



Archer (John E.), *The Monster Evil : Policing and Violence in Victorian Liverpool*

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- 1 Historical research on interpersonal violence has expanded considerably in recent years, with much of this work centred on the nineteenth century. In particular, Clive Emsley, Martin Wiener and John Carter Wood have charted changing attitudes towards violence in this period, while situating sensibilities in the shifting contexts of accepted gender norms and ideas of Englishness. In *The Monster Evil*, John Archer builds on these national surveys through a local study of Liverpool. Lacking extensive police and court records from the mid-nineteenth century, this work is based predominantly on extensive sampling of the local press, producing an extremely rich and detailed account. One especially revealing series of articles – a narrative of policing on the busy Rosehill night shift – is even reproduced as an appendix.
- 2 The opening chapters focus on Liverpool itself, and its notoriety as a hotbed of criminality and violence. Dominated by unskilled casual labour, and hosting a highly mobile population of young men, it is unsurprising that the city acquired such an inglorious reputation. Its image was reinforced by a series of shocking crime reports, notably the Tithebarn Street murder of 1874, in which a respectable working man was kicked to death by street roughs known as ‘cornermen’. For most contemporaries, the criminal statistics confirmed Liverpool’s position as the capital of violence, yet Archer

remains advisedly sceptical of such evidence. Having demonstrated that even homicide figures were vulnerable to changing recording practices, he resists any extended comparison with statistical data from other towns.

- 3 There follows a section on policing, in which Archer sketches the development of the police force and the persistent concern of inexperience in its ranks, a problem common to Victorian police forces. Pride of place, though, is given to a substantial discussion of violence between police and public. The analysis of police violence is especially welcome, illustrating both the ubiquity of violence on the beat, and the difficulty faced by civilians (especially 'roughs' of both sexes) seeking redress through the courts. A surprisingly large portion of assaults by policemen – some 54 per cent by Archer's reckoning – were 'unprovoked', with much of the remainder committed during arrest or at the station. In a rare account of middle-class disapproval of the police, Archer traces Hugh Shimmin's (journalist and editor of the *Porcupine*) gradual disillusionment with the force and its brutality. Despite the obvious appeal of such a frank and discontented commentator, however, Archer is right to warn that Shimmin gave voice to 'the opinion of a minority, albeit a substantial one, of the liberal radical middle classes' (45). This section concludes with the suggestion that the Liverpool constabulary's *esprit de corps* contributed to antagonistic relations with the working class in the mid-nineteenth century, fostering an "us versus them" attitude when dealing with the public' (61). Just how cohesive the force was, especially given its high turnover of personnel, is surely open to question, yet this is nevertheless a welcome attempt to relate police culture and relations with the public.
- 4 The remainder of the book – some two-thirds of it in fact – is devoted to a panoramic survey of various forms of violence in Victorian Liverpool. The breadth of Archer's interest is impressive, with four chapters centred on public and street violence between men and women, and a further four dealing with domestic violence of various kinds. The absence of the police is repeatedly highlighted, both in connection with the press panic surrounding 'cornermen' in the 1870s, and their reluctance to intervene in domestic assaults against wives and children. The analysis of men's and women's violence presents interesting contrasts, especially the greater propensity of men to attack strangers. Most consistently, this section examines the role of the press in stoking up fear of violent crime, and in drawing moral distinctions between rough and respectable violence, between dutiful wives and brutish husbands, and so on. The final chapters are probably the most original, dealing with violent children and child victims. Child-killers are sensitively explored, contrasting the measured reaction of Victorian press and courts with the hysteria which can surround such cases today. Archer's exploration of the ambiguities of violence against children, and the shifting line of acceptable chastisement, is similarly perceptive.
- 5 *The Monster Evil* is the fruit of extensive research, and the first genuinely comprehensive treatment of violent crime in this period. Its contemporary significance is considerable, and especially in the discussion of child-killers, where the resonance of Liverpool's most famous crime of recent times – the killing of James Bulger – is obvious. He concludes that the police enjoyed a greater degree of acceptance by 1900 than previously, and that the 'civilising process' progressed unevenly, with customary fighting practices living on in rougher parts of the city into the twentieth century. While economical with its arguments, the book's clear structure and straightforward prose allow for easy navigation and sampling, though some specialists will still miss a

sustained, critical engagement with the historiography. One avenue, in particular, which Archer neglects to explore fully is the connection between the two central themes of his work, policing and violence. Though dealing extensively with violence on the beat, the ambiguous position of violent crime as an object of nineteenth-century policing remains an under-developed theme in the current literature. A more searching enquiry into the assumptions which underpinned the preventative model may well have shed further light on why constables sometimes failed to recognise that assaults were really their business. It may also have helped to explain how Head Constable Greig could, in 1875, maintain an attitude towards street violence apparently 'bordering on the blasé' (8).

- 6 This book's greatest strength, however, lies in its local focus, and the examination of Liverpool's criminal reputation is Archer's most original contribution. Founded on an uncertain statistical basis, the city's notoriety was sustained in the national press by its constant association with acts of extreme violence, and selective reporting of particularly shocking murder cases. Archer reminds us that Liverpool was a violent place – what else would one expect of a bustling Victorian seaport? – yet its criminal reputation took on a life of its own, and became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. By making such a virtue of his geographical focus, Archer produces much more than a 'case study' of violence in Victorian England; *The Monster Evil* is a powerful account, the likes of which local historians of crime would do well to imitate.

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