

Donovan, Stephen & Matthew Rubery (eds.), *Secret Commissions: An Anthology of Victorian Investigative Journalism*. London: Broadview Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1-55111-330-2. 311 pages.

Between August and November 1888, the case of the five brutal murders of street prostitutes in Whitechapel, East London, transformed the world of journalism in Britain. The press coverage of what became known as the “Jack the Ripper” story defined the way in which the sensational, shock-and-horror style of reporting of the crime created a new type of narrative in the popular press that continues even today: eye-catching banner headlines, hyperbolic language, human interest focus, on-the-spot illustrations, and an underlying sense of moral outrage.

That such a newspaper style should emerge during the Victorian period in Britain is not surprising. The industrial revolution that transformed the means of factory-based production also created a concomitant social upheaval in the conditions of ordinary people’s lives. The enclosures of the common land in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century forced thousands of farm labourers to migrate to the cities in search of work. The sprawling, unplanned expansion of places like London, Manchester, Glasgow and Newcastle, as well as the unregulated market forces of a laissez-faire capitalism, led to the creation of a new class of industrial workers and even bigger concentrations of urban poor. The existence of these new and volatile categories of slum dwellers produced varying responses of hope, fear and loathing among the political and cultural commentators of the time, with Charles Dickens personifying the conflicting mixture of these reactions, both within literature and journalism. The debate about the condition-of-England question, that is the poverty of the lower classes and the privilege of the ruling classes, continued to haunt the collective Victorian conscience from the beginning to the end of the period. Two distinct and contrasting attempts at documenting these new and disturbing social changes can be found in Friedrich Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), a politically radical investigation of the working class in Manchester, and Charles Booth’s monumental, but more philanthropic *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889-1903).

Stephen Donovan’s and Matthew Rubery’s new anthology of investigative journalism lies between both Engels and Booth chronologically, but also in terms of the differing radical/reformist perspectives and journalistic methods represented. There are 19 newspaper items in all in their collection, some classic by Charles Dickens (“A Sleep to Startle Us” 1852), Henry Mayhew (“Labour and Poor: The Metropolitan Districts” 1849) and W. T. Stead (“The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” 1885), others much less known, although together they make up some of the most remarkable and controversial examples of social reportage from the whole period. Not least the harrowing depictions of slum life and death in George R. Sims’s portrayal of abandoned children in “How the Poor Live” from 1883, and the article on infanticidal, so-called baby-farming, written anonymously by “A. B.” in 1870. The range of areas and subject matter covered

by the anthology give not only an indication of the sweeping ambitions of investigatory journalists in the Victorian era, but also the powerful impact of their reports in providing first-hand, documentary evidence of the crying need for social, political and economic reform: child abuse, unregulated factory labour, exploitative domestic service, homelessness, slum housing, contagious diseases and the total lack of sanitation, punitive workhouses, the plight of gypsies, widespread hunger, backstreet abortions, endemic prostitution, brutal prison conditions, and the wanton cruelty to animals.

The selection of articles and extracts is introduced by a wide-ranging and deeply researched background discussion of the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of investigative journalism, in which the two editors interrogate the nature of the genre itself, its development and cultural significance, linking it to “the same forces of industrialization, urbanization, and social modernity which were facilitating the modern press’s own emergence” (11). Donovan and Rubery are clearly expert guides into the world of Victorian slum reportage.

In 1976, Peter Keating edited what became a classic anthology of Victorian social exploration, *Into Unknown England*. Stephen Donovan’s and Matthew Rubery’s new collection is much more comprehensive, varied and illuminating. It is also a feat of archival research and recovery in its own right. After reading through the anthology, one is at once horrified at the barbaric conditions of Victorian capitalism, and haunted by the present-day prospect of a possible return to those dark days.

*Ronald Paul*