Deconstructing a theory

Or, how to be a historian/buzzkill

# Objective

This is an exercise in historical thinking; in how we can employ historical thinking to analyze and assess a historical theory. In this case: assessing the validity of a Jack the Ripper suspect. The skills in this assignment are relevant to assessing research methodologies and sources in other instances as well.

# the suspect: Aaron Kosminski

**Born:** c. 1865

**Died:** 1919

Aaron Kosminski was born in Russian Poland to a Jewish family. They immigrated to London in the 1880s.[[1]](#footnote-1) He found work as a barber in Whitechapel.[[2]](#footnote-2) He was institutionalized in an asylum in 1891 where admission notes state he had been suffering symptoms since 1885. He heard voices, and had delusions about food, and refused to clean himself. The supposed cause of his disease was masturbation. His food delusions led to him being quite thin and malnourished. He died in an asylum at the age of 53.[[3]](#footnote-3)

# the Accusation

Melville Macnaghten was appointed Assistant Chief Constable of the Metropolitan police force in June of 1889.[[4]](#footnote-4) He was therefore deeply knowledgeable about the murders, as the investigation continued for some time after the crimes. In 1894, the *Sun* newspaper reported that a man recently arrested for stabbing young girls was, in fact, Jack the Ripper.[[5]](#footnote-5) Macnaghten was indignant at the idea, and wrote a letter in response outlining his theory of the crime. Known as the [Macnaghten memoranda](http://www.casebook.org/images/memo.pdf), this letter named “Kosminski” as one of three possible prime suspects (alongside Dr. M.J. Druitt and Michael Ostrog).

historical theory. In this case: assessing the validity of a Jack the Ripper suspect.

# the Accusation Redux

Russell Edwards, an enthusiastic amateur historian, claimed to have found concrete DNA proof that **Aaron** Kosminski was the man Macnaghten referred to, and that he was in fact Jack the Ripper.

Edwards’ “smoking gun” starts with a shawl purchased in 2007 at an auction. This shawl was supposedly the same shawl found by the body of Catherine Eddowes in Mitre Square, 1888. Acting Sergeant Amos Simpson had been at the crime scene, and followed the body (and shawl) to the mortuary. According to Edwards, he sought permission from his superiors to take the shawl from the crime scene home to his wife. It was a large silk scarf, and she was a dressmaker.

Again, according to Edwards, Simpson’s wife was not impressed by this macabre act of gallantry, and hid the scarf away in a box. That same shawl then stayed in various storage places, never washed, and was handed down through the Simpson family. In 1991 it’s modern day owner, David Melville-Hayes, donated the shawl to Scotland Yard's Crime Museum. The shawl was not put on display, however.

In 2006, the shawl was tested for DNA. Its results were inconclusive. But Edwards hoped that DNA technology had improved to the point he might have better luck. He found a historic DNA expert at Liverpool John Moores University to help him. Dr. Jari Louhelainen found what he believed was arterial blood, semen, and even a kidney cell on the shawl. He shared these results in Edwards’ 2014 book—nowhere else.[[6]](#footnote-6) These results were then compared with descendents of Kosminski and Eddowes; Edwards gleefully found they were a match.

# questions

The goal here is to start poking holes in the theory. Historians should be skeptical when it comes to their research, and not come to conclusions based on flimsy evidence. What questions can we reasonably ask about the evidence? In other words, why should we be skeptical?

* Macnaghten
  + What questions do we need to know about Macnaghten in order to assess his knowledge of the crime?
  + What information do we need to know about Kosminski?
    - Where could we find such information?
* Redux
  + Think like a lawyer: are there any problems with the shawl itself?
    - How it was kept/stored/handled
    - Proof it was involved in murder?
  + Think like an academic: are there any problems with the DNA test?
    - Do all actions as described sound plausible to the time and place?
    - How much should we trust Macnaghten to provide unbiased information? Was he convinced of Kosminski’s guilt?

# Takeaways from Deconstruction a theory

* What lessons learned from this exercise might be applied to assessing other theories about Jack the Ripper?
* Is it possible to ever conclusively know who Jack the Ripper was?

1. Paul Begg, *Jack the Ripper: The Definitive History* (London: Pearson Education, 2003), 269-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Laura Vaughan, “Mapping the East End Labyrinth,” in Alex Werner ed., *Jack the Ripper and the East End* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. S.K. Lekh, A. Langa, P. Begg, B.K. Puri, “The case of Aaron Kosminski: Was he Jack the Ripper?” *Psychiatric Bulletin* 16 (1992): 786-788, [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 21.Paul Begg and John Bennett, *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Begg, *Jack the Ripper*, 184*n*8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Russell Edwards, *Naming Jack the Ripper* (Pan books, 2014) Kindle edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)