The Impact of Criminal Anthropology in Britain (1880-1918)

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Only one book devoted entirely to the theories of Cesare Lombroso was published in Britain in the period 1880-1918, and that is *The Criminal*, by Havelock Ellis. In his book, Ellis noted the paradox of the British reaction to criminal anthropology. While researching the book, he had canvassed opinion among criminal justice professionals on the subject, hoping to garner home-grown reactions to the impassioned criminological debates taking place at the time on the Continent. Ellis was familiar with the pioneering work of British prison doctors James Bruce Thomson, David Nicolson, and psychiatrist Henry Maudsley, and their theories that there existed a “criminal type” possessing an unvarying set of mental and physical defects. Ellis had concluded, however, that research by these “precursors of Lombroso” as they have been called, for all its promise, had petered out in the mid-1870s; at precisely the point when Cesare Lombroso was formulating his own - in many ways similar - theories in Turin. One can almost sense Ellis scratching his head at this conundrum; puzzled that a country which had “in the past been a home of studies connected with the condition of the criminal” should now “lag so far behind the rest of the civilised world”. Although a number of prison doctors and psychiatrists agreed to provide information for *The Criminal*, Ellis was disappointed by the overall response: “Some of my correspondents, I fear,” he wrote, “had not so much as heard whether there be a criminal anthropology.” He was forced to reach the unwelcome conclusion that “Criminal anthropology as an exact science is yet unknown in England”.

Although Havelock Ellis may have found such British indifference frustrating, mainstream opinion within the country’s medico-penal Establishment saw things differently. From the beginning of the 1890s, it would appear that British criminologists, that to say the doctors, psychiatrists and senior civil servants working in the country’s prison system, had unanimously adopted a position in stark contrast to those favoured by the various Continental schools. The British approach emphasised the hands-on clinical experience of its practitioners, contrasting it with what it considered the arid theorising which dominated elsewhere. Seen from this perspective, Lombroso’s theory of the born
criminal did not measure up to acceptable standards of scientific rigour. In particular, the Italian’s unchanging checklist of anatomical and physiological “stigmata” held to prove deviant propensities was condemned as a blunt methodological tool, incapable of unravelling the complex and highly-varied causes of criminal behaviour.

Prisons inspector Major Arthur Griffiths is a typical representative of this British mindset. The country’s only official delegate at the International Congress on Criminal Anthropology held in Geneva in 1896, Griffiths wrote the following words on his return in a report for his Home Office superiors:

Criminal anthropology … has never seriously taken root in this country, the seeming extravagance of its momentous deductions and from such imperfect premises has tabooed it among men of real science, and its consideration has been left exclusively to those little qualified or competent to deal with it.

In his Memoirs, published two years earlier, he had already come to similar conclusions:

The world will probably remain very much where it was before the evolution of the criminal type. The fact is interesting, but it cannot be imported into criminal methods with either fairness or safety…. Criminal anthropology rests at present on too insecure grounds, on too many suppositions and probabilities to be entitled to the name of a science. It has been deduced from too incomplete premises, too hasty inquiries to give substantial results.

Similar views, often laced with cutting irony, were repeated frequently by British specialists on crime in the period leading up to the First World War. They considered it vital not to limit analysis of the subject to the crude deductionist model they associated with Lombrosian theory. As for the extreme form of environmentalism urged by the French Milieu Social School, that was to be equally shunned. Rather, British criminologists advocated a case-by-case approach, with the various contributory causes of criminal behaviour identified for each offender, whatever their origin. Once the causes established, and only then, could a penal solution, tailor-made for the individual offender, be envisaged. In 1889, psychiatrist Dr Henry Maudsley argued in an article in the Journal of Mental Science that it was essential to “abandon empty generalities and phrases, and apply ourselves to the laborious observation of particulars if we wish to gather practical fruit”.

In his earlier work from the late 1860s and ’70s, Maudsley had adopted a very different position, underlining the way in which inherited physical and mental traits, acquired over several generations by a process of atavism and/or degeneration, led inexorably to crime: “Multitudes of individuals come into this world weighed with a destiny against which they have neither the will, nor the power to contend; they are the step-children of nature and groan under the worst of all tyrannies - the tyranny of a bad organisation”.

Twenty years later, while conceding the existence of “savage instincts”, Maudsley now accepted the key role played by “social habits” and “surroundings”; a clear break with the biological determinism of his earlier work. Indeed, in his 1895 book, he emphasised the almost accidental nature of the outcome of the struggle between nature and nurture:

On the one hand, there are thousands who are not criminals because they are not at all, or not opportunely, or not strongly, tempted by the circumstances of their lives
to do amiss; on the other hand, there are thousands of criminals who are so only because time and chance has been unpropitious to them by exposing them unprepared to the sudden and urgent temptation, or gradually to the slow sap of insidious temptation, or untowardly to a conjugation of circumstances suited to put a great strain on the weak fibres of their natures. How many persons are there in a large city who are moral, nay, how many do not commit robbery or other crime, simply because of the strong ally which gaslight is to morality? ... Many men therefore have good reason to bless, not only the prevenient grace of their genitives, but also the special providence which ordained the special circumstances of their lives.

Dr James Devon, medical officer at Glasgow Prison, also concluded that the causes of crime were complex. In a book published in 1912, he reminded his readers that it was impossible to discriminate between the part played by inherited tendencies and social pressure, in the production of certain acts. ... There is only one way of finding out why people commit crimes and that is by making a patient enquiry in each case. The causes in many cases may be similar, but the part they play may be different.

With that wry humour that often characterised British discussions of Lombroso in these years, Devon added:

We have been reproached in this country with a failure to make a scientific study of the criminal, and the works of foreign writers have been translated for our example and emulation. They contain a certain amount of useful information, but its value is not to be measured by the difficulty of understanding it. Big and strange words may as easily mask an absence of useful knowledge as convey a fruitful idea ... The criminal is a man or woman like the rest of us, and information about his head or heels, while it may have a special value in relation to his case should not be confounded with knowledge of himself. He is something more than a brain or a stomach.

Forensic psychiatrist Dr Charles Mercier, a leading figure in Britain's criminological Establishment in these years, made a similar point, couched in the form of a humorous parody of Lombrosian reasoning. The style is flippant, but the point is no less serious for all that:

You are a criminal, it is true, but the fault is not yours. It is not in the habit you have formed of yielding to your passions. It is not in your self-indulgence; your laziness; your slavery to impulse; your selfishness; your cultivated lack of control. No! It is impressed on you by your inheritance. You, poor fellow, are visited with the sins of your father and grandfather ... In a word, you are a degenerate; and since your crimes are no fault of yours, you shall not be punished for them.

It would seem then that the approach favoured by British criminologists at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth represented a break both with research by their countrymen in the 1860s and '70s, and with the practice of their contemporaries in Continental Europe. But are things so clear-cut? A major theme running through much recent research on the origins of European criminology is that the tendency of specialists in the period to divide themselves into competing "schools", defined according to both epistemological and geographical criteria, has often obscured the extent of common ground between the different approaches. While it is true that there was little explicit support for Lombroso and his "born criminal" within Britain's criminological Establishment after 1880 (with the exception perhaps of prison chaplain W. Douglas Morrison), that does not mean that there were no "Lombrosians" on the other side of the Channel. We have referred already to Havelock Ellis. Mention should also be made of Francis Galton. Although his interest in criminology had waned by this period, he...
contributed a laudatory review of *The Criminal* to the magazine *Nature* in 1890, and his work continued to emphasise the hereditary basis of behaviour, including criminal behaviour\(^\text{11}\). The fact that support for criminal anthropology came from men like Ellis and Galton only served to confirm Britain’s “professional” criminologists in their view that interest in the born criminal was confined to those, as Arthur Griffiths had put it, “little qualified or competent to deal with it”. Such men, according to Charles Mercier, were guilty of “eager gullibility”; capable of swallowing doctrines “without any attempt to examine them critically”\(^\text{12}\).

The examples of Ellis and Galton are well-known. However, support for criminal anthropology in Britain did not stop there. Lombroso’s theories met with a very favourable reaction from a number of asylum-based psychiatrists on the margins of the criminal justice system; men like Dr Thomas Clouston of the Edinburgh Royal Asylum\(^\text{18}\), Dr Samuel Strahan of the Northampton County Asylum\(^\text{19}\), and Dr Alfred Tredgold, author of a widely-read textbook on the subject of “feeble-mindedness”\(^\text{20}\). The latter cited with approval the tenets of criminal anthropology. Indeed, his “morally perverse or habitual criminal type” shared many of the physical characteristics Lombroso had associated with born criminals.

Even within mainstream criminological opinion, things are not quite what they seem, despite the tendency of historians to accept Ellis’s account of a hiatus in the 1870s, followed by unequivocal hostility to Lombroso in the subsequent period\(^\text{21}\). An interesting insight into the subject is provided by an article which appeared in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) in September 1889, entitled “The Physiognomy of Murderers”\(^\text{22}\). Interestingly, the article discusses the description of the murderer contained in Lombroso’s *Criminal Man*, in the context of the still-unsolved Ripper murders committed in London’s East End two years earlier:

> We are prepared to admit that habitual crime is a constitutional disease, which is often inherited and, like other diatheses, has its outward physiognomical expression. [... Lombroso’s] may possibly be an accurate portrait of the wretch whose butcheries have for so long made a reign of terror in Whitechapel, but it would hardly be safe for a detective to arrest the possessor of such physical attractions on the strength of his murderous countenance. Many habitual homicides ... have been of particularly attractive appearance. The ‘high a priori method’ is as unsatisfactory in criminal physiognomy as in other branches of science, and might lead to highly inconvenient results in practice.

These comments indicate, first of all, that rejecting the approach of Cesare Lombroso and his followers did not mean ruling out a role for hereditary factors in the generation of criminal behaviour, nor their manifestation in outward physiognomical stigmata. The objection to criminal anthropology is not to the Italian’s depiction of the “born criminal” murderer as such (“[it] may possibly be an accurate portrait of the wretch ...”), but to its capacity to predict the external stigmata of all criminals.

There are other articles, both from the BMJ and its sister journal, *The Lancet*, published between 1891 and 1896 which in their different ways evidence an equally equivocal reaction to criminal anthropology. “Between the cautious attitude of the British law and the confident procedure of the Italian”, argued *The Lancet* in 1892\(^\text{23}\), “there is surely a via media.” Similarly, a July 1891 issue of the BMJ expressed concern that criminal anthropology with its “hasty conclusions and immature classifications” seemed to be “gain[ing] vogue merely because they are startling”, but admitted that it was “doubtless true that the degenerated classes have certain deficiencies of structure which show a
hereditary weakness of constitution”

By the middle of the 1890s, such equivocation had become a thing of the past, to be replaced by the kind mocking criticism we noted earlier. Thus commenting on the agenda paper at the 1896 Geneva Congress on Criminal Anthropology, The Lancet pronounced itself “very doubtful” that the criminal could “... ever be reduced to anything like an exclusive or distinctive type by any grouping of physical characteristics in individual cases”.

Just four years after advocating a via media between criminal anthropology and British jurisprudence, the journal was extolling the virtues of traditional explanations of crime, and “the influence of circumstance and motive in leading up to the commission of criminal acts.” The Lancet concluded by warning its readers “not to allow themselves to wander away from the regions of common sense and everyday experience”.

However, for all its insistence on “common sense and everyday experience” and the need for “a patient enquiry in each case” in order to weigh the respective contributions of nature and nurture in the explanation of criminal behaviour, in reality British criminology in these years was not as far removed from the model of Lombroso and the criminal anthropologists as it claimed. An impromptu exchange between psychiatrist Dr Thomas Clouston and prison doctor Dr David Nicolson, at the end of a speech by the latter before a prestigious audience at the Medico-Psychological Society in 1895, is very revealing in this respect. In his speech, Nicolson poured scorn on the very idea of looking for the physical characteristics of criminals. If the term “criminology” could be given to such an enterprise, he suggested, “the terms doctorology, parsonology, [and] shoe-maker anthropology could be applied to similar studies on other groups of men who follow special occupations in life.” “It is not for us to stamp ‘criminals’ as lunatics or quasi-lunatics”, he went on, “or to place them on a special morbid platform of mental existence, merely because they prefer thieving, with all its concomitant risk, to more respectable, if more laborious, modes of maintaining themselves”.

In the discussion that followed these remarks, Nicolson was accused by Clouston of minimising the importance of hereditary factors in the aetiology of criminal behaviour:

> I am certain that most of us will scarcely agree with you in your optimistic view of criminology and its psychological relations. No doubt most of us who have looked through the books of Lombroso and Havelock Ellis and others are inclined to admit that it is a little overdone by some of our continental brethren, but to say that the mass of criminals in this country are merely criminals by want of opportunity of doing good, by want of education, and not by their organisation, is absolutely contrary to the results of psychological investigation for the last fifty years. I once had the occasion to carefully examine the inmates of the Edinburgh prison, and if there were one thing that impressed itself upon me it was that I had to do with a degenerate aggregation of human beings.

Ironically, Clouston was defending a position here very close to that argued by Nicolson himself some twenty years previously when as one of those “precursors of Lombroso”, he had published the results of his researches into the physical and mental traits associated with crime. The response from the mature Nicolson is highly revealing. Clouston had, he said, misrepresented his views. He (Nicolson) was not suggesting that there was no truth in criminal anthropology. “What I object to”, he went on, “is that a description - honest, true, verbose if you like - applicable to the few should be held up to the world as being
applicable to the whole criminal class.” To back up his arguments, Nicolson reminded his audience of what he had written twenty years previously in the pages of the *Journal of Mental Science*, namely that only about 5 - 10% of the prison population were “weak-minded”. It was to this small minority of offenders, he insisted, *and to them alone*, that the descriptions of the criminal anthropologists could be applied; a stance similar to that defended by the *BMJ* article from 1889 we quoted earlier.

David Nicolson’s off-the-cuff remarks from 1895 are a faithful reflection of mainstream criminological thinking in Britain at that time. It was accepted that inherited criminal propensities did exist and moreover that such propensities could be detected in the form of outward physical traits, but that such biological factors could explain criminal behaviour only for a certain sub-category of criminals. This group was given different names over the years: the “weak-minded”, “moral imbeciles” or, later, “the “feeble-minded””. An article from 1892 by prison doctor John Baker is a good example of this kind of work. Baker’s analysis of twenty-five male specimens of what he calls “essential criminals” - many of them “weak-minded” and “degenerate physically” - revealed that in a majority of cases, the forehead was “generally low”, the frontal sinuses and zygoma “prominent”, the lower jaw generally “weak” (except in four cases of epileptic prisoners with “massive and square” jaws), and most remarkable of all, he notes, the prisoners’ palates were “frequently” abnormal. Indeed, Dr Baker found that only six of the twenty-five prisoners examined were “normal” in this respect.

Habitual criminals or recidivists (the latter term was imported from France in the 1880s) came to be increasingly described in such terms. Thus, while British criminologists claimed to have rejected the simplistic theories of Cesare Lombroso, and in particular his unchanging checklist of anatomical and physiological “stigmata”, they continued to make use of what was in practice a criminal type when it came to explaining habitual crime. In reality then, despite their protestations to the contrary, the criminal type had not disappeared from criminological practice across the Channel. Despite their claim to have traded the clipboard and the craniometer for the individualised psychiatric profile, British criminologists before 1918 were still ready to draw up lists of the physical and mental defects associated with certain forms of crime. When those lists are examined in detail, they are found to contain many of the same indicators as Cesare Lombroso had used to identify his famous “born criminal”.

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