

Killing for Company: Case of Dennis Nilsen

Brian Masters



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On February 9th, 1983, Dennis Nilsen was arrested in connection with the uncovering of human remains in a manhole outside his home in Cranley Gardens, Muswell Hill. Within the next few days Nilsen confessed to a total of fifteen murders which he committed over a period of four years. Only two of his victims had ever been reported as missing, and certainly not one had occasioned a murder hunt. Never had any of Nilsen's colleagues at the Job Centre of the Manpower Services Commission in Kentish Town or his co-tenants had any cause for suspicion about his behaviour. It is vital that we try to comprehend such catastrophes rather than turn in horror from them, if we are to discover how to avert their repetition. We must examine the sort of society it is in which fifteen men can disappear practically unnoticed. We must attempt to fathom the conditions which transform an apparently mild-mannered man into a brutal killer. Brian Masters is in a unique position to address these questions. Sanctioned by the Home Office, he has had free access not only to Nilsen's extensive personal journals, but also to Nilsen himself. It is extremely rare for a murderer to talk about himself as frankly and exhaustively as Nilsen has: his prison archive is an unprecedented document in the history of criminal homicide. Masters has made discriminating use of this unusual cooperation and articulacy, corroborating the murderer's memory and retrospection by researches in to outside sources, to produce a document as illuminating as it is chilling. The forlorn life of Nilsen - his all but loveless childhood, his gradual and fatal obsession with the sexuality of death, the increasing isolation of his adulthood, the heavy drinking this resulted in, the horrific squalor of his existence at the time of his arrest - is compellingly drawn and scrupulously examined. As desperate and dismal the inner world of Nilsen was the world from which he drew his victims - the unseen London of casual sexual encounters, of down-and-outs and drifters with no one to miss them. Killing for Company is the story of how these two worlds came into collision. As such, it must stand as one of the most remarkable and accurate accounts ever written of the singular relationship between a mass murderer and a society.

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