

Cops, Villains and Trials
Explorations in Crime and Law for Family and Social
Historians

Contents

	pp
Introduction	
1. Chronicles of Crime	8
2. Cops	52
3. Villains	70
4. Trials	96
5. Other Criminal Sources	125
6. Irish Themes	178
General Bibliography	207

**

Introduction

For some years now I have been working in the huge and complex area of the history of crime. This is one of the rooms in the vast mansion of historical studies that has some space for amateur enthusiasts: that is to say, writers who have no degree in law nor any experience as a police officer or other legal person. My interests in the purely social side of this subject gradually expanded into the fascinating study of family history, and these collected essays are almost all taken from my contributions to the main family history magazines. Some are from *The Family and Local History Handbook*. But I have added new material.

The focus is on offering case studies in essay form, rather than any systematic presentation of material. My intention here is to add some fascinating stories to the basic framework we all, as historical researchers, have to work with.

As the whole area of interest covered by crime and law within social history generally comprises not only the central themes of crime-investigation –trial, but an almost infinite number of ancillary topics, I always felt the need to explore some of the ramifications of legal history in this respect, and hence I have included here such topics as police court missionaries and the court for crown cases reserved: subjects of great usefulness to family historians but little known.

Overall, I hope this collection provides openings to researchers and writers looking into those 'skeletons in the cupboard' we all have somewhere, the reason being that 'crimes' in times past were

Introduction

so easy to commit that many who were in the dock c. 1750 would now be doing the same action but committing no transgression.

There is a need to explain the problems and pitfalls awaiting the family historian at this point, with particular reference to the history of crime and law. Looking into the narrative of a specific crime offers something very special to the historian; this is perhaps best explained as a light shining into a dark corner. The footnotes of history are often the areas with the most insight into the motivations of the past. The challenge we have is immense, as it is a search for the truth – or as near to the truth as we might expect to arrive at. My view is that there is always an unanswered question, and that every enquiry leads to a dozen others. A small triumph may be an immense discovery.

When my niece delved into our own family history, as a crime historian, I of course secretly desired a terrible villain to be revealed from our past. There was no such luck. The only offender found was an uncle who committed suicide, and that was only shortly before the 1961 legislation which ended suicide per se as a criminal offence (though pacts were still unlawful).

In family history, the problems and pitfalls are many, but the most common are:

- Lost or destroyed records
- Events with no documentation
- Misread information
- Journalistic errors in press reports

Specifically in crime investigation from the long annals of the law, we meet with frustrations all the time. I was once asked to try

to trace a villain who had emigrated from Britain to South Africa, just after the Anglo-Boer War, and of course he had changed his name. There was very slim chance of tracking him down. But what perhaps exemplifies the nature of these frustrations and wrong turns is an example from when I first began to research history. I was looking into the famous Lincoln case of Tom Otter, and his horrendous murder of his new wife. In a contemporary newspaper report, a writer had written the Latin phrase 'nisi primis' and of course I took out the reference works and searched for this. I wasted some time before realising that what the words should have been were 'nisi prius' – meaning 'unless before' and that refers to a particular timing of a trial.

That was a caveat regarding the internet and newspaper sources. More problematic is oral history. I have always found that families have myths, distortions and delusions. Every little story-source from the past is open to interference over the process of time and change. I grew up with tales of a roving Scotsman called Argyle who arrived in South Leeds circa 1890 and married into our matrilineal line; for years I thought this was the case. Then the discovery was made that the Argyles in our story came north from Buskington in Warwickshire. They were farm labourers.

But at the heart of this aspect of family and social history is the intensely human element. In my notebooks, which have been filled during my mainstream research, with off-shoots of interest, I have this, quoted from the Annual register for 1803:

'The sessions ended at the Old Bailey when 7 malefactors received sentence of death.

Cops, Villains and Trials

Viz. Thomas Beck and Peter Robinson for the highway; Dorothy Soffet for stealing a guinea from

A person in drink; Richard Wentland for a street robbery; Anne Wentland his wife for forcibly

... stealing goods out of a house at Hendon. Hurst was held up at the bar to receive

Sentence and died on the back of one who was carrying him to the cells. The 2 women

Pleaded their bellies; Wentland only was found pregnant; 25 ordered for transportation, 3 burnt

In the hand, and 4 to be whipped.'

Now, this reflects both the attraction and the challenge of entering that past country where they did things so very differently. The reader has to know the reasons for pleading the belly, and why people were burnt in the hand or transported. Yet under all the contextual material, there is that strong, heart-rending human presence.

**