

ROGUE SCHOLAR





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ROGUE SCHOLAR



The Sinister Life and Celebrated Death of Edward H. Ruloff

RICHARD W. BAILEY

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Endsheets: Bird's-eye view of Binghamton, Broome County, New York, 1873.
Courtesy of the Broome County Historical Society.



**For the victims
and
those who loved them**

Preface

Since the beginning of national news, America has thrilled to a “trial of the century” nearly every decade. In the first three months of 1871, that trial was ordinary enough: a proceeding about the incidental murder of a clerk during the botched robbery of a store.¹ On its face, it hardly mattered beyond the limits of Broome County, New York. In the small city of Binghamton, the county seat, it had not even been the sole crime of the night of August 19–20, 1870, for that same evening a young man’s nearly empty purse was stolen by a thief who knocked him to the ground and ran away. In another incident, toward morning, a despairing young prostitute poisoned herself under mysterious circumstances.

Crimes fit the times. But for them to do so, raw events need to be shaped into a story, and, to capture the imagination of the public, interpreters must gather powerful ideas and weave them into a compelling tale. In our own era, trials of the century have been elaborated out of our collective fears. In a different time, the deeds that enthrall us would have mostly passed unnoticed or, if noticed, attached to some other narrative entirely. We cannot imagine Timothy McVeigh as a murderer of the 1930s nor Bruno Richard Hauptmann as a killer in the 1990s.

Crimes in themselves hold almost no intrinsic interest: a young man shot in the back of the head dies, and there’s an end on it. But in our case, the man gripping the handle of the gun took hold of both his victim and the imagination of the public. His narrators were many, but the principal reporters were two, both of whom wrote book-length biographies from the substance of their daily journalism.

One was from New York City—a “dapper Bohemian” who wore yellow gloves on his visits to the Binghamton jail. His paper was the *New York Times*, just another city paper given to lurid reporting in the days before Adolph Ochs. Edward Crapsey thought of the people of Broome County as rubes, and he did not conceal his contempt in writing for his

big-city newspaper. His reporting on the Binghamton trial was reductive: the killer of the clerk was a brute, a fraud, and a sinner. The sooner he was done to death the better. Crapsey's book was supposed to appear just after the criminal was hanged, but the villain pursued yet one more of many niggling and legalistic appeals past the publication date, so the book lacked its last chapter, the story of the gurgling sound as the hangman's trap dropped him into space and the attending physicians pronounced him dead. People in Binghamton didn't like Crapsey much, even those who agreed with him.²

The other reporter was a local boy just starting in the newspaper business. He could not have known of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*—it had appeared in Russian only five years earlier and was only much later translated into English—but he caught the idea of that novel in presenting the case as one involving a criminal intellectually sensitive and morally numb. The murder was, he thought, a sudden impulse involving madness and perhaps reduced blame. This reporter's name was Edward Hamilton Freeman, known to his friends as Ham. On his visits to the jail, Ham wore ordinary clothes and spoke in the accents of Binghamton. Just before the execution, he kissed the killer on the mouth and was thrust from his embrace when there was no capsule of poison or sharp blade delivered with his tongue.³ Ham fully acknowledged their intimacy. His book appeared just after the hanging was done and the body buried. Ham was smart enough to sell the republication rights to someone who thought that the trial of the century would continue its fascination and sales. (It did not.) People in Binghamton liked him. As "one of the editors and proprietors of the 'LEADER,'" Ham was one of their own.

The murderer was Edward Howard Rulloff. He was a man waiting (and wanting) to be known, to have yarns spun about him, to become memorable.

There were reporters other than just Ed and Ham to tell the tale, of course, and all of them arranged circumstances into different narratives. Ed Crapsey had everything figured out: the man was a mountebank. Ham Freeman was not so certain, but, if some later theories of psychology had been available, he would have seized them. As it was, he made do with popular ideas about insanity. Another journalist, Oliver Dyer of the *New York Sun*, made Rulloff's quest for the origin of language the leitmotif of the murder. Dyer was willing to entertain the idea that Rulloff had unlocked the secret of an ancient mystery. He believed

that marvelous benefits might follow from this discovery, and his coverage of the case almost single-handedly brought Ruloff's intellectual side to national attention. The proprietor of the local paper in Ithaca, New York, gave another angle to his newspaper stories. For a quarter century, Ruloff the murderer had been the scourge of the district, and the accounts written under the editorship John Selkreg in the *Journal* gave a historical perspective on the story.

Other writers had biological determinism on their minds: believing that nature had created a criminal, they set by science, to prove that Ruloff was a "natural" killer.⁴

Still others had literary analogies to offer: Milton's Satan was one—the brilliant rebel against high obligation; Byron's Manfred was another—defiant against inexorable fate. In mid-nineteenth-century America, literature was the coin of conversation. Americans were readers—and rememberers. The apt quotation and the telling allusion were scattered through every discourse.

The visual artists drew lurid images of the killing and marketed them in the sensational papers: that clerk at the moment of death; the drowned accomplices splayed on planks against a barn in the broiling August sun. Lurid instant books, with illustrations, found a ready if ephemeral market.⁵

Every newspaper across the country could tell the story and could tell it in what was almost real time. In San Francisco, the news that there was "no hope" reached Ruloff's brother in his morning paper at about the time of the execution. Technology and the telegraph enabled reporters to create a national narrative out of murder.⁶

Every American knew about the death of that clerk in Binghamton, New York, and everyone knew what to think about it—even if they did not think the same thing. The newspapers told them what to think. Editors considered whether a very intelligent murderer should be put to death as rapidly as a doltish one. Most agreed he should. In fact, intelligent murderers should be dealt with more swiftly, if anything, since they did not have privation or stupidity to mitigate their crimes. For such editors, it was galling to find that some English papers jeered at Americans for wanting to delay executions in the hope that arcane theories would be properly written up by condemned scholars like Ruloff. "We are as ready to execute our intelligent criminals as any country on earth," American editors and reporters patriotically claimed. We are like other civilized and moral nations.

PREFACE

More than that: America was a democracy and thus as ready to hang a genius as a fool.

But long after the execution there remained a mystery.

Who, exactly, was this particular criminal—the man with the gun in the dry goods store? Which was he: genius or fraud? Calculating murderer or pitiable lunatic?

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