

## Artful Dodgers: Youth and Crime in Early Nineteenth-Century London

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John Springhall

In the last 25 years or so the social history of crime, and more recently of juvenile delinquency, has taken enormous strides both in Britain and elsewhere. The book under review is a well-crafted example of the outpouring of studies on English nineteenth-century crime. Starting out as a doctoral thesis on the history of juvenile crime in Middlesex (1790-1850), the author has successfully converted her research into a readable monograph, published by the Royal Historical Society, on the process of becoming delinquent in Dickensian London. Hence *Artful Dodgers* offers an approach to its subject matter far more rigorous than that of recent popular histories like Donald Thomas' *The Victorian Underworld* (1998), a reread of familiar sources like Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Walter's *My Secret Life*, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour* and various parliamentary blue books which helped to create the exaggerated concept, perpetuated by Thomas, of a Victorian 'criminal class'.

For an overview of academic research on the history of British juvenile crime, let me recommend a recent special issue, 'Histories of Crime and Modernity', of the *The British Journal of Criminology* (Vol. 39, No. 1, 1999), edited by Andrew Davies and Geoffrey Pearson and available from Oxford University Press. This contains, among others, an article by Heather Shore on juvenile crime and the criminal 'underworld' in the early nineteenth century; Shani D'Cruze on how local courts dealt with violence against women in mid-nineteenth century Middleton, Lancashire; and Andrew Davies on young women, gangs and violence in late Victorian Manchester and Salford. Roger Hood and Kate Joyce provide oral testimonies on crime and social change in the East End of London and members of the Centre for Social History at the University of Lancaster present findings on crime migration and social change in north-west England and the Basque country. The aim of this excellent special issue, building on the detailed historical case studies of delinquency and policing that first saw the 'take off' in crime history, is one of consolidation, 'both by bringing together new research on the history of crime, and hopefully by stimulating further interchange

between historians and criminologists through the pages of the *British Journal of Criminology* and elsewhere' (p. 2). We are also promised the publication of an excellent international conference on 'Becoming Delinquent: European Youth, 1650-1950' held in April 1999 at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge University, one of the organizers of which was the author of the book under review.

In the mid-1980s, when I was researching *Coming of Age*, a book on the history of adolescence in Britain since 1860, my chapter on the adolescent and crime suffered considerably from the absence of suitable secondary sources by historians, apart from a few articles, which could assist me in tracing how and when juvenile misbehaviour became recognized as a threat to social order, then was criminalized and institutionalized. To make up for the prevailing paucity of studies of juvenile crime by the new breed of social historians, I fell back on primary sources such as the evidence collected by the diligent Edwin Chadwick for the 1839 report of the commissioners (of which he was one) appointed to inquire into setting up an efficient county constabulary force in England and Wales (Chadwick's papers are in University College, London). Also useful was Mary Carpenter's influential *Reformatory Schools for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes and for Juvenile Offenders* (1851) and the records of Feltham Industrial School held in the Greater London Record Office, plus the late Raphael Samuel's *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (1981). The resulting piecemeal chapter would have benefited considerably from access to a monograph such as the one under review.

The last named historian also put me on to a unique source in the Home Office papers at the Public Record Office in London which Heather Shore has used far more thoroughly: interviews conducted with juvenile offenders circa 1836 by Mayhew-like investigator William Augustus Miles on board the juvenile hulk *Euryalus* at Chatham, sometimes as part of the same constabulary commission mentioned above but also on his own initiative. [In a footnote we learn that during the 1840s Miles became superintendent of the Sydney police in New South Wales but lost his place in 1848 on account of being drunk on duty!] Dr. Shore has also made good use of the Old Bailey sessions papers, from 1834 the printed proceedings of the Central Criminal Court. Back in 1986, I concluded that the emergence of the stage of life, adolescence, and the legal concept of juvenile delinquency were mutually reinforcing. Also that changes in police practices, legislation and shifts in public perception of crime, made it problematic for the historian to produce a consistent definition of what actually constitutes 'delinquency' in British society over time (*Coming of Age*, p. 189). I am now persuaded by the book under review that 'whilst there has always been an awareness of youthful delinquency, it was only in the early nineteenth century that a clearly identifiable label, the "juvenile offender", emerged and became embedded in the social and political lexicon' (p. 8).

*Artful Dodgers* moves assuredly from the 'invention' of the juvenile delinquent, via among other determinants Carpenter's 'perishing' and 'dangerous' juveniles, to the debate on whether or not juvenile crime was genuinely rising in the early nineteenth century. Several chapters on 'processes' then examine the juvenile offender's home and street-life or leisure, not untypical of most working-class children, and the pattern of offending and journeying into the justice system. Larceny was the most common juvenile offence, often dealt with by summary conviction from a magistrate. In the years 1797-1847 covered by the dataset of the Middlesex criminal registers which Shore provides, of the children aged 16 and under indicted, never fewer than 85 per cent were convicted for some sort of larceny. Many of the children cited in the Miles interviews and other sources for the voice of the delinquent reflect those who had been much more effectively criminalized, such as boys appearing at the Old Bailey or awaiting transportation on board the *Euryalus* hulk, or in Newgate, Tothill Fields and, later, Parkhurst. Subsequent chapters look at debates over punishment, whether sending offenders to voluntary refuges or for transportation, and acquittals, death or imprisonment. Finally, there is a chapter on transportation and potential reformation through colonial emigration.

To clothe with flesh the dry bones of academic discourse, such as statistical analysis of the rapid rise in the number of London juveniles formally indicted in the courts or dealt with summarily during this period, Dr. Shore has attempted to humanise juvenile offenders as people, or as children, and not merely as objects of moral or penal policy-making. She points out, perhaps self-evidently, that the subjects of historical research, whether working, middle or upper class, whether children or adults, had an existence, an identity, a name (p.

150) but is also aware that recent work on the history of crime has already begun to rectify the anonymity of statistics, viz. Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged* (1991), Victor Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree* (1994), and much recent postgraduate work. If Shore exaggerates the novelty of giving voice to the juvenile offender (surely others have tried before, if less systematically?) this is excusable, given her own tireless research. She does her best, given the limitations of the sources, to impart a sense of lived experience, and to ask fundamental questions about who the children caught up in the London (or urban Middlesex) criminal justice system were and where they came from. How did they work and play? How did they view their capture, trial and the punishments that awaited them?

For the historian, as opposed to the novelist, to catch hold of some of the essence of past lives means reliance on the surviving sources and the ability 'to sit back, to try not to bend them into the desirable shape, but to let them tell their own story' (p. 12). An admirable injunction. None the less, the sources are themselves recognized as a problem, presenting a particular construction of criminality, dependent on time and place, on political or economic rationales and the agendas of their creators. 'Yet within these constructions the voice of the poor can be teased out and captured' (p. 12). Investigation of the workplace, home, play and school, as well as experience of the courts and prisons, also contributes to a more holistic approach to the juvenile offender which avoids familiar middle-class, parliamentary or journalistic representations. Too often accounts of nineteenth-century juvenile crime, particularly in the East End of London, have derived solely from the tribes of journalists, sensation seekers, would-be sociologists and moral reformers, who inflicted their often unwelcome attentions upon the poor in the wake of Henry Mayhew.

Does this book achieve its author's intention to give the poor thief or juvenile offender a voice, rather than to treat him or her as a mere statistic? The answer is a qualified yes because the book is heavily reliant on W. A. Miles and the interviews he conducted on board the *Euryalus*, plus some other interviews from metropolitan prisons like Tothill Fields and Brixton and the Old Bailey sessions papers. As the author acknowledges, the offenders who speak to us from these sources are by no means representative being, in a sense, 'hardened' juvenile delinquents with several convictions, rather than opportunist or petty thieves (although, sadly, the two categories were often interchangeable). The Miles interviews, consisting of imprecise notebooks and rough (often pencilled), verbatim transcripts, which veer from the first person to the second, are subject to the sorts of problems to be expected from selective, handwritten accounts but also possess a remarkable immediacy and a graphic use of demotic 1830s speech patterns.

One boy awaiting transportation, George Hickman, told Miles in relation to police corruption that:

Policemen, especially City Police are so nice -- There is one fellow (number given) who behaves very well to us in the City. He never cares about getting a fellow sent to prison for three months because it does him no good, but if he can make an Old Bailey case of it, he takes the Boy up, because he gets his expenses, or something, I believe, for his trouble -- He sometimes stops a fellow and takes anything from him which he may have about him and lets him go again (p. 85).

The payment of protection or bribes to police is mentioned so often, and by so many children, that Shore believes there must be more than a grain of truth in such statements. Many of the boys, like George Hickman, have been identified by a list submitted by J. H. Capper, the head of the hulks' establishment, to the 1835 Select Committee on Gaols. Showing remarkable assiduity, Shore has tracked down the conduct registers kept for Van Diemen's Land which survive in Tasmania's Archives Office for a number of the boys interviewed by Miles, most of whom were transported from the *Euryalus* to Van Diemen's Land between 1835 and 1837 (20 per cent of all convicts arriving).

This book confirms that crime historians can be committed to pushing forward knowledge of their chosen subject matter, here youth and crime in early nineteenth-century London, in a spirit of scrupulous and constructive enquiry, without becoming imprisoned by the often unreadable theoretical constructs and language of the American-influenced social sciences. *Artful Dodgers* also manages to 'humanise' and make real the subjects of the author's research without resort to the rhetoric or invention of popular histories of the

so-called Victorian underworld. During the early nineteenth century, Shore grimly concludes, a combination of factors led to more indictment of juveniles, more imprisoned juveniles, and more transported juveniles, 'resulting in a situation where more children than previously were incorporated into the criminal justice system' (p. 149), the vast majority for petty and minor crimes. The British institutionalisation of troublesome, neglected and vagrant youth from the 'perishing and dangerous classes' in industrial and reformatory schools from the 1850s onwards was not far off.

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