

The Gangs of Manchester: The Story of the Scuttlers, Britain's First Youth Cult

Review Number:

769

Publish date:

Tuesday, 30 June, 2009

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ISBN:

9781903854815

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£11.99

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

Milo Books

Place of Publication:

Preston

Reviewer:

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The Gangs of Manchester is a welcome and timely contribution to the growing literature on the history of youth. Davies' book is a study of the rise and fall of the 'scuttler' street fighting gangs of Manchester from the mid to late 19th century. It paints a powerful picture of the harsh urban environment in which the young men and women who joined these gangs lived and worked. Davies provides insight into the fear and concern that scuttlers provoked in the adult population, and the methods used by the police, the magistracy and social reformers to attempt to counteract the gangs. Scuttlers were previously studied by Geoffrey Pearson in his study of hooliganism in the 19th century ([1](#)), but *The Gangs of Manchester* is a refreshing, in-depth study of the phenomenon. The result is a book which places a particular youth movement within its broader social, economic and spatial contexts, and which also has much to contribute to current debates and concerns.

Davies opens the book with an account of the development of slums in Manchester in the early to mid 19th century, as thousands came from around the British Isles to find work in the booming factories. Despite the massive wealth generated by factory owners, the Manchester working classes endured long hours for low wages, poor housing and equally poor diets. Yet, as Davies notes, this did not discourage a real lust for life that was manifested on the streets of Ancoats and other slum districts. Music halls, pubs, gin shops and the like did a roaring trade, which was supplemented by a lively street culture of young and old congregating on the streets to talk, drink, gamble and fight. Davies argues that fighting had its own specific social functions and codes. A fair fight was a legitimate means of resolving a dispute in public, and the police did not investigate unless the fight went sour. To a point, scuttling had its [sub]cultural roots within this vibrant parent culture and its performative aspects of street life and fighting. This concept of deviant youth

subcultures as arising from deviant working class adult cultures was originally developed in the 1950s and 1960s by sociologists such as John Barron Mays, David Downes, Terence Morris and Madeleine Kerr.⁽²⁾ With Morris in particular, this was tied in with a notion that place was an important variable in shaping social behaviours and norms. This view was also reflected in Jerry White's study of Campbell Bunk, 'worst street in North London', which discussed the slide into delinquency, whereby young people were drawn into crime through exposure to family and neighbours who presented deviant behaviour as 'normal'.⁽³⁾ *The Gangs of Manchester* makes a valuable contribution to this literature through its rigorous use of court records and newspaper accounts to build up a vivid picture of life in the slums of Manchester, the excitement and the call of the gangs, and their appeal to young people. The book also speaks to a much longer heritage of linking place and space with criminality, stretching back from the reportage of Dickens, Mayhew and others, as well as the impressionistic police diaries of Charles Booth.⁽⁴⁾

Davies has identified the trigger point for scuttling as arising from the reception of the Franco-Prussian War by the schoolboys of Ancoats. Young boys re-created the battles on the streets of Ancoats, using the categories of Catholic French and Protestant Prussian to reflect their own allegiances between Irish Catholic and English Protestant. This game quickly evolved into a widespread vogue for street battles, beginning with the so-called Rochdale Road War of 1870. This initial flurry of street fighting laid the ground for the more complex phenomenon of scuttling. The battle lines between Catholic and Protestant reflected the different allegiances and identities created by the geographical and social boundaries created by streets, canals, markets and the like, as well as the clustering of different religious and ethnic groups. The gangs developed strong group identities which gained power through calls to local allegiances and bonds of friendship, and flagged through careful dress. The gangs had a distinctive dress code of long 'donkey' fringes, neckerchiefs, pointed clogs and caps tilted back on the head. The clothes and accessories immediately identified the scuttler as such, but also had their violent functions, as the scuttlers' belts, with their large buckles, doubled up as weapons in fights. Whilst the fashions were common to all scuttler groups, place was the most distinctive influence in the shaping of scuttler identity and relationships between gangs. Gangs were associated with particular streets or districts, and gangs assiduously policed their territory. Gang members kept a wary eye out for young men straying into their area; being in the wrong place at the wrong time could lead to violence. It was not just young men that these rules of place applied to. Gangs expected young women from their area to court young men from the same; this was a frequent cause of violence between gangs from Ancoats and Angel Meadow in 1886. Yet young women were not always passive 'molls' – as Davies points out, they often encouraged the male gang members in fights and also participated in violent acts themselves.

The gangs were variously admired, feared and loathed by the communities around them. The gangs were violent and volatile. Fists, feet, knives, buckles, stones and even paving stones were used as weapons. Fights often resulted in serious injury and even death. As Davies draws out, violence between gangs and indeed gangs and bystanders, could erupt for the smallest of reasons. Passers-by could find themselves on the receiving end for bumping into a scuttler or for appearing affluent or vulnerable; doing a good turn – such as returning a lost cap – or intervening to break up a fight between scuttlers were rewarded with violence. Others suffered damage to their property, or had to adjust their daily lives to avoid coming into conflict with the scuttlers. The presence of scuttlers on the streets created fear amongst the adult population, who were wary of how the simmering threat of violence could erupt at any time. Outrage and anxieties were expressed time and time again in letters to newspapers following incidents and cases going to court. This tension between the teenaged gang and the neighbourhood is a vital one. Davies successfully manages to marry the importance of locality for the gangs with the impact it had upon the wider community. Gang territory was marked out by the urban landscape and the ways in which it was experienced, through flows of foot traffic and points of connection. Yet the young gang members applied different meanings to the street, by using it as a place for out-and-out battle, thus turning a space for transit into a place for fighting.

Scuttling was a temporary phase in the lives of the young men and women attached to gangs. Davies draws out tantalising points about the relationship between home lives and the street. Although the young scuttlers were seen as being wild and undisciplined, Davies points out that many grew up in strict homes and were

expected to contribute to the family income. Before marriage, the family home was a place of constraint and responsibility. Davies notes that, when scuttlers were brought to court, mothers rather than fathers attended. Mothers came to plead for their sons' good character, partly as fathers were at work, but also because they could attempt to convince the judges that sending their sons to prison would reduce the family income. This touches upon the gendered power dynamics of the disciplining of young people, and the negotiation of this with external bodies such as schools, the police and the courts. Yet the stakes rose once the young men married and found themselves running their own homes. A prison sentence for scuttling could literally put one's wife and small children in the workhouse, and the temptations of street fighting had to be balanced against the cost to the family unit. Although we understand more about the slide *into* delinquency in the 20th century, from such classic texts as *Campbell Bunk* and *The Delinquent Solution* as well as more recent criminological studies, the slide out of delinquency is somewhat clearer (young men grow out of deviant behaviours) if the specifics are less well researched. In this way, *The Gangs of Manchester* is an important historical counterpart to recent criminological research, such as Andrew Rutherford's *Growing Out of Crime*.
(5)

Davies also draws out some of the continuities within debates about how young people are treated by the state, the police and the courts. The publication of *The Gangs of Manchester* coincided with the centenary of the 1908 Children Act. This Act introduced dedicated juvenile courts in England and Wales, regulated the sale of tobacco and alcohol to minors, and also prevented the young from being sent to prison, amongst other things. In many ways, much of Davies' discussion of the introduction of lads' clubs and the decline of the scuttler ties in with the development of this Act. Some of the individuals mentioned by Davies – such as Charles E. B. Russell – used their experience of club work in the 1890s on the streets of Manchester to inform their work in the evolution of the juvenile justice system. As Davies points out, part of the solution to scuttling was to provide the young men with other outlets for their energies. Although much of this was tinged with a missionary attempt to bring the young back into religious ways, club sporting and social activities offered the bonds of loyalty, friendship and allegiance without the same demands of violence. Davies argues that one of the nails in the coffin of the scuttler was the rise of the youth club movement, whilst another was the growing popularity in the 1880s and 1890s of association football.

But whilst it can be argued that these liberal, reformist moves had a positive impact on reducing scuttling, Davies also points out that this was accompanied by more aggressive policing and harsher prison sentences. On occasion, the police found it difficult and dangerous to effectively prevent and control outbreaks of scuttler violence. They changed their tactics and methods of detection in order to achieve this. The magistracy also increasingly looked at the popular view of scuttling incidents and used punitive sentences as a means of taking gang members off the streets as well as conveying a message that scuttling would not be tolerated by the broader community. Prison sentences certainly had a disruptive influence on gang leadership, but were not always a deterrent to scuttlers. Davies draws out the relationship between public outrage and the shaping of sentencing patterns, linking this also with the sensibilities of particular magistrates. In his discussion of the calls for flogging for scuttlers, Davies subtly draws out the tensions between the prescription of particular punishments and public or magisterial demands for reform. Flogging was only applicable in cases of robbery with violence, which the scuttlers rarely, if ever, committed. Yet a certain branch of the public wished to see flogging as a punishment for scuttlers, using violence as a means of beating scuttling out of the system. Davies has identified two distinctive trends in youth justice, which co-exist even if one predominates at any one particular time.

The Gangs of Manchester was published in September 2008, after a summer of intense media interest in the so-called 'gang violence' on the streets of London and other major cities. Davies draws out a number of points about youth gangs in the 19th century which nevertheless have important resonances for any understanding of current problems. The gangs were not participating in thefts or any form of organised crime, but rather the gang was a forum for finding friendship and a group identity. Much of their violence was directed at other gangs straying into their territory, in a similar fashion to so-called postcode wars in the 21st century. The scuttler violence was heavily physical, using fists and knives, with reputations won and lost on the outcomes of fights. These aspects find their parallels in a number of subsequent youth cults,

strongly suggesting that group violence has a particular role in the social development of young men, if the manifestations of this need to be explored amongst all social classes. Whilst we should not rush to view all youth cults together as being essentially the same regardless of geography and point in time, Davies has skilfully drawn out the continuities of youthful – and especially male – behaviour in modern society.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London, 1983).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See John Barron Mays, *Education and the Urban Child* (Liverpool, 1968), David Downes, *The Delinquent Solution: A Study in Subcultural Theory* (London, 1966). Terence Morris, *The Criminal Area: A Study in Social Ecology* (London, 1957) and Madeleine Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London, 1958).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jerry White, *Campbell Bunk: the Worst Street in North London* (London, 1986).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For the Booth Metropolitan Police Notebooks, see the Charles Booth Online Archive at the London School of Economics <<http://booth.lse.ac.uk/>> [2] [accessed June 3 2009].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Andrew Rutherford, *Growing Out of Crime: The New Era* (Winchester, 2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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