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Dorothy Sayers called William Roughead "the best showman who ever stood before the door of the chamber of horrors," and his true crime stories, written in the early 1900s, are among the glories of the genre. Displaying a meticulous command of evidence and unerring dramatic flair, Roughead brings to life some of the most notorious crimes and extraordinary trials of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and Scotland. Utterly engrossing, these accounts of pre-meditated mayhem and miscarried justice also cast a powerful light on the evil that human beings, and human institutions, find both tempting to contemplate and all too easy to do.

Classic Crimes Details

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From Reader Review Classic Crimes for online ebook

Patrick says

This book is a classic. Roughead wrote of famous (read infamous) crimes that took place in Scotland in the mid to late 19th Century. For those who love British true crime, this a must have reference volume. His coverage of Burke & Hare, the 'body snatchers' who worked the dark streets of Edinburgh is thrilling to read.

Sally says

"One cannot have too much of a good murder", 25 April 2016

This review is from: Classic Crimes (New York Review Books Classics) (Paperback)

Covering twelve major cases from Scotland and England in the 18th and 19th centuries, this is a brilliantly written book. As I started, I did wonder how a work on crimes - some of which are well-documented by other writers - was chosen as a New York Review Book. But the author's pithy turn of phrase and legal know-how add much to his accounts. Thus (in discussing alleged poisoner Madeleine Smith):

"It was through these rusty bars that the white hand of Madeleine was wont to proffer for the refreshment of her unpleasant wooer those midnight cups of cocoa or chocolate, of whose baneful effects he complained to his complaisant confidante, Miss Perry."

Other cases include Burke and Hare, Deacon Brodie, the Road Hill case (recently re-examined in "The Suspicions of Mr Whicher") and the Balham Mystery (also discussed in Elizabeth Jenkins' "Dr Gully"). There are innocents who were jailed through police bungling and undoubted killers who got away with it. Fascinating read.

Bill Kerwin says

Have you watched "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" and discovered—although you enjoy the noir vignettes, tautly directed and sharply written—that its greatest pleasure comes from the persona of its Master of Ceremonies: an arch-cynic masquerading as an Edwardian throwback, a self-important, polysyllabic man whose measured diction and subtle ironies scarcely conceal his macabre delight in each detail of mayhem and murder?

If so, I think you will also enjoy these twelve "true crime" essays. I have always suspected—without a shred of evidence—that Hitchcock's persona was influenced greatly by the prose of William Roughead. At any rate, I am certain Hitchcock must have heard of him, for he was well-known on both sides of the Atlantic in the twenties and thirties, attracting many notable admirers, including Henry James, Dorothy Sayers, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Since I made the Hitchcock comparison, I think it fair to mention that the tone of Roughead is morally superior to that of Hitchcock. (I speak here of Hitch, snide Master of Ceremonies, not Alfred Hitchcock, consummate film director, poet of expiation and obsession.) Although he relishes the gory details, Roughead is no heartless cynic. He uses his irony in the service of moral outrage, and his prose is at its most powerful

when he excoriates the incompetence of investigators, the venality of lawyers, the beastliness of the genuine sociopath.

A Scottish solicitor who preferred writing about law to practicing it, Roughead loved murder trials and attended—and wrote about—virtually every major Scottish murder trial for a period of sixty years. This substantial collection—more than five hundred pages—is a fine introduction to his work. It includes (in addition to an excellent forward by Luc Sante) “The Westport Murders,” his classic account of the crimes of body-snatchers Burke and Hare, as well as the accounts of a maid bludgeoned by her nasty old employer, various poisoned husbands, wives and lovers, two silenced robbery victims, plus the horrific accounts of one baby brother disposed of by razor and one devoted mother dispatched by gunshot—all described in Mr. Roughead's old-fashioned but effective prose.

Roughead's style is best appreciated in context, but I here include three easily culled examples of the greater delights to be found within:

1. *"This fine spirit, housed in a short stout tabernacle of flesh, triumphed over its unromantic casing to the beguilement of its female worshippers: the doctor, a fat little man with a charming manner, had a way with women."* Before the colon, we see the doctor in the inflated way he saw himself; after the colon, the plain truth of the matter.
2. *"When the stones, forty-two in number, were removed, in a cavity beneath the boulder was seen the dead body of a man."* A sentence worthy of Vergil. The order of words follows precisely the order of occurrence and revelation.
- 3) *"I defy a couple, living on the footing here described, of violent opposition and mutual distrust, not to afford their intimates a glimpse of the cat in the marital bag, nor wholly to stifle the cries of that indignant creature."* I love the way he takes a moribund cliché like "let the cat out of the bag," revives it with the addition of the surprising adjective "marital," and concludes his sentence by further animating the cliché-cat with its "cries".

Katherine Addison says

William Roughead was a Scottish lawyer and true crime writer in the first half of the twentieth century. I should confess first of all that I find him compulsively readable, although he may not be to everybody's taste (profoundly influenced by Dickens, check). The twelve essays collected in this book discuss crimes from 1765 to 1926, ranging from the infamous, like Burke & Hare, to the utterly obscure, like Katharine Nairn or John Donald Merrett. I can see his influence quite strongly in Dorothy Sayers (it doesn't hurt that some of the cases he discusses are cases she clearly used as inspiration for her stories, like Madeleine Smith (Harriet is kind of an inversion of Smith in *Strong Poison*) and Dr. Pritchard (quite explicitly, in the opening of *Unnatural Death*)). In those cases where I have found more modern writers with better evidence (e.g., Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, Ruddick's *Death at the Priory*), Roughead is wrong wrong wrong, but I don't even care. I love him for his prose style, I love him for his cheerfully blatant partisanship, and I love him for the way he's trying, even when he's wrong, to piece together the story of what happened.

I have thus far resisted the urge to go to Amazon and just buy all the Roughead I can find, but it's a struggle.

John Bellamy says

No one else comes close: William Roughead was and is the greatest true crime writer of them all. Combining a flowing prose style with an inimitable, pawky sense of humor, he remains the best and most sardonic stylist chronicling human depravity since, well, the authors of the Old Testament put down their styli. By birth a Scot, Roughead became a Writer to the Signet, a privileged position which allowed him to attend and chronicle in print the great murder trials of his era (1870-1952). His books are mostly and shamefully out of print but are well worth seeking in used book stores: both the commercial editions and his volumes in the "Notable British Trials" series. Henry James was one of his many avid fans and even the briefest sample of his prose makes it obvious why true-crime enthusiasts consider him the Master. "Classic Crimes" (which contains chapters on Deacon Brodie, Burke and Hare, Madeleine Smith, Dr. Pritchard, William Palmer and other villainously vintage killers) is the best collection of his work in print and I would be remiss if I did not mention that I owe my introduction to the peerless Roughhead to Toni Morrison, who confessed her Roughead idolatry in a New York Times Book Review piece some quarter century ago. If you like his stuff you'll never be able to get enough of it. (Also worth tracking down are the works of Roughead's friend, American librarian Edmund Pearson, whose "Studies in Murder" is especially worth reading.) As Roughead so eloquently put it: "Murder has a magic of its own, its peculiar alchemy. Touched by that crimson wand, things base and sordid, things ugly and of ill report, are transformed into matters wondrous, weird and tragical. Dull streets become fraught with mystery, commonplace dwellings assume sinister aspects, everyone concerned, howsoever plain and ordinary, is invested with a new value and importance as the red light falls upon each."

Pete says

nothing but a good time, if you are into ornate Scottish prose on 18th century crimes of passion or other kinds of retardation specific to celts in formal dress. My first tentative step into true crime, although it's a NYRB book so i can like, not worry about getting the stinkeye from literate people on the subway.

Jonathan says

If you want a creepy summer read that removes you entirely from this world into the world of the aberrant side of the Victorian psyche, then this is your book.

This book is a fascinating look into some highly sensational murders and trials that took place in Scotland and England in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was written in the late 1920s by William Roughead, who was a lawyer and criminologist. To us, these murders are obscure. To the world of Victoria, these were the Lizzie Borden cases of the day! These are the murders you see in those magnetic and beautiful engravings on the covers of The Police Gazette and The Illustrated London News. Ones with captions like "She knelt in court and wept. 'All I want from them is the return of Helen's head!'"

For example, teenager Constance Kent. Her mother went mad in her corsets and crinolines, and eventually died when Constance was a young teen. The father then married the charming and dependable governess (smoother transition, I daresay!) and they had a batch of precious children who were constantly compared to the first set of children. Not in a good way, either. The second family obviously was better loved. They even

had nicer beds and sleeping arrangements.....Do we wonder that one of the new kiddies ends up in an outhouse with his throat slit?? Ahhh....the well bred Victorian family.

Most of the families preferred the poison method, but there are a few "brain coshings" and implied lesbian lovers in this book, just so one doesn't get bored.

The amazing part of the book is the bungling of evidence and the ad misericordium logic that is applied to these cases. It is truly bizarre. Be glad you live in the age where pigs can fly! :)

The writing is slightly archaic, but it isn't too bad to get through. In my humble opinion this man is a great writer, for any age.

Oh, and truly be careful: Mummy might strip her gears at any minute.....

Nancy Oakes says

This book appeals to my deeply-entrenched fascination with true crimes of the past, and was such a pleasure to read that its 560 pages just flew by in no time. Rarely does a book of nonfiction this large maintain my interest so intently, but for some reason, I hated having to put this one down. And it just goes to show that crime hasn't really changed over the centuries -- the prime motives of murder (sex and money) are timeless. Before I even get to the end here, let me just say that if you are at all interested in famous crimes from times gone by, especially from the UK, this is a book you should consider reading.

The author of this book is William Roughead (1870-1952) a lawyer in Scotland who was quite well known for his interest in the history of crime. He was a contributor to the Notable Scottish Trials and Notable British Trials series, friend to Henry James, and in one famous case of the era (that of Oscar Slater), he joined such notables as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in trying to get justice for what they considered to be a trumped-up case and an incorrect verdict that sentenced a man to death. Roughead does more than chronicle the cases in this book; at many junctures he injects his wit and sarcasm and tries to appeal to his readers' sense of justice in cases where the guilty walked away and the innocent were wrongly convicted. Using the official court documents of each case, he takes the reader through the commission of the crime (with all personalities involved), witness statements, the arrest and trial, and the aftermath. Roughead's version of true crime reporting is nothing at all like some of today's accounts that promise titillating tattle, you know, the ones with the catchy titles and lurid covers -- he offers facts, his opinions and manages to keep the reader interested throughout. As Luc Sante, who introduces this book, notes:

"He is relentlessly discursive, his asides convincingly sounding as if they are being whispered along a bench, and digressive too. But his sense of timing is superb: though he'll take the reader on a walk through the past or through the neighborhood, he will always be back in time for the crucial next question."

There are an even dozen cases in this book, all of which occurred in Scotland, some of which have been well publicized via books, television, and movies, including:

- The case of Madeleine Smith, who was tried for murder in 1857 after her secret lover had been poisoned.
- The case of Burke and Hare, the two grave robbers who eventually resorted to murder to provide bodies to the medical school from 1827-1828
- The case of Constance Kent, the young girl whose father eventually married the governess and had a child with her; Constance confessed some years afterward to killing the boy in a most heinous manner
- The case of Florence Bravo, a young newlywed whose husband died mysteriously from poisoning one night
- The case of Oscar Slater, who was convicted of a brutal murder solely on the basis of a pawn ticket and

mistaken identity

and some I'd not heard of before, including

- The case of Katherine Nairn in the 18th century, suspected of murdering her husband by poison
- The case of Deacon Brodie in the 18th century, respected gentleman by day, burglar by night
- The case of Jessie McLachlan, who was supposed to have killed one of the maids of the Fleming household, and laid the blame on the eldest member of the Fleming family
- The case of Dr. Pritchard, whose wife and mother-in-law both died under very mysterious circumstances, probably at his hands
- One of my favorite cases in this book, "The Arran Murder," in which two men on holiday climb up a mountain and only one comes down
- An incredibly twisted case known here as "The Ardlamont Mystery," involving the mysterious shooting death of a young man and a rather slimy con man of sorts
- The case of John Donald Merrett, who went off to a dance hall while his mother was dying of a shot to the head

Classic Crimes is a treasure trove of true crime and treachery, one of the best I've ever read. I found myself heading to the Internet on several occasions to see if there were other books, television dramas or movies based on any of these cases and threw a few into my Netflix queue and onto my Amazon wishlist. On the flip side of my praise for this book, however, the language throughout is a bit stilted and may turn many readers off. Again, by Luc Sante:

"You can open the book anywhere and light on a random sentence -- for instance, 'The secret marauder came and went without a trace, save for the empty till, the rifled scrutoire, or the displenished plate-chest that testified to his visitation...' The usages herein may often send the reader to the dictionary, sometimes even to the OED."

However, if you can get used to Roughhead's manner of speech, the cases themselves will provide you with hours of entertainment, if true crimes of the past are one of your interests.

Daniel Polansky says

So this was a lot of fun. A collection of true-crime essays, mostly from the 19th century, mostly taking place in Glasgow. Roughhead writes in a style which is at once erudite and readable, and anyone who enjoys outdated slang will have a field day here; I particularly enjoyed Swarfed, meaning fainted, and Kitchen Fee, referring to the ends of leftover food given away to the poor as charity. The crimes are morbid, cruel, and fascinating, lovers poisoning each other slowly with arsenic, the brutal murder of a brother by her half-sister, and Roughhead's discussion of the court cases these crimes give rise to, the frequent incompetence and occasional excellence of the investigators, the fearless disinterest of the accused, the brilliance of some or other lawyer, are a pleasure to read. Recommended if you have any interest in this sort of thing at all.

Tony says

Roughead, William. CLASSIC CRIMES. (This edition pub. 2000). ***1/2. The author was a Scotsman who lived from 1870 – 1952. Reading his work, you might have thought that he had lived and written earlier because of his prose style. During the early 1900s, he was Writer to the Signet – a job that doesn't exist today, but was a support to attorneys of the day in that he described true crimes that had occurred throughout the U.K. – though mostly Scotland – and the subsequent arrest and trial of the presumed criminals. These write-ups would be submitted on a regular basis to the attorney associations throughout Scotland for their edification. Roughead also went back in time and assembled information on earlier famous crimes and recorded them so that we have records of them today. Later, he was the editor of the on-going series, "Notable British Trials." This book collects twelve of his cases for which he pieced together the evidence and trial records. Each of the cases are well documented, and include many that are familiar to modern day mystery fans. This genre of "true crime" has had a long history, and has spawned offshoots in the "false crime (?) crime. Many of the cases presented in this book have been adapted into either plays or novels, and the author refers to them where he knows of them. In all, this is a collection that every crime fan would enjoy – though the archaic prose style of the author does sometimes get in the way.

Chris Nagy says

There are a dozen murder mysteries and their resulting trials covered in this book. All took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Scotland. What makes these real stories so unique is that all of them contain things almost unbelievable, from the behavior of the characters to the verdicts handed down. Justice is a hard-won battle and then as now it isn't won but lost and turned upside-down. Too many of these cases went the wrong way, but in its terribleness is a lot of fun reading.

The author, William Roughead wrote in a somewhat archaic style for being written in the twentieth century. It feels more like early nineteenth-century prose, but I love that inflated style. Roughead was a friend of Henry James and corresponded with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle so it is no surprise that these real-life stories take on a very literary quality.

I loved this book. I just there was more of it.

Highly recommended.

Undine says

Like his friend and fellow amateur criminologist Edmund Pearson, Roughead brought an elegance, tastefulness, and humor to his analyses of even the most revolting crimes. Roughead's writing style was strictly out of the 18th century, which may put off some modern readers, but I find it charming. One so seldom sees this sort of literate, careful writing nowadays.

Although this particular book does not show any examples of this, Roughead occasionally moved away from the true-crime genre to write about Scottish literature, history, and odd characters from his country's past. They make for delightful reading.

Dave says

True crime stories from the Victorian and Edwardian era. Roughead is a bit florid in his descriptions--to say the least--but the best of these tell the story clearly, with only a modicum of side issues and purple passages.

The last two are the best: Mrs. Merrett and her son, which is affecting, and the Oscar Slater story, the injustice of which is unbelievable; it would make a great movie. Worst are the ones where the personal reminiscences, worship of the lawyers and judges, and exhaustive tendencies get the better of him--my least favorite is the longest. Oh, and the creepy one where he and Henry James drool after a murderess. Ick.

Luc Sante's intro to the volume is terse and perceptive. Made me want to read his own stuff.

Jess Nauright says

fun and witty. full of scots and gossip. (you will learn a lot about scottish criminal procedure!) (and this is more interesting than it sounds. e. g. witnesses' statements are called PRECOGNITIONS. that is....poetic. the scottish jury can return three possible verdicts: guilty, not guilty, and NOT PROVEN. which really blew my mind. provincial american that i am.)

i enjoyed the hell out of this book but i really can't say why. it's just peculiar good writing. i am tempted here to make an analogy to single malt scotch.

Laura says

If you're a true crime buff, you should check this one out. It's written in a sort of high Edwardian style that most of the true crime buffs among us won't expect -- we're used to Ann Rule going, "And he hated women. *Truly* hated women. He killed them. Killed them...dead" and so forth. So this is a refreshing change. Roughead's writing style is a lot of florid fun, probably even for people who aren't genre buffs.
