Mary’s husband, a collier by the name of Davies, was killed in the early 1880s in an explosion in a coalmine in Wales, though it is unclear which one. There were some Davies among the names of the 102 men who died in the catastrophe that occurred at Pen-Y-Graig, just before Christmas in 1880, when the ventilation fans began sending explosive gases back down into the mine. It was joined by at least a dozen fatal mine explosions in Wales alone between 1879 and 1882, which killed well over 300 people.1 Neither can we say for sure how Mary, about nineteen years old at the time, felt about the death of her husband; we can only assume that it was devastating for her. Estranged from her immediate family, she went to live with a cousin in Cardiff, and it seems that it was there that she learned, probably through her cousin’s prior involvement in prostitution, that a young, bright and attractive woman could earn a fair amount of money selling sexual acts.2

In 1884, Mary moved to London, settling somewhere in the west of the metropolis, where she made a living in whole or in part through prostitution; initially in the lucrative West End, and later, for a time, in Paris. But, by choice, by necessity or by direction, Mary eventually ended up in the East End, living at first at a suspected brothel on the Ratcliffe Highway. As she moved around the area, she became a well-known figure in her neighbourhood, thought of as pleasant and mild-mannered. In 1887, she met Joseph Barnett, a dock worker and porter at the Spitalfields fish market, and elected to live with him. He found work, and they found rooms. But, in what was a familiar story for working-class Londoners, especially casual labourers, at the time, low pay and unstable employment meant that soon the couple were visiting the pawn shop and ‘shooting the moon’, moving from room to room and dodging rents that were in arrears.3 They quarrelled when Mary began to allow friends who worked as prostitutes to stay with them on cold nights; Joe left Mary, and it seems she turned back to prostitution herself.

Mary’s is one story among thousands. There was also Lydia Harvey, a poor photographer’s assistant who in 1910 embarked with her pimp from New York City for London....
Zealand on a passenger liner to Buenos Aires, later to be found ill and lonely on the streets of London. Harvey’s story lies in contrast to that of Nellie Thompson, a young woman who in 1885 testified to having received one or two pounds from her madam each time she saw a client, while living in St John’s Wood. Then there was Leah ‘Stilts’ Hines, who worked as a prostitute in the interwar years, walking the streets of Soho in very high-heeled shoes; and Marthe Watts, who moved from her native Paris around the brothels of France, Spain and Italy until finally coming to London, where she became entangled with the exploitative Messina ‘family’ during the Second World War. The police files, Home Office documents, court records, papers of rescue homes and philanthropic societies, and the published investigations and memoirs that furnish this study are peppered with the fragments from such women’s lives.

Yet, even when a great deal (relatively speaking) is known about women who worked as prostitutes, there is so much left unknown in their stories. Mary, the widow of the miner, is an excellent example of this, for she is Mary Jeanne Kelly, the last victim of the serial murderer known as ‘Jack the Ripper’. It is safe to say that Kelly’s life has been scrutinized more than that of any other woman selling sex in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century London. Police interviewed witnesses; the coroner’s inquest sought the testimony of her former lover Joseph Barnett, her neighbours and her friends. The press investigated her family; the coroner analysed her body – her breasts, her thighs, her uterus – which had been badly mutilated. We know the precise dimensions and furnishings of her little room in Milner’s Court; we even know the song she was singing a few hours before she died (it was ‘A Violet from my Mother’s Grave’). We can also see the enormous transformations in her life brought by the passage of only four years, a scale of change which much of social history is ill-equipped to detect.

All this, and still so little is known about her, and less still is known about other women. An exception here is Marthe Watts, whose autobiography *The Men in My Life* (1960) represents the only authentic autobiographical account I have been able to find written by a woman who had worked as a prostitute before the 1960s. Yet even this autobiography is problematic: while frank and unsensational, Watts’s reminiscences are nonetheless stylized, edited and designed for popular readership. Indeed, there is good reason to suspect that they were in fact ghost-written as part of what was by the time of the book’s publication a healthy industry of true-life crime writing. Though the almost banal nature of the memoir suggests that it may not have strayed too far from her life story, her experiences of high-class prostitution as part of an organized criminal syndicate tell us little about many other women. No individual story, after all, can be said to be representative of such a diverse group of people involved in something as variable as commercial sex.

Throughout the book, I have endeavoured to make the most of this diversity, and of the fragments of women’s experiences, voices and lives that