



Richard M. Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice in 18th-Century London*, London : Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 256 p., ISBN 9781472507112.

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- 1 In the ever-widening body of work on media representations of crime, eighteenth-century England has received particular attention, with notable contributions from historians such as Esther Snell, Peter King and Robert Shoemaker. Richard Ward's book is a valuable addition to this work, not least because he examines a range of different genres of print culture while most other studies have been limited to one genre. Specifically, he looks at metropolitan newspapers, social policy pamphlets, graphic prints, the Old Bailey Proceedings (the accounts of trials at London's central criminal court) and the Ordinary's Accounts (descriptions by the chaplain of Newgate of the lives of criminals condemned to death). Ward is interested in the impression print crime literature gave of crime and the administration of justice. However he also wants to explore the interaction between this crime literature and the justice system. To investigate this, he focuses on London during the relatively short period of 1747 to 1755. Mid-century London makes an interesting test case firstly because there was an unprecedented, wide range of publications covering crime and secondly because it experienced something of a crime wave following the end of the War of Austrian Succession.
- 2 In the first substantive chapter, Ward uses diaries to show that print literature was indeed an important source of information on crime for Londoners, particularly as they had little or no direct experience of serious crime. He provides evidence that the entire range of genres in his study were consumed by people in the eighteenth century. The next chapter deals specifically with property crime. Prosecutions for crimes of this nature tended to fall during wartime and rise as war ended, and the period following the end of hostilities in mid-1748 was no exception. Various explanations have been proposed for

this pattern, such as the sudden influx of demobilised troops. Ward argues that changes in print crime news, which he characterises as a moral panic, may also have influenced prosecution practices. Newspaper crime reports started to increase in number and concerns voiced about rising crime as early as 1747. Moreover both newspapers and the Old Bailey Proceedings gave a distorted picture of property crime by concentrating on violence theft. This was construed as a serious problem requiring stringent responses and tougher sentencing. A key factor driving the fluctuations in crime reporting seems to have been the amount of important foreign news : as the war effectively came to an end, crime news increased, but fell again when peace negotiations started.

- 3 In Chapter Four, Ward looks at the representation of policing in print literature. Snell has contended that the eighteenth century saw a fundamental change in the representation of the justice system. Whereas traditional criminal biographies showed criminals getting their just deserts, newspapers, with their need to publish stories as they emerged rather than when justice had been done, presented a less comforting picture that emphasised the weakness and failings of the justice system. Ward on the other hand argues that print literature gave a relatively positive and reassuring picture of policing. Thus half of newspaper crime reports mention the offender being detained, and both the press and the Old Bailey Proceedings regularly celebrated the efforts of the police. In fact the Fielding brothers actively used the press to publicise the activities of their Bow Street runners.
- 4 The final substantive chapter makes the case for print crime literature influencing the 1752 Murder Act. This act increased the humiliation of the death sentence for murderers. In the period leading up to the act, sensational media coverage of murder cases turned murder into a coherent theme demanding urgent attention. The measures eventually adopted of dissection of the body and hanging in chains were being advocated as effective penal practices in the print discourse. The influence of the print media can also explain the timing of the act. The Felonies Committee, which proposed the bill, was established in February 1751 but it was only in February 1752 that the committee first made mention of measures to combat the crime of murder. This was seemingly out of the blue, yet Ward is able to show that this coincided with a peak in the press coverage of murder trials.
- 5 Throughout the book, Ward engages in a lively debate with the arguments and findings of other historians of crime in eighteenth-century England, sometimes coming to very different conclusions, as noted above. In this way, the book actively builds on the existing scholarship. Ward also makes sensitive use of his sources, discussing their limitations at some length and recognising the many factors at play. Thus his attempt to analyse changes in sentencing is hampered by a sudden change in prosecution practice in around 1750 whereby grand larcenies were 'fictionalised' as petty thefts and tried in a lower court.
- 6 This book demonstrates the benefit of concentrating on the minutiae of a relatively short period. By looking at month-by-month developments in crime news and the administration of justice, Ward is able to draw conclusions about the relationship between crime news and prosecuted crime that would otherwise be lost in the broad sweep. He shows that crime print literature had its own dynamics and was not simply a reflection of actual crime or actual crime prosecutions. Ward is on less sure ground when discussing the effect of print literature on readers' perceptions and the operation of the justice system. In the example of the Murders Act, where the members of the Felonies Committee are known and where there is some evidence that they were consuming the

relevant print genres, his argument for the influence of crime news reporting is certainly plausible. In other situations, any conclusions about the effect of crime literature, for example on the readiness of victims to prosecute, must remain speculative, as indeed Ward recognises. However he might have been able to say more if he had given a clearer picture of the target readership for the print literature in question. Ward refers to them consistently as 'propertied Londoners', which suggests that he has an idea of the type of person involved, but he never defines this term. To what strata in society did they belong? In particular, to what extent would they have overlapped with the victims of crime in the metropolis and with the juries, judges and magistrates responsible for the prosecution of crime? This background information would have helped in assessing the potential impact of crime reporting.

- 7 Despite this caveat, Ward offers an interesting and thought-provoking account of crime literature and its relationship with the administration of justice at a time when there was an unprecedented array of different publications covering crime. His main contribution is in examining a range of different genres and thereby providing a richer, more comprehensive picture of crime in print culture that comes closer to the actual experience of readers in the eighteenth century.