

## **Ireland on Sunday newspaper**

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Double page feature story

### **Was Jack the Ripper Irish?**

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It's a mystery that has fascinated historians, amateur detectives and the world in general for more than a century. For three terrible months in the autumn of 1888, Victorian London was terrorised by the most infamous serial killer of them all. Then, just as quickly as he had appeared out of the Whitechapel fog to claim his victims, Jack the Ripper disappeared.

His identity has never been established. Over the years, doctors, butchers, Polish anarchists, sailors on leave, black magicians, a fish monger, a boot-finisher, a midwife, a Liverpool cotton broker and a royal duke – the dissolute Prince Eddy, eldest son of the future Edward VII, who died of pneumonia aged 28 – have been paraded as suspects. Most recently, renowned crime writer Patricia Cornwell – author of the hugely successful sequence of novels starring the forensic pathologist Dr Kay Scarpetta – spent millions of dollars and, in her own words, ‘stopped having a life’, in an effort to prove that Jack was the distinguished artist Walter Richard Sickert.

Many remain unconvinced. In a recent opinion poll, Ripperologists voted ‘the person most likely to have committed the Whitechapel murders’ to have been an almost forgotten Irishman who was a visitor to London during those three bloodstained months. Francis Tumblety, who, it has recently emerged, was arrested and questioned by Scotland Yard six days after the last Ripper murder in November 1888, is on the face of it an unlikely suspect. He was flamboyant and eccentric, hardly the unremarkable, angry white male loner described today in so many FBI profiles.

In fact, at first blush, Tumblety – a quack doctor, who spent most of his life in America where, bizarrely, he was also briefly a suspect in the murder of Abraham Lincoln – more closely resembled a character in a Charles Dickens’ novel, the blundering buffoon who is constantly tumbling into trouble, than a serial killer.

But significantly, he was a prostitute-hating homosexual who kept a ‘museum’ full of women’s anatomical parts in his home and had the anatomical ‘know-how’ to carry out the grotesque butcherings. He was visiting London at the time of the killings and his name has also been linked to two similar sets of murders – in Jamaica and Nicaragua – that took place just a month after he skipped bail and disappeared.

At the same time, and just as suddenly, the Ripper killings ceased. Amazingly, despite the publication of more than 200 books attempting to solve the riddle, Tumblety’s name remained forgotten by Ripperologists until the discovery in the mid-1990s, of a letter written in 1913 by one of the investigation team, which identified him as a prime suspect. Francis Tumblety, the youngest of 11 children, was born into a poverty-stricken family in Co. Limerick in 1833, where he was described by neighbours as a ‘dirty, awkward, ignorant, good-for-nothing boy...utterly devoid of education and uncared for by his

family'. In 1850, at the age of 18, he took the boat to America to escape a brutish father and the gloom of post-Famine Ireland.

He settled in Rochester, New York, where his entrepreneurial instincts rapidly came to light; as a teenage, he began to sell pornography to canal boat-crews. Then he found work at a small drug store, before moving to Detroit where he set himself up as a 'medical physician', specialising in Indian herbal medicine.

At that time, America was swarming with unscrupulous 'quacks' who made money from the sick and the dying. There is no indication that Tumblety ever attended medical training – or even finished school – but, despite this, he managed to become a prosperous 'doctor', selling his own home-made potions and miracle cures to the rich and the vulnerable.

He moved to Canada, living a flamboyant lifestyle from the proceeds of his trade. Among his best-selling concoctions was a pimple-banishing ointment. Frequently, however, he fell foul of the law and would quickly move location to set up his 'practise' in another area – always one step ahead of the police.

In 1857, he was arrested for attempting to abort the pregnancy of a Montreal prostitute and in 1860, he narrowly escaped prosecution after a patient died while taking medicine he had prescribed. He fled to Boston, where – his Canadian misadventures conveniently forgotten – he built up a thriving practice, travelling across the United States.

Around this time, he began to affect what would become his trademark: he wore a military outfit at all times and rode a white horse, sometimes leading two greyhounds behind him. The moustachioed Irishman published pamphlets about himself and acquired a fortune.

**The police had him but then, amazingly let him go, now Francis Tumblety has been voted as a prime suspect in the Whitechapel murders by a poll of respected Ripperologists**

With the outbreak of the American Civil War, Tumblety moved to Washington and put on the airs of a Union army surgeon, claiming to be friends with Ulysses S Grant and a host of other well-known political figures.

Feelings ran strongly about him. He was despised by some of his self-aggrandising stories, fraudulence and medical incompetence; others admired a man who, although a noted eccentric, was conspicuous for his imposing dress, studied solitariness and aristocratic airs.

In 1865, he was arrested near Washington as a suspect in Lincoln's assassination. It turned out to be a case of mistaken identity and he was quickly released. But, in what historians now say was a turning point in Tumblety's life, his credibility in the US was destroyed. There were increasingly loud rumblings about a darker, more sinister side to him. Asked one night why he had not invited any women to a dinner party he was hosting, he exploded: 'I don't know any such cattle and if I did, I would sooner give you a quick dose of poison than take you into such danger'.

He then invited his guest, an army officer called Colonel CA Dunham, into a 'museum' where he showed him 'a dozen or more jars containing, as he said, the matrices (uteri) of every class of woman'. In a later conversation, Col Dunham asked Tumblety why he hated women so much.

‘He said that when quite a young man, he fell desperately in love with a pretty girl, rather his senior, who promised to reciprocate his affection. After a brief courtship, he married her. The honeymoon was not over when he noticed a disposition on the part of his wife to flirt with other men. He remonstrated, she kissed him, called him a dear, jealous fool – and he believed her.

‘Happening one day to pass in a cab through the worst part of the town, he saw his wife and a man enter a gloomy-looking house. Then he learned that before her marriage, his wife had been an inmate of that and many similar houses. Then he gave up all womankind!’

If any of this account is to be taken at face value, then it sets the mood for the ‘misogynist doctor’ so prevalent in Ripper theory and profiling down the years. But, by now, Tumblety was living what by Victorian standards was an outstandingly open – and therefore extremely dangerous – homosexual lifestyle.

After travelling to Europe, he met the not-yet-famous Sir Henry Hall Caine (then 21) in Liverpool in 1874 and entered into a homosexual relationship with the younger man which lasted until 1876 when Tumblety returned to New York City. There, he aroused suspicion through his ‘seeming mania for the company of young men and grown up youths’.

Back in England in 1888 – the year of the Ripper murders – he once again found himself at odds with the police. That autumn, when the Ripper killings began, he was living in Batty Street in the heart of the East End.

He was known in the district for threatening prostitutes on the streets. He boasted of keeping women’s organs, particularly their wombs, in preserves of vinegar. He wore military style clothing with long dark coats, and often wore a button-down, deerstalker hat similar to the one eyewitnesses said the killer had worn.

### **The letter had the phonetic spelling of someone with or affecting an Irish accent or background**

He insisted that everyone call him ‘Doctor’ and though not a doctor, may have had enough knowledge of anatomy to perform the gruesome mutilations.

At the time of the murders, hundreds of letters (mostly hoaxes) were sent to the police and news agencies associated with solving the case. Only three letters stood out as having any significance whatsoever. The two letters signed ‘Jack the Ripper’ were eventually discounted because the red stains on the paper were found to be red ink rather than blood stains. George Lusk, the head of the Mile End Vigilance Committee in Whitechapel, received the only other letter of significance – most probably written by the killer.

This time, the letter was sent with a parcel containing a portion of a human kidney. And it was this that finally swung police suspicions towards Tumblety.

The letter, post-marked October 16, 1888, was full of spelling mistakes, had no punctuation at all and had the phonetic spelling of someone with, or affecting, an Irish accent or background. Notice the words ‘Sor’, ‘Mishter’ and ‘tother’.

*From Hell*

*Mr Lusk*

*Sor*

*I send you half the Kidne I took one women prasarved it for you tother piece I fried and ate it was very nise I may send you the bloody knif that took it out if you only wate a whil longer*

*Signed*

*Catch me when you can*

*Mishter Lusk*

The letter was copied and posted outside every police station in the hope that someone would recognise the handwriting. A facsimile of the letter was published in all the London daily papers. The portion of kidney accompanying the letter was examined by Dr Thomas Openshaw at the London Hospital. It was found to be a human kidney which had been preserved in spirits of vinegar rather than the formalin fluid used in hospitals. Dr Openshaw indicated that the kidney belonged to a person suffering from Bright's disease which had afflicted the Ripper's fourth victim, Kate Eddowes.

By the time these new facts came to light, Mary Kelly – the last of the Ripper's five victims – had already been butchered on November 9, 1888. Queen Victoria was furious about the murder of Mary Kelly.

'This new most ghastly murder shows the absolute necessity for some very decided action. All these streets must be properly lit, and our detectives improved. They are not what they should be,' she told her Prime Minister.

The Irish girl with long, red hair and slender limbs had been the most savagely disfigured of all the Whitechapel victims. Criminologists believe Tumblety, who never shrank from declaring his hatred of women – especially prostitutes – must certainly have hated the memory of his brutal childhood in Ireland. Kelly, like Tumblety was from Limerick.

Could this 'double trigger' have led to the increased ferocity of the attack?

Several prostitutes came forward claiming Tumblety was the culprit.

Coincidentally, on November 7, at the height of the campaign of terror, he had been arrested on charges of 'acts of gross indecency' against four men – which was Victorian-speak for homosexual activity – around Whitechapel.

But, as the courts and prisons in London were swamped with criminals, Tumblety was released on bail. He was then rearrested and, when questioned by Scotland Yard, could not account for his whereabouts at the times of the slayings.

His landlady came forward to reveal that on the morning of a double murder on September 30, he had left the house hurriedly after asking her to wash his shirt, which was saturated with blood. Tumblety was charged on suspicion of the Whitechapel murders shortly after Mary Kelly's body was found in her lodgings.

Incredibly, after a single court appearance on November 24, Tumblety was released on bail. There is some suspicion, that because he had become wealthy from his 'medical practices', he could easily have bribed the court judge in order to secure his release. He immediately fled to France, from where he was able to return to America.

New York police were waiting for him and it is believed a Scotland Yard detective may have followed him. But the American police said they could not arrest Tumblety because 'there is no proof of his complicity in the Whitechapel murders and the crime for which he was under bond in London (homosexuality) is not extraditable.'

The situation was tense. All of New York knew of Tumblety's whereabouts, thanks to the newspapers, but there was no means of detaining him. Eventually, he disappeared from

his lodgings on December 5, 1888. Interest gradually waned as the years dragged on and he next appears living back in Rochester with his sister in 1893.

Bizarrely, although US newspapers carried dozens of articles on his arrest and escape, there was no coverage of either in the British press. It has been suggested that Scotland Yard wished to keep Tumblety a secret to avoid the embarrassment of having lost their main suspect – particularly now the killings had ceased.

Whatever the case, the story of Francis Tumblety and his suspected involvement in the Ripper murders was to remain a mystery until 1993 when British policeman Stewart Evans – in his spare time, a fanatical Ripperologist – obtained from an antiquarian bookseller a yellowing letter that had been written 25 years after the killings by then Chief Inspector John Littlechild.

Littlechild wrote: ‘One of the main suspects is a quack called Tumblety who was a frequent visitor to Whitechapel at the time of the killings. On these occasions, he was constantly brought to the notice of police, there being a large dossier concerning him at Scotland Yard. Although he was a ‘Sycopathia Sexualis’, he was not known as a sadist, which the murderer unquestionably was, but his feelings of hatred towards women were remarkable and bitter in the extreme, a fact on record.’

In Tumblety’s defence, Littlechild concluded that some factors appeared to disqualify him as a credible suspect: ‘He was 55 years old at the time of the killings, a bit too old, according to some eyewitness accounts. Also, homosexual serial killers usually prey upon their own sex, not the opposite sex.’

Eleven years later, (1903) Francis Tumblety died peacefully in his bed in St Louis – leaving behind him the not inconsiderable fortune of \$65,000 (the equivalent of 1.2m Euro today). He took with him the story of those ghastly three months in the gas-lit underbelly of Victorian England.