

## London's Criminal Underworlds, c. 1720 - c. 1930

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**Reviewer:** Robert B. Shoemaker

Towards the end of this fascinating study, Heather Shore reflects on the difficulty of ‘trying to uncover or reconstruct something that does not exist in a concrete form’ (p. 192). For Shore, the ‘underworld’ is a ‘cipher’, through which the press, the police, the government, and the wider society represents, and tries to understand, crime as a social problem. It is not that criminals themselves have no role to play in this process, but that their activities are interpreted through the distorting lens of a particular discourse. While historians have tended to see forms of criminal organisation as culturally constructed, and sensationalist popular ‘true crime’ histories depict gangs as entirely real, Shore follows the lead of modern criminologists and sociologists and approaches the topic from a combined socio-cultural perspective.

Shore argues that the period from 1720 to 1930 was fundamental in creating the modern understanding of this concept in England. The term ‘underworld’ was not regularly used before the late 19th century, but vocabulary with similar connotations had evolved over the previous two centuries. Of course, the idea of a separate, organised, and threatening alternative society of criminals has a much longer history, including the thieves, fraudsters, and vagabonds of the 16th-century ‘rogue literature’ (1), but what changed in the early 18th century was the development of a purportedly factual dimension to print culture with the growing popularity of newspapers, the *Old Bailey Proceedings*, and other publications, combined with the advent a state-sponsored system of rewards and informing which fostered the corrupt practice of ‘thief-taking’ and made policing a vital factor in shaping beliefs in the pervasiveness of gangs. Two centuries later, our modern idea of the underworld became firmly entrenched owing to the influence of reports of North American ‘gangsterism’ and ‘gang wars’, in which the violence of the ‘racecourse wars’ in Southeast England was represented. As these justifications for the time limits of this study suggest, Shore’s argument identifies the media and the police as the key factors which have shaped our understandings of the ‘underworld’, while also paying attention to changing patterns of crime. Her focus is unapologetically on London, since the metropolis ‘has historically been seen as the home of the underworld’ (p. 22).

Shore seeks to present a ‘social and cultural’ history, but to cover this topic over two centuries within a single study would be impossible. She therefore adopts a case study approach, alternating more thematic overview chapters with specific case studies, using ‘thick description’, of individual criminals and their

associates. The former tend to focus on the changing language of organised crime used by the press, police and victims. Chapter two shows how the use of rewards and the encouragement of informing encouraged the development of 'informing constables' and 'thief-takers' who occupied a liminal position, helping to create a 'visible culture of criminal confederacy', described as 'gangs' (p. 26). Chapter four describes the new language of 'hustling' which was used by prosecutors in the early 19th century to describe the techniques used by groups of street robbers, particularly youths, to surround and fleece their victims. In the 1820s and 1830s this activity was frequently associated with the 'swell mob', a particularly sophisticated group of thieves with ideas above their station. Covering a longer period, chapter six traces the evolution of the language used to describe fraud between 1760 and 1913, as gangs of 'swindlers' and coiners were given visibility owing to the establishment of the Detective Branch of the Metropolitan Police in 1842. In particular, 'long-firm fraud', a crime involving obtaining goods on credit, selling them on, and then disappearing, was often reported in the second half of the century, reflecting 'a growing belief in the ubiquity of "professional" and "career" criminals' (p. 140). At the end of the century, as discussed in chapter seven, the term 'hooligan' was invented, and used by the media and police to describe territorially related youth violence; while such street violence was not new, its association with specific places marked a new departure.<sup>(2)</sup> Finally, chapter eight describes the language of 'gangsterism', propagated by the tabloid press, which emerged during the 'race course wars' after the First World war, when rival gangs fought for control of the right to operate as bookmakers.

The dominant theme in these chapters is the crucial role played by the press and the police in changing constructions of the 'underworld' and in shaping contemporary responses to crime. While Shore is alert to both underlying continuities and to new patterns of criminality owing to the changing nature of urban communities, the economy, and transport, at times it seems as if she loses sight of the role of the criminals themselves in this labelling process. But this is to a significant extent remedied by the other chapters, or parts of chapters, which provide in-depth studies of individuals and groups. Based on often heroic levels of detective research, we learn, for example, about Moll Harvey, keeper of a disorderly house and thief who, with the support of kinship and neighbourhood networks, largely successfully resisted the attempts of reforming magistrates to prosecute her in the 1730s <sup>(3)</sup>, and Bill Sheen, a child murderer, brothel keeper and career criminal who with family support, and by cooperating with the police, also for the most part managed to avoid retribution for two decades following the murder of his four-month old child in 1827. In the 1920s Shore focuses on the Sabini brothers, from the Anglo-Italian neighbourhood of Clerkenwell, who formed the core of one of the most important gangs in the racecourse wars.

While the limitations of the available evidence (more attention could have been paid to this point) mean that our understanding of even these lives is inevitably very patchy, what emerges are some fundamental insights into the nature of criminality and lower-class life in this period. Those accused of crime were never mere 'criminals'; they always had other identities deriving from their families, ethnicity, economic situation, and local neighbourhoods. Shore is particularly interested in the resulting overlapping networks of social bonds, which she describes as 'characterised by flexibility and fluidity ... and disorganisation'. Networks of criminal activity, therefore, varied over time, and 'fundamentally overlap with the other communities, associations, and relationships that structure people's lives' (p. 194). This is abundantly evident in the case of Moll Harvey, who was both the target of hostility from her more respectable neighbours in Westminster for the vice and crime which took place at her alehouse, *and* reliant on support from locals for assistance when she forcibly resisted arrest by groups of constables. This 'thick description' of Moll's social relationships should lead us to question the value of the term 'community', with its implication of shared values, to describe the residents of places where inhabitants were torn between the various pressures of policing, the need to coexist with one's neighbours, and the inducements and threats of the criminally inclined. Bill Sheen, tormented by his neighbours as an infant killer, nonetheless managed to remain in his local area of Whitechapel for decades, running lodging houses and brothels which would have needed some degree of local cooperation to survive. Shore acknowledges that these communities were 'contested spaces' (p. 16), but this reader was left wondering whether the term 'community' is appropriate for describing the complex and conflicting social relations of these London neighbourhoods.

Shore is keen to point out the plebeian agency demonstrated by protagonists like Moll Harvey, but the emphasis placed on the role of the press and the police in defining the underworld in this book tends to undermine this theme. We learn about how criminals negotiated with and often successfully resisted, the police, but what is missing is an examination of how they engaged with print culture. Not enough is said about how criminals used or responded to the opportunities presented by the rapid expansion of the press in this period. Chapter two notes that accomplices who turned king's evidence justified turning on their fellow criminals in published criminal biographies, but nothing is said about how some robbers were able to justify their criminality in print using the stereotype of the polite gentlemanly highwayman.<sup>(4)</sup> Bill Sheen colluded with his public image as an 'infanticide', but the reader is left wondering whether at other times criminals adopted the language of territorial gangs, such as the 'Lambeth Lads' or 'Somers Town boys' in 1891, as badges of identity (p. 155). and whether the participants in the 'racecourse wars' used, or adapted, the language of 'gangsterism', perhaps in an attempt to intimidate their opponents and the police.

Two other issues also merit further attention. First, despite the key role played by the press in the book's argument, not enough attention is paid to the dramatic changes in print culture which occurred over these two centuries, notably the expansion of cheap print in the early 19th century and the emergence of the tabloid press a century later (though the latter is implicated in disseminating the language of North American 'gangsterism'). The dramatic expansion of the audience for print, with a paradoxical parallel reduction in the ability of plebeian Londoners to get their views published, had major implications for how organised crime would be represented. At the risk of widening the scope of the analysis impossibly further, the depiction of organised crime in fiction, touched on at some points in this book, also would benefit from further analysis, given the ability of such literature to spread underworld stereotypes.

Finally, to return to the compelling argument at the centre of this book, we need to think about *why* such stereotypes of the ‘underworld’ have been so influential, given their fundamental inaccuracies. Shore argues that ‘the discursive power of the “underworld” was (and remains) in its function as a shorthand ... to describe the worlds of the criminal ... and to keep them at arm’s length’ (p. 195). But why do these stereotypes take the specific forms that they do? Why is the underworld seemingly inevitably constructed as organised, stable, violent, and comprised solely of men? To answer this question we need to direct our research in another direction, into the minds of the law-abiding consumers of print. By situating the underworld at the centre of such a complex pattern of discursive practice, policing, and crime, this book raises several important questions for further research.

## Notes

1. See Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City, 1550–1660* (Cambridge, 2008), ch. 4.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Here Shore largely follows the influential arguments of Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London, 1983).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. This research was previously published by Shore in “‘The Reckoning’: disorderly women, informing constables and the Westminster Justices, 1727–1733’, *Social History*, 34, 409–27.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Robert B. Shoemaker, ‘The street robber and the gentleman highwayman: changing representations and perceptions of robbery in London, 1690–1800’, *Cultural and Social History* 3 (2006), 381–405.  
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