxter cover cartoon in 1886 where he fights off an angry mob – a prefiguring of Bloody Sunday.[34] However, although the cops were depicted sympathetically, increasingly their leadership was not, and a ›lions led by donkeys‹ attitude became evident. Our *Half-Holiday* case study from October 1888 clearly demonstrates that Warren and Matthews were viewed as upper class fools, and therefore that the comic's coverage of the Ripper case can be viewed through the lens of this kind of thinking.

Possibly, there is a wider picture to be appreciated. Historian Clive Bloom has written persuasively about how the Victorian state was being consolidated in this period. To quote: »…[It entailed] a wholly new organ of control consisting of the Home Office, the Colonial Office, Treasury and the Metropolitan Police, as well as local municipal government. It was a situation wholly undreamt of when Victoria came to the throne in 1837, but fifty years later was an established fact that bewildered those who had grown up in an age of individualism.«[35] The *Half-Holiday*'s attitude to the police, therefore, and the Ripper more generally, can be seen as a symptom of a more wide-ranging historical evolution in society, moving towards ever-greater monitoring of the populace, and resulting in the form of government we are familiar with today.

This line of argument might be extended further to contextualise the comic's attitude to the ›anarchist scare‹ of the 1890s, when militancy and assassinations supposedly reached their peak (all the time reflected in a sensationalist press). Now, the lone figure lurking in the shadows, who wants to kill passers-by in indiscriminate fashion, was an anarchist terrorist; typically drawn in a style very familiar

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34 | William G. Baxter: »The ›Unemployed‹ at Sloper's«, in: *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* (Feb 27, 1886). The cartoon is reproduced at Sabin: *Ally Sloper: The First Comics Superstar?*

35 | Clive Bloom: »A Letter to the Home Secretary: The State and the Ripper.« At: *http://www.clivebloom.com/home%20secretary.htm* (cit. 12.02.2016).

from the Ripper years. This new bogeyman was often associated with the East End, and became the focus for renewed calls for a stronger police force.

As a post-script, this idea that the *Half-Holiday* was fitting the Ripper story into a previously-existing discourse can be tested, to a degree, by looking at other comparable publications. A cursory survey reveals that this was a common trend in the penny press. It was most obvious in the case of the ›true crime‹ sensationalist papers, which swerved quite naturally into treating the Ripper as prurient entertainment. The humour publications that were rivals to the *Half-Holiday* followed suit. For example, *Punch*'s take on the situation had much to do with its previous sermonising about urban poverty (the most famous *Punch* Ripper cartoon is by John Tenniel and depicts a ghostly figure hovering over the East End, knife in hand, captioned »The Nemesis of Neglect«). Similarly, *Judy* magazine had been much obsessed with the question of Irish Home Rule, and had often made the point that the Irish were too savage (and primitive) to ever govern themselves: so it was no surprise that when it came time for a cartoon to depict the Ripper, he was portrayed as the typical Irish brute – complete with simian jaw. More systematic research is necessary, but clearly the Ripper was often a symbol for something else.

In conclusion, the coverage of the Ripper murders in the *Half-Holiday*, and especially the October 20, 1888 edition, reveals much about late Victorian culture. Notably, how the murderer was constructed, what his deeds were perceived to mean, and how the ideology of the comic, and of the penny press at large, was reflected. This process took place over time, and the fact of seriality as a mode led to a unique symbiosis between the Ripper and Sloper. The Ripper insinuated himself into people's lives with each new killing; Sloper insinuated himself into people's lives with each new issue. Their meeting had an uncanny inevitability.

Humour was certainly used as a coping mechanism; as a way of neutralising the Ripper's negative energy. The *Half-Holiday* cleverly transformed his attacks on the women into an attack on the community of the East End, and *ergo* into an attack on the comic's community of readers. This fortified the comic's reputation as a ›friend of the reader‹, but meant that the victims were marginalised: the comic was not unsympathetic, but at the same time we would have to wait for another century for the women to be properly acknowledged (and even this is arguable). Within this scenario, Sloper was positioned as the servant of the community – a drunkard and an idiot, yes, but somebody who was not likely to be swayed by subversive political ideas, and who was a believable recruit for the police. In essence, he typified ›the people‹, but only as imagined in their most conservative guise.

Yet, although the penny press, including the *Half-Holiday*, was capable of responding to events with speed, this did not necessarily mean it was coming up with new frameworks to understand those events with a comparable speed. Instead, publications went with ›what they knew‹ and fitted the new story into old templates. From this perspective, the Ripper could be a symbol of misrule, of lawless-

ness, of anarchy. That had a bigger meaning than just positioning him as a murderer, and further explains the comic's lack of interest in his victims. The *Half-Holiday* was thus part of a process of solidifying (mainstream) popular culture's alliance with the state. In the end, Ally Sloper didn't catch Jack the Ripper, and neither did anybody else. The struggle between order and chaos continued.

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