

Book Review: A Fiery and Furious People: A History of Violence in England by James Sharpe

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In *A Fiery and Furious People: A History of Violence in England*, James Sharpe draws on a wide range of primary source materials to give the reader a vivid insight into England's criminals and criminal system from the medieval period to the present day. As Sharpe outlines how society's attitudes towards different forms of violence have changed throughout the centuries, Katherine Williams focuses on the book's particular treatment of sexual violence against women and the gendered perceptions of its victims in both the media and wider society.

A Fiery and Furious People: A History of Violence in England. James Sharpe. Penguin Random House. 2016.

Find this book: 

Readers should be aware that this review references acts of sexual violence.

The mysterious death of Roger Crockett in 1572 is our introduction to James Sharpe's lengthy work on the history of violence in England, *A Fiery and Furious People*. Crockett, the owner of an inn in Cheshire, met his unfortunate end when local rivalries led to him being hit over the head with a staff by a person or persons unknown. The book is peppered with such case studies, showing the reader how trivial disputes often ended in someone's death, something not considered that unusual throughout the medieval period. This was compounded by the fact that a lot more people carried weapons, as the unfortunate Crockett was to discover.

Violence is a major cause for concern in modern history, and public unrest in particular is considered something of an anomaly in the UK (for example, the riots of 2011). However, as Sharpe points out, as a society we are simultaneously fascinated and appalled by violence, and typically watch it in some form or another everyday on our screens. The question of whether humans have some innate propensity to commit acts of violence has been debated since biblical times, and the term 'violence' itself is a tricky one to unpack.

As Sharpe notes, there is no shortage of theories regarding violence, and he subscribes to two: evolutionary psychology and the concept of the civilising process as developed by sociologist Norbert Elias. The 'civilising process' is worth mentioning in particular. The concept describes how the emergence of sovereign state powers was due to a monopolisation of force on the part of macro-level institutions such as the military. Therefore, individuals on the micro-level will veer towards empathy for others: thus, 'civil society' is born as feudal territories consolidate into larger kingdoms with social infrastructure that promotes cooperation between groups. While the ultimate goal of *A Fiery and Furious People* is to shed light on long-term changes and patterns of violence, as Sharpe rightly points out the history of violence is also the history of individuals, whose stories are told throughout the book.

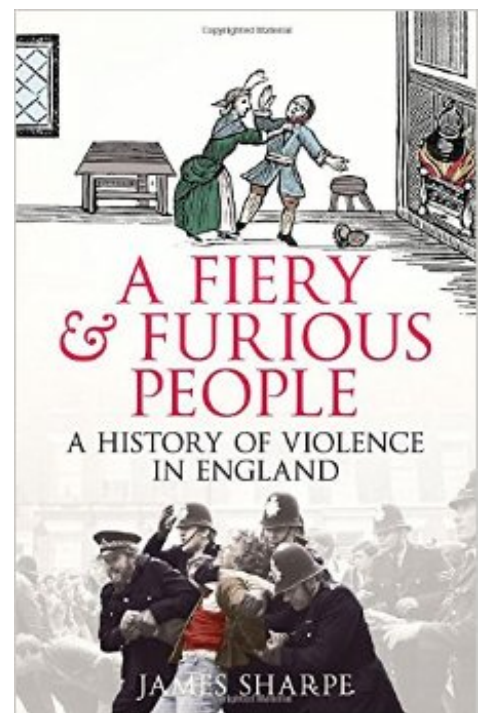




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The book is comprised of three principal sections: “No man was sure of his life”: England in the Middle Ages; “A polite and commercial people”: From the Tudors to the Victorians; and “Violence is always on the agenda”: The Modern Age’. Subsequent chapters cover a wide range of topics from duelling, infanticide, organised crime and capital punishment to football hooliganism. This review shall focus on just two of the many violent crimes discussed in Sharpe’s book: rape and serial killing, in particular the gendered perceptions of the victims in both the media and society at large.

Chapter Fifteen, ‘Women and Sexual Violence’, provides insight into how the crime of rape has been perceived throughout the centuries. The chapter begins with a discussion of Susan Brownmiller’s ground-breaking *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975). Brownmiller states that ‘her purpose in this book has been to give rape its history, now we must deny it a future’. Brownmiller argued that rape in itself is not a sexual act but an innately violent one: ‘a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear’. Brownmiller’s book has been widely challenged; Sharpe himself believes that rape is, in fact, a multi-faceted crime for which there must be some sexual motivation, although in his consideration of biological explanations behind the occurrence of rape, he does reject them as being just as dogmatic as Brownmiller’s. However, if readers consider Brownmiller’s theory that rape is an act of power, then we can begin to expose the ‘men-can’t-help-themselves’ trope as something of a fallacy, and one which ultimately lets perpetrators off the hook.

In terms of its history, Sharpe notes that the first legal pronouncements on rape were in Alfred the Great’s legal code circa the ninth century. A system of compensation was developed based on the social status of the victim, with virginity central to the ‘worthiness’ of the claim. The fact that women were and arguably still are judged as to whether they are suitably victimised is laid bare in Brownmiller’s argument: when women are treated as objects in society, then society considers them to be intrinsically worthless as objects are used as their owners see fit. Regardless of the reader’s own stance on Brownmiller’s radical feminism, I would argue that the exposure of hidden dynamics of power is central to any discussion of the status of women throughout history (I would recommend *The Creation of Patriarchy* by Gerda Lerner for more on this particular topic). Despite its ambivalence surrounding the innate causes of rape, Chapter Fifteen does pay lip service to several diverse theories surrounding its prevalence throughout the ages. The author concludes that it is a fact of contemporary life, albeit one now viewed in a different light, particularly in judicial terms. However, as the rape conviction rate in England and Wales today stands at a mere [7.5% of](#)

recorded allegations (despite the doubling of reported rapes in the last four years), one wonders if societal perceptions have changed that much.

Society's responses to female victims of crime is a theme further explored in Chapter Sixteen, 'The Serial Killer: A Very Modern Murderer'. The author begins the chapter by exploring historical precedents such as Jack the Ripper and Mary Ann Cotton. Such examples, Sharpe argues, tend to be part of a wider folklore, and in some cases, exist to this day (for example, the identity of Jack the Ripper remains something of a national obsession). Sharpe believes that the anecdotal evidence available can support the claim that serial killings increased in the late Victorian era, but rightly asks: how many other killers have gone undetected throughout history? Women who kill like Cotton tend to be seen as exceptional figures (see also *The Subject of Murder* by Lisa Downing), whereas male killers have been elevated to something akin to celebrity status. Peter Sutcliffe (aka The Yorkshire Ripper) was eventually convicted of thirteen murders, all of whom were women and most of whom were working as prostitutes, following a deeply flawed investigation.

The gendered dimension to both the crimes and the subsequent investigation are difficult to ignore. The numbers are mind-boggling: 260,000 people questioned; 32,000 statements taken; 5,400,000 car registrations noted; paper records spanned 24km; and all at a cost of six million pounds. Sutcliffe himself was interviewed nine times. The testimonies of surviving victims were ignored because they were not working as prostitutes, even though some of Sutcliffe's eventual victims were not either. If one similarity can be drawn between the case of Jack the Ripper and Sutcliffe, it is clear that the authorities were inadequately prepared for such a case, and that the victims were treated as expendable because of their social status. Sharpe also considers Sutcliffe's motives behind his terrible crimes. One theory has it that his controlling mother was to blame; another that he became obsessed with visiting brothels after a fall-out with a girlfriend. Both of these lay the blame squarely, and unfairly, at the feet of women. But, as Sharpe notes, one gets the impression that Sutcliffe killed because he could, and women working as prostitutes were easy targets as no-one cared too much about them; it could, in fact, be the case that Sutcliffe is simply a violent misogynist.

A Fiery and Furious People offers the reader a vivid and interesting insight into the history of violence in England. From domestic violence to serial killers, football hooligans and mass uprisings, the book uses a vast array of primary source materials, such as assizes, pamphlets, novels, flyers and contemporary media, to try to give the reader an impression of prevailing social attitudes towards violence from the medieval period through to the Victorian era and beyond. Whilst it can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint Sharpe's precise stance in *A Fiery and Furious People*, the book does not shy away from discussing theories considered controversial, and gives a broad overview of the topics at hand. The bibliography of the book also offers readers the chance to further explore the subjects discussed, should they wish to do so.

Katherine Williams graduated from Swansea University in 2011 with a BA in German and Politics. She received a distinction for her MA dissertation on the motivations of women involved in ethno-national liberation movements. Her academic interests include feminist methodologies and political theory, memory and reconciliation politics, and gender in IR. You can follow her on Twitter: @polygluttony. [Read more reviews by Katherine Williams.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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