

Criminals and the Criminal Justice System

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Nor should we imagine that Victorian streets were safer than ours: quite the contrary. There had been anarchy before the advent of modern law enforcement (beginning with the found-

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ing of the Metropolitan Police in 1829), and it took several decades to bring both manpower and methods to a level of efficiency that made them effective. Cities abounded-- as readers of Dickens will know-- with pickpockets, kidnapers, confidence tricksters and assorted criminals who made it their business to prey on the gullible, the young and the weak. The struggle to live was so desperate for the poorest that anything might be stolen from those who were not careful. There was a practice, for instance, of luring lone children off the streets and stripping them of their clothes to sell-- there were, in other words, entire sub-species of criminal that have thankfully since become extinct. In the centre of cities there were whole districts that it would be dangerous to enter in daylight and suicidal at night. Anyone leaving London's Drury Lane Theatre late in the evening would have to hail a cab at once. The surrounding alleys teemed with men waiting to rob those who set out to walk the few yards to the Strand.

The suburbs were not necessarily safer. Street lighting was poor, and there were numerous opportunities for attackers to lurk in shrubbery or on waste ground. In 1862-- during what was perhaps the decade of greatest elegance, and therefore the one that most typifies the 'mid-Victorian calm'-- there was a much-publicized outbreak of suburban mugging known as 'garrotting'. This was carried out by groups of three. Two would surround a victim, pinioning his limbs while a third-- known as 'the nasty man'-- applied pressure to prevent resistance. A magazine article described the process:

The third ruffian flings his arm around the victim, striking him smartly on the forehead. Instinctively he throws his head back, and in that moment loses every chance of escape. His throat is fully offered to his assailant, who instantly embraces it with his left arm, the bone just above the wrist being pressed against the

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'apple' of the throat. At the same moment the garrotter, dropping his right hand, seizes the other's wrist, and draws his back upon his breast and there holds him. His burden is helpless from the first moment, and speedily becomes insensible.

Though this probably occurred less frequently than the newspapers implied, it still represented a notably vicious outbreak of premeditated crime, and for a time brought fear to the comfortably off. In 1898, during another decade that is popularly associated with confident complacency, there was a rash of gang violence so severe that a new term-- 'hooligan'-- was invented to describe those responsible. Like the skinheads, 'hoodies' and similar groupings of a later century, hooligans were instantly recognizable by their dress. It was described by a newspaper:

No hat, collar or tie is to be seen. All of them have a peculiar muffler twisted around the neck, a cap set rakishly forward, well over the eyes, and trousers very tight at the knee and very loose at the foot [what would later be called 'flares']. The most characteristic part of their

uniform is the substantial leather belt heavily mounted with metal. It is not ornamental, but then it is not intended for ornament.

The response to this was a penal system that was both harsh and humane. It included transportation to Australia (until 1867), flogging in prison (though a doctor was present, and could stop the punishment if the victim were suffering too much) and the wearing of masks by prisoners to prevent them recognizing each other. Child criminals were incarcerated with adults and given the same punishments. In some sample cases seen at Wandsworth Prison in 1872, fourteen-year-old Wil-

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liam Trimmer was sentenced to ten days' hard labour and five years in a reformatory for stealing two bottles of lemonade. James Hempson, a year younger, received four days' hard labour and ten strokes of the birch for purloining a box of figs. James Leadbeater was given a whipping and four days' labour for the theft of celery worth a shilling, and John Morrells twenty-one days' hard labour for stealing a glass worth sixpence. It was widely felt that sentences for serious criminals were not sufficiently harsh, and the return to the streets of paroled ('ticket-of-leave') prisoners was seen as dangerous folly. The 'ticket-of-leave man' was a particular bogey.

The Victorians were as afraid of crime as any people before or since. One reason for their preoccupation was-- as we have found in our own age-- that better communications mean more incidents are reported. A climate of fear, fed, in their case, by journals of the *Police Gazette* variety, could create periodic hysteria. In fact, Victorian law enforcement was highly effective. Prior to the Queen's accession the Army had been used as a matter of course to quell civil unrest. That this became extremely rare during her reign indicates how successful the police were in maintaining order.

Serious crime was no better or worse than was to be expected among a crowded and expanding population that experienced both frequent recessions and the temptations of flaunted wealth.

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