

Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England

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‘A detective’, wrote a crime-fiction reviewer in 1932, ‘should have something of the god about him’:

It was the divine, aloof, condescending quality in the old great ones of Poe, Gaboriau, Wilkie Collins and Sherlock Holmes that made their adventures so glamorously irresistible. A writer of detective stories might have a style as brilliant as Poe’s, as consummately competent as Collins’s, as pompously absurd as Doyle’s – it did not matter: what mattered was whether he gave us a detective whom we could worship.⁽¹⁾

Even the most ardent fan of crime fiction might think ‘worship’ an overstatement; nonetheless, by the time those words were written, detectives had indeed become among the most popular figures of modern literature. In the decades since that ‘golden age’ of crime fiction, *police* detectives have often even managed to hold their own against their previously more celebrated private counterparts, whether in print, on television or at the cinema. As *The Ascent of the Detective* makes clear, such trends are remarkable in view of the suspicion that greeted real-life police detectives in their early years and their frequent literary belittlement.

The ‘ascent’ in the title of Haia Shpayer-Makov’s fascinating book refers to two related trends: the rising *professional status*

and improving *public reputation* of English police detectives during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The book is correspondingly divided into sections that consider detectives *as workers* and *as cultural icons*.

Part one builds on the author's pioneering research into the labour history of policing, embedding the emergence of detective forces within the more general transformation of the state maintenance of public order.⁽²⁾ Although London's Metropolitan Police was founded in 1829, a detective force was not organised until 1842; then, in 1878, detectives were reorganised into the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). Such models spread outward from London, mainly to other urban forces. (Except for brief asides, Scottish and Irish contexts are not considered.) The tasks of finding and arresting suspected wrongdoers were not new, having been previously undertaken by victims themselves or by voluntary associations, 'thief-takers' and the quasi-official 'Bow Street Runners'; however, the shift toward state-employed detection was seen by many as a significant, and worrying, change.

To assuage concerns that the new police forces would impose an 'un-English' system of spying and threaten purportedly traditional liberties, early police officials emphasised the goal of *prevention* rather than *detection*. Nonetheless, even the uniformed police at first faced an 'atmosphere of hostility' (p. 187). Gaining acceptance was a slow, step-by-step and 'piecemeal' (p. 26) process.

The expansion of detective forces, Shpayer-Makov argues, was driven by necessity: the growing sense in the 1830s that preventive goals had failed was followed in later decades by new challenges, such as the end of convict transportation, panics about street crime and the growth of terrorism (whether anarchist or Irish republican). Nonetheless, vehement criticism continued, reflecting concerns about cost, doubts about effectiveness, anxieties about oppression or revelations of corruption.

Devoting considerable attention to how detectives were selected and trained, Shpayer-Makov draws out the distinctiveness of the police compared to other predominantly working-class occupations, such as 'on-the-job training, secure employment, wages not directly influenced by competitive forces in the external market, and jobs within the police force filled by the promotion or transfer of workers who had already gained entry' (p. 63). Such patterns, especially the reliance on internal recruitment from the uniformed branch, contributed to a strong institutional identity and 'esprit de corps' (p. 76). Detectives were part of a 'common police culture' characterised by a mixture of 'traditional aristocratic paternalism' and 'modern middle-class notions of efficient management' (p. 101).

Divisions quickly emerged, though, between the uniformed and detective branches. Although most police work was done by beat-walking, uniformed constables, detective service became 'a magnet' and seen by many officers as 'the promised land' (p. 100). There was a growing sense that detectives formed a 'distinct entity' (pp. 105-6) with higher pay, greater status and better opportunities for advancement. By the Edwardian period, Detective Sergeants had achieved lower-middle-class – and Chief Inspectors solidly middle-class – status (pp. 117-18). Given detective departments' tiny size, competition to join a force's CID was correspondingly fierce. Detective work also provided a distinctive degree of 'semi-autonomy' (p. 123), one that police supervisors sought to control by requiring extensive written reports: by the 1880s the now-perennial police complaint of being buried in paperwork could already be heard.

In their relations with the public, detectives relied upon a flexible 'discretion' with regard to criminal wrongdoing. Despite evidence of 'class-related bias against people of their own stock' (p. 128), Shpayer-Makov emphasises that police held 'varied' political and moral views: they might share the beliefs of those they policed and could be kind or helpful to those they felt capable of rehabilitation. She finds little evidence of detectives acting like the continental-style 'spies' their critics feared. Special Branch, initially formed within the Met's CID to deal specifically with anarchism and Irish terrorism, may have been an exception, but even here Shpayer-Makov – in a formulation that is evocative albeit somewhat evasive – finds detectives coming to the 'threshold of political repression though not beyond' (p. 135).

Part two of the book leaves behind the relative solidity of institutional and labour history and turns to the inevitably somewhat nebulous topic of the detective as a 'cultural construct'. However, the author

successfully avoids discursive abstraction by focusing clearly on the *agents* involved: journalists, fiction authors and detectives themselves. Unusually for a working-class profession, an intense press attention accompanied detectives from the start, combining fascination, admiration and assessment. Police detectives were expected to uphold ideals of public service and respond to democratising trends, and the press constantly (and often critically) evaluated their ability to solve crimes. Detectives were dependent on the public not only for approval but also for information, and thus the police concentrated on maintaining a positive image.

The most important agents in the media depiction of detective work were journalists. Their relationship with police detectives was complex, characterised by mutual dependence, 'reciprocity' (p. 186) and a 'culture of exchange' (p. 160). The trade of *information* for *image* (or vice-versa) between these two groups saw the detective transformed from a 'menacing figure' to a 'national celebrity' (p. 7).

Although even the middle-classes were initially anxious about the association of detectives with 'fakery', 'dishonesty akin to spying' (p. 189) and the often corrupt practices of 18th-century 'thief-takers', they quickly became – as they would remain – the police's most steady supporters, less likely to complain about police excesses than their sense that policemen were never around when needed. There were critical 'dissenting voices' (p. 224) throughout the 19th century and several rough patches in police-public relations, such as a corruption scandal in the late 1870s and the failure to solve the 'Ripper murders' a decade later. But by the early 20th century, journalists had confirmed detectives as 'essential to society, designating a public role for them as professional fighters for the public good' (p. 186). The working classes also, if more 'grudgingly' (p. 192), came to accept the police. An enduring political division in press coverage emerged, however, with liberal and radical papers tending to condemn police practice (if not the policing model itself) and the conservative press tending to decry police *inaction*, the meddling of lawmakers and the 'too liberal' (p. 208) tendencies of English justice. There was a wide range of opinion, but Shpayer-Makov emphasises the 'pivotal role' of the press 'in entrenching a tolerant attitude to official crime control' (p. 224).

In crime fiction, however, the police detective remained overshadowed by his private, often gentlemanly, counterpart. While Shpayer-Makov here relies on the extensive secondary literature on crime fiction, her ability to link this work to the experiences of real detectives and patterns in press narratives allows her to strike several innovative notes. Detective fiction was one product of a late 18th- and early 19th-century shift in focus (and sympathy) in fiction from criminals to the police, driven by increasing expectations of orderliness and a declining severity of punishment. Building on transitional genres, such as fictional detective 'pseudo-memoirs', detective stories flourished from the 1880s, offering, on the one hand, excitement and exotic locales and, on the other, 'a sense of security' in the midst of a society undergoing the unsettling process of urbanisation (pp. 240–1).

But while the fictional police detective might be depicted as dogged and worthy he was rarely brilliant and frequently rather plodding. Sparkling intelligence was, with a few exceptions, reserved for the private detective, who was seen as 'more competent and praiseworthy' (p. 226), a trend that both preceded and was reinforced by the appearance of Sherlock Holmes stories in 1887. (There was, however, a 'slight' (p. 255) shift toward greater appreciation of Scotland Yard detectives in fictional works after 1900.) The doubts about literary police detectives may have initially reflected the real-world police scandals of the decades during which the modern genre was born (the 1870s and 1880s) and were likely kept alive by a combination of 'lingering traditions' (p. 256) of real-life private law enforcement as well as class prejudice: real detectives were too working-class to be celebrated in a middle-class genre, so gentleman heroes predominated.

While somewhat supportive of Marxist and Foucauldian claims that detective fiction 'upheld hegemonic middle-class norms' and justified the 'centrality of surveillance in the new urban and industrialised milieu' (p. 266), Shpayer-Makov counters that this fiction also presented ideals of *limited* state power, impartial justice and a 'faith in tolerance' (p. 271). Ultimately, it presented 'a kind of middle way—an equilibrium between reliance on the individual and the state' (p. 268).

Detectives not only shaped their public image through their interactions with journalists but also as writers themselves: in her final main chapter, Shpayer-Makov focuses on the published memoirs of actual detectives, which became popular reading from the 1880s onward. As authors, detectives fed into an already existing – if sporadic – critique of crime fiction, as those in the police force (or their sympathisers) sought to set the record straight with regard to its many distortions. Detectives' engagement with literary culture is particularly striking, as they could be seen as working-class authors, even if they primarily adopted an 'occupational' rather than 'social' identity (p. 296).

As this summary suggests, *The Ascent of the Detective* sets out to be both a thoroughly detailed and broadly comprehensive study of police detection as an occupation and a cultural obsession. That it succeeds so well in both cases rests upon Spayer-Makov's skill in balancing and clarifying several related interconnections: between real police work and its press image, between the uniformed and detective branches, between police and public (or press) viewpoints and between fictional and non-fictional accounts.

Alongside the rich detail of the book, some general themes emerge that are relevant beyond 'police history' as such. For example, Shpayer-Makov portrays the emergence of the public-service detective as a triumph over *laissez-faire* ideology and evidence of an important cultural shift toward the acceptance of state power. There was nothing unique, as she emphasises, about the detection of criminals in itself, a service which had been (and continued to be) privately supplied for those who could afford it; however – whatever civil liberties concerns it raised – the rise of the police detective democratised criminal detection services.

Another intriguing general aspect of this story is how media portrayals of detectives were vitally important in establishing their institutional legitimacy and social standing. The vast majority of the public, after all, did not encounter detectives in real life but rather in the pages of newspapers or detective novels. The fact that these depictions were to the benefit of the police demonstrates the extent to which modern forms of state power were legitimated by the media and highlights the role played by the imagination in shaping real forms of social and political life.

What is also interesting in this context, though, is the fact that most of the actual agents who were thereby legitimated were working-class. The working-class background of policemen (and thus detectives) is established in the book's early chapters and echoes throughout the book. It is important to see that this working-class group – one often not recognised as such – had a different set of relationships with their work, the state, the public and the media than did any other group of workers. Along with her other achievements, in this book Shpayer-Makov continues to cast a new light on police history as *labour* history.

While the book succeeds magnificently in its own aims, it raises several questions that go somewhat beyond the geographical, topical and chronological boundaries that Shpayer-Makov herself sets.

First, for example, in so far as London policing served as a model for the evolution of forces in other cities and in the provinces – Scotland Yard developed, Shpayer-Makov shows, into a 'singular' (p. 50) institution – the book's London-centric approach is certainly justifiable. Still, considering the recent shift in attention in policing and crime historiography to areas outside of London (3), more attention to the uneven spread of detective techniques and the mixture of cooperation and tension that characterised relations between the Met and provincial detective forces would have been of interest. Detective forces remained small, locally managed and predominantly urban on the eve of the First World War, and one wonders whether more might have been said about the diversity of professional practice among provincial forces. As Shpayer-Makov notes, 'local diversification' combined with 'common values and practices' – often with London's CID 'setting the standard' – became the 'double-edged trademark of English police detection' (p. 61). The book emphasises the latter aspects, but with so many small forces spread throughout the nation, it would be valuable to know more about instances in which the exchange of methods and practices was mutual.

Second, the topic of Englishness warrants further consideration. As Shpayer-Makov notes, the image of real detectives came to symbolise the 'quintessence of Englishness' (p. 271). However true, this raises the

question of just how distinctive the English example really was, inviting a more comparative perspective. After all, this period saw the emergence – and broad acceptance – of ‘modern’ police and detective forces in many countries in Europe. As Shpayer-Makov demonstrates, fears that English detectives would become continental-style ‘spies’ were chronic; moreover, some – particularly those in Special Branch – *did* go beyond fighting *crime* to engaging in more explicitly *political* forms of counter-terrorism. How different were real English detectives, then, from their European (or North American) counterparts with regard to their public acceptance and political activities? Relatedly, it would be helpful to know more about how the Englishness of the *fictional* detective was perceived abroad. (‘Like the world itself, the detective novel is controlled by the English’, observed Bertolt Brecht.⁽⁴⁾) Intriguingly, Shpayer-Makov links the fictional detective both to a complacent English sense of national superiority as well as to growing international competition and fears of national inadequacy (p. 302). This mixture, too, inspires a comparative question: were competing influences of national confidence and self-doubt distinctive to the construction of the police detectives in *England*, or were they in this case a specific national permutation of a more general European (or Anglo-American) modernising trend?

Third, and related to the above issues, Shpayer-Makov’s compelling analysis sparks considerations that go beyond its chronological limits. During the First World War, the English police received many new powers. The decade that followed the Armistice saw an acute rise in anxieties about the police, many of them focused on detectives. While there was continuing admiration for the police (especially for Scotland Yard), there was also a new flowering of earlier concerns that the English police had metamorphosed into something like the police of (depending on the commentator) Soviet Russia, continental Europe (especially France) or the United States. Fears centred, as they had done earlier, on plain-clothes ‘spying’ and the susceptibilities of corruption that came with extensive contact with the criminal underworld. In a pattern that emerges both from this book and from subsequent history, chronic problems suddenly became newsworthy through a series of scandals that, ultimately, created sufficient political pressure for a parliamentary inquiry. By the late 1920s, the police were responding to their image problems not only via the Metropolitan Police press office (founded immediately after the Great War) but also with threats of libel lawsuits against newspapers that printed stories accusing Scotland Yard detectives of ‘third-degree’ methods.⁽⁵⁾

The 1950s saw another wave of anxieties about the police and, since the 1970s, they have had a complex relationship with the press that has combined hostility, law-and-order cheerleading and sometimes questionable forms of collaboration. Considering Shpayer-Makov’s insightful mixture of real and fictional contexts, one wonders whether the recent surge in film and television adaptations of the most archetypal ‘private’ detective of them all, Sherlock Holmes, is – as was the case at the character’s birth – at least partly a result of contemporary doubts about the effectiveness and moral integrity of the real-life police, and the longing for a figure who, to refer back to my opening quote, has ‘something of the god about him’ when it comes to solving the chronic and insoluble problem of crime.

Notes

1. Little ‘tecs have little crooks’, *New Statesman and Society* (7 May 1932), 594.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Making of a Policeman: A Social History of a Labour Force in Metropolitan London* (Aldershot, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Such as Joanne Klein, *Invisible Men: The Secret Lives of Police Constables in Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham, 1900–1939* (Liverpool, 2010); John Archer, *The Monster Evil: Policing and Violence in Victorian Liverpool* (Liverpool, 2011).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Bertolt Brecht, ‘Über die Popularität des Kriminalromans’, cited in Todd Herzog, *Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany* (New York, NY, 2009), p. 26. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John Carter Wood, “‘The Third Degree’: press reporting, crime fiction and police powers in 1920s Britain”, *Twentieth Century British History*, 21 (2010), 464–85 and ‘Press, politics and the “Police and Public” debates in late 1920s Britain’, *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History and Societies*, 16 (2012), 75–98.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/418129.article> [2]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/23/ascent-detective-haia-shpayer-makov-review> [3]

H-Net

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [4]

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[4] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37901>