

2011

# Revisiting the Detective Figure in Late Victorian and Edwardian Fiction: A View from the Perspective of Police History

Shpayer-Makov, Haia

Shpayer-Makov. (2011) 'Revisiting the Detective Figure in Late Victorian and Edwardian Fiction: A View from the Perspective of Police History', *Law, Crime and History*, 1(2), pp.165-193.

Available at: <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/8867>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/8867>

---

SOLON Law, Crime and History

University of Plymouth

---

*All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.*

## REVISITING THE DETECTIVE FIGURE IN LATE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN FICTION: A VIEW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLICE HISTORY

*Haia Shpayer-Makov*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The mechanics of detection and figures with an investigatory function appeared in fictional texts in Britain before the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> but it was approximately from this period onwards that the detective in the modern sense gradually became a recognised figure and the genre was acknowledged as a literary form. By the end of the century, just a few years after the creation of Sherlock Holmes and the establishment of his subsequent enormous popularity, the repertoire of detective characters in fiction was of an unprecedented diversity, feeding the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for this fascinating figure. Despite such diversity, researchers have observed common themes related to the detective figure in British fiction. The recurrent nature of these themes has lent itself to varied ideological and contextual readings by scholars, mostly from a literary perspective. This article, by contrast, re-examines these and other themes and tropes in the context of police history.

**Keywords:** police detectives, private detectives, detective fiction, crime fiction

### Introduction - A Curious Fictional Convention

A close look at the corpus of novels and stories containing the figure of a detective in the late nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century shows that the term 'detective' applied to different kinds of crime fighters. In addition to persons who enforced criminal law as employees of the police, the texts featured numerous private detectives – either self-employed or employees of a private agency – or others who undertook the task of detection not as a livelihood but by accident, for altruistic reasons, as a hobby or as a way to advance their own private interests or those of family or acquaintances.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, although police detectives increasingly populated the fiction of the period, it appears that not only did private investigators far outnumber them, but that these texts accorded private sleuths a much greater role in society as crime fighters. In fact, the general impression is that they, and not the official representatives of law enforcement, were the principal bulwark against law breaking and social, moral and political deviance.

---

<sup>1</sup> currently teaches British and European history at the University of Haifa, Israel, [shpayer@research.haifa.ac.il](mailto:shpayer@research.haifa.ac.il).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Richmond: Scenes in the Life of a Bow Street Runner, Drawn up from his Private Memoranda*, intro. by E. F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), first published 1827. For details, see Ian Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.59-73; Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.104-15.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'private detective' used in this article refers to all these meanings.

Moreover, save for certain narratives masquerading as authentic memoirs by police detectives in which the narrators are depicted as impressive characters (see below), the fictional private detective – whether amateur or professional – commonly outmatches the police detective. He/she is also more often cast as the protagonist, both in one-off texts and in serials, and is occasionally also a character with extraordinary attributes. Equally intriguing is the fact that in many of the narratives, the two – police and private detectives – collaborate with each other in investigating cases, sometimes even closely, but it is the involvement of the private investigator that is generally crucial in unveiling the truth. At times, the police themselves apply for his/her assistance. In the context of such relationships, the private sleuth sometimes displays a disdainful attitude towards his/her official counterparts, usually deservedly.

While there were many private detectives in Britain in the period, and their number grew during the latter part of the nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> such detectives did not in reality deal with the majority of those violations of the law most often associated with them in literature – notably murder – nor did they possess the special constabulary powers that would in fact have been required to enable them to discharge certain detective duties. The modern police forces, which spread out over the entire country during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, financed by public funds, were the primary apparatus for tackling crime, and were increasingly perceived as such.<sup>5</sup> It was the police detective departments, created in larger urban forces from the middle of the century onwards, which handled the serious offences.<sup>6</sup>

Even less realistic was the fictional motif of cooperation between police and professional private detectives, especially in narratives that depict the private detective as taking the leading role in an investigation, a theme rehearsed in many detective tales of the period. From time to time, the police did collaborate with private detectives who were former colleagues in the police, and once in a while with America's Pinkerton sleuths in international cases.<sup>7</sup> Ex-detective sergeant William Harris of Scotland Yard, who was dismissed from

---

<sup>4</sup> 'Private Detectives', *Police Guardian*, 8 February 1896, p.3 from *Reynolds's Newspaper*.

<sup>5</sup> For details, see T. A. Critchley, *A History of Police in England and Wales* (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1972); Clive Emsley, *The English Police* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); Carolyn Steedman, *Policing the Victorian Community* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); David Taylor, *The New Police in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> For details, see Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), pp.32-46.

<sup>7</sup> *Police Review*, 13 July 1894, p.333; Melville L. Macnaghten, *Days of My Years* (London: Arnold, 1914), pp.66-7; 128; 277; 188-90. The Pinkertons were members of the largest and most famous American private detective agency.

service and consequently bore a grudge against the police, maintained that many detective assignments were apportioned to retired officers 'who in turn employ private inquiry agents to do it, paying them at an arranged rate'.<sup>8</sup> But in fact joint ventures were few and far between. In any event, private detectives were not, in reality, accorded equal status with police officers, nor did the figure of the gentlemanly detective have actual equivalents. Certainly, private investigators did not have the authority to manage police inquiries.

Yet although literary conventions about the superior acuity of the private detective bore little resemblance to reality, they dominated detective fiction of the late Victorian and Edwardian period.<sup>9</sup> While works of fiction are not meant to replicate real life, the curious recurrence of these themes in numerous literary texts suggests that they reflected existing social sensibilities and mindsets. Scholars of detective fiction have repeatedly pointed out that police officers were generally sketched as 'conspicuously lacking in intelligence', as 'incompetent or powerless', or as marginal to the plot, and that private detectives (amateur and professional) colonised this type of fiction and were on the whole more effective in enforcing the law and social norms.<sup>10</sup> Yet in addressing these motifs the extant research has paid insufficient attention to the contemporary context of police evolution and its historical ramifications. The present article proposes to redress this gap by referring to the history of policing as well as to discussions and debates relating to the forces of law and order conducted at the time.<sup>11</sup> It addresses the following questions: How can one account for the preponderance of private over police detectives in the fiction of the period, and for the qualitative discrepancy between the two types of investigators? More specifically, why were police officers not chosen more often to be the protagonists and chief investigators, as in the pseudo-memoirs, especially as the nineteenth century wore on and the police became the recognised agency for the control of crime? Why were private detectives described as much more gifted and efficient at law enforcement, and how can the motif of cooperation be explained? *Inter alia*, the answers to these questions highlight certain contemporary views of the functioning of the detective police force and recommendations as to how to improve it.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 8 October 1910, p.463.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'detective fiction' used here does not refer to a particular narrative structure, but to any fictional texts that feature a detective figure.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1941), p.72; A. E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1968. First published 1958), pp.46; 211; D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.2-3; Martin A. Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection, and Narrative* (London,: Macmillan, 1992), p.118; Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction*, pp.171-2.

<sup>11</sup> Worthington's work deals with the early nineteenth century, and thus is not included in this comment.

## 1 Historical Context

Significantly, when the Metropolitan Police of London – the first professional force in England – was created in 1829, it did not have a detective department. When necessary, officers would temporarily shed their uniform and conduct investigations.<sup>12</sup> To a great extent this arrangement was the result of the police reformers' desire to mitigate widespread opposition in the country to the notion of highly organised policing before and during the formation of the Metropolitan Police and the other modern police forces in subsequent decades. Such opposition emanated from different sectors of the population, all of which were united by a rhetoric which linked systematic policing with despotic government, oppressive intrusion into political and private life, and the possible curtailment of the liberties of freeborn Englishmen.<sup>13</sup> Policy makers initially opted for an exclusively uniformed and visible police (although this idea was associated in certain circles with the military, hence with tyranny and coercion), largely because they were widely perceived as less threatening than unidentified agents of the law.<sup>14</sup> The fear guiding the opponents was that in the disguise of plain clothes, police officers would be free to spy, incite and resort to deceitful means and corrupt practices,<sup>15</sup> and in fact to engage in the kind of behaviour expected of continental police forces, particularly in France, Austria and Russia.<sup>16</sup> Such suspicions were exacerbated in the early 1830s when it became known that Sergeant William Popay of the Metropolitan Police had concealed his police affiliation with the aim of infiltrating and spying on the radical National Political Union, in whose meetings he posed as a militant and advocated violent conduct.<sup>17</sup> The public outcry was substantial, leading to the formation of a parliamentary committee to inquire into the case.<sup>18</sup>

Apprehension about detective work also stemmed from the realisation that crime fighters needed to be in close contact with the underworld, which made them susceptible to the temptation to attain results by colluding with criminals beyond acceptable boundaries. However, a few well-publicised failures to detect crime in the early 1840s, and an attempt on the life of the young Queen Victoria in May 1842, provoked harsh public criticism of police

---

<sup>12</sup> Police Orders [Metropolitan Police], 1 May 1842.

<sup>13</sup> *Select Committee on the State of the Police of the Metropolis (Third Report)*, Parliamentary Papers (PP), 8 (1818), p.32; Stanley H. Palmer, *Police and Protest in England and Ireland 1780–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.71-3.

<sup>14</sup> Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street*, pp.61-80.

<sup>15</sup> *Report of the Committee on the State of the Police of the Metropolis (Third Report)*, PP, 8 (1818), p.32; *Report of the Departmental Commission on the State, Discipline, and Organisation of the Detective Force of the Metropolitan Police, 1878* (henceforth 1878 Commission), p.108, National Archives, UK (NA) HO45/9442/66692.

<sup>16</sup> Palmer, *Police and Protest*, pp.71-3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pp.312–3.

<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Select Committee on the Petition of Frederick Young and Others*, PP.13 (1833).

performance, and fostered a recognition in the police leadership that crime investigation required special skills, experience and a professional approach, which the common policeman lacked.<sup>19</sup> To attain these qualities and objectives, a permanent cadre of detectives – later known as Scotland Yard – was established in the Metropolitan Police in the summer of 1842, though it consisted of only eight men. Not until 1869 did this tiny detective department expand significantly (to 207 men) – who were from then on stationed in the divisions as well as at headquarters. The detectives, though, formed only 2.3% of the entire force.<sup>20</sup> Other detective departments that were gradually formed in several urban forces (and in the City of London Police) similarly constituted only a small part of the uniformed police.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, despite such misgivings, during the mid-Victorian period, detectives (alongside the uniformed police) began to elicit growing support from the middle classes.<sup>22</sup> Members of these classes occasionally expressed qualms about certain methods used by official detectives or about their performance, but their role in society was perceived as both legitimate and mandatory. It took longer for the working classes – the principal target of police surveillance and detection – to reach this conclusion (and some never did), but as the century progressed, a greater proportion went along with it, even if grudgingly.

## 2 The Superior Acuity of the Private Detective

With the creation of detective departments in the country, and growing media interest in the activities of their agents, particularly those working in London, more and more police detective figures entered fiction. Interestingly, during the 1850s and 1860s, when the press was still ambiguous about covert law enforcement, certain fictive texts coalesced into a gallery of impressive police detective figures. Quite a few detectives were even chosen to be the heroes of the texts (see below). No doubt, the growing recognition of police detection as a force for good paved the way for this development. Yet, it appears that this popularity was largely the result of a convergence of unrelated circumstances that worked to the benefit of police detectives. Charles Dickens, whose special liking for police detectives was manifested in a series of articles he had published in his *Household Words* in the early 1850s, articulated his partiality most succinctly in the figure of Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* (1853). Bucket's task was to solve the murder of a lawyer, which he accomplished

---

<sup>19</sup> *Examiner*, 30 April 1842, pp.283-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Report of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner for 1869*, PP, 36 (1870), p.406.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in 1877 in Liverpool, out of 1,200 police officers, only 28 were detectives. In Birmingham the proportion was 16 out of 520 and in Leeds 11 of 355 (*1878 Commission*).

<sup>22</sup> Haia Shpayer-Makov, 'From Menace to Celebrity: the English Police Detective and the Press, c.1842-1914', *Historical Research*, 83, November, 2010, p.677.

successfully. In this assignment he was shown to be assertive, observant, thoughtful, friendly, and composed. His kindness and sensitivity to the suspect were palpable, and he was diligent and competent in his work. In fact, the police crime investigators had to assume responsibility since the amateur detectives in *Bleak House* had failed in their performance.<sup>23</sup>

Because of Dickens's standing in the world of literature and beyond, as soon as the novel saw print, the figure of Bucket became well known to countless readers and served as a model for other writers. Indeed, Wilkie Collins, a close associate of Dickens, followed in his footsteps in constructing Sergeant Cuff as a shrewd and good detective in the novel *The Moonstone*, published in 1868.<sup>24</sup> This book also enjoyed tremendous popularity. A less iconic fictive character, though one no less capable of skilful detection, was another Scotland Yard investigator, Henry Carter, who featured in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Henry Dunbar* (1864).<sup>25</sup>

Quite independently, and more or less simultaneously, the literary market saw the rise of a new trend – the publication of pseudo-memoirs of detectives, in many of which, in contrast to *Bleak House* and *The Moonstone*, the official crime investigator plays the leading role. The first such text was published in July 1849, even before *Bleak House*, in *Chambers's [Edinburgh] Journal* as the initial instalment in a series of stories entitled 'Recollections of a Police-Officer', which ran intermittently until September 1853.<sup>26</sup> Waters, the central figure, was an officer in the Metropolitan Police, who spoke in the first person about the mysteries and crimes he had resolved in a professional and competent manner.<sup>27</sup> These 'Recollections' proved an immediate success. In 1852 a pirated edition of some of the stories saw print in book format, followed by editions in 1856 and 1859, which continued to be published thereafter both in England and abroad.<sup>28</sup> This success may explain, at least partly, why William Russell, the author behind *Recollections*, wrote other fake memoirs of private and police detectives, and why similar texts, written by other anonymous authors,

---

<sup>23</sup> Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, pp.70-1.

<sup>24</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.103. The novel first appeared as a series in Dickens's journal *All the Year Round*. For a discussion of Sergeant Cuff, see Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven*, pp.120-28. The figures of Bucket and Cuff were based on real police detectives, See P. Brantlinger, 'What is Sensational about the Sensation Novel', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37(1), 1982, pp.1-28

<sup>25</sup> Braddon's novel *Aurora Floyd* (1863) contained a depiction of another capable detective.

<sup>26</sup> An earlier text which can be regarded as a harbinger of these pseudo memoirs was *Richmond*, published anonymously in 1827 (see above note 1).

<sup>27</sup> 'Recollections of a Police-Officer', *Chambers's [Edinburgh] Journal*, ns (July 1849–Sept.1853). For details, see Worthington, *Rise of the Detective*, pp.140-59.

<sup>28</sup> For the publishing history of this text, see Introduction, Eric Osborne, 'Waters', *Recollections of a Detective Police-Officer* (London: Covent Garden Press, 1972).

proliferated in the first half of the 1860s.<sup>29</sup> These seminal works usually extolled the characters of the narrator-protagonists, whether they were public servants or private detectives.

Enhancing the preference for police detective protagonists in the 1860s was the importation of crime stories by French authors, particularly those of Émile Gaboriau, whose police detective, M. Lecoq, was the hero in several texts that attracted a mass readership.<sup>30</sup> Despite an unsavoury past, Lecoq emerged as a clever, honest and efficient officer who used a variety of means in his inquiries with great success, including disguises and scientific techniques. A memorable police detective also surfaced in 1863, in a play by Tom Taylor entitled *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, in which Hawkshaw, a police detective, helped to rehabilitate an ex-convict who had been wrongly accused.

The cumulative effect of these detective characters creates the impression that during the 1850s and 1860s police sleuths enjoyed the level and type of exposure later denied to them. This may well be true, but only for the first half of the 1860s, when the booming invented life stories of detectives seemed to overshadow the many other texts produced in these decades in which the investigator-in-chief was the private and not the police detective. Overall, during these two decades, many police detective characters were not laudable figures.<sup>31</sup> Even Inspector Bucket, the sympathetic brainchild of Dickens with his soft spot for detectives, and Sergeant Cuff, both of whom repeatedly serve in scholarly works as examples of commendable police detectives,<sup>32</sup> displayed traits that mar this image somewhat. While Bucket was painted as competent, even he can be said to have had a dark side.<sup>33</sup> The performance of Sergeant Cuff, in the one novel in which he appeared, was far from perfect. He made a serious mistake in identifying the culprit, was removed from the case after wrongly accusing the heroine, and was not the person who eventually unveiled the intricacy of the crime. Characters who were not detectives by profession, and who lacked experience, proved to be more clear-sighted than he.

---

<sup>29</sup> For details, see Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.31, 33-6.

<sup>30</sup> Murch, *Development of the Detective Novel*, p.127. For Gaboriau and his impact, see Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800*, pp.48-52.

<sup>31</sup> Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven*, p.115.

<sup>32</sup> See Brantlinger, 'What is Sensational about the Sensation Novel', for instance.

<sup>33</sup> For reservations about Bucket, see Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, pp.94-5. For Dickens's attitude to the police, especially to detectives, see Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1964), pp.196-219. Also see Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven*, pp.82-110.



Whether the detective literature of these decades was significantly different in its attitude to police detectives than later literary works or not, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, the superiority of the private detective became increasingly pronounced as a theme in the corpus of fictional texts. Yet not all private detective characters conformed to the image of high professionalism, nor were they consistently brilliant or triumphant in hunting criminals. Some of these unofficial fictional crime fighters were shown to be tainted by dishonesty. The unnamed detective in 'A Private Detective's Story', published in *Chambers's Journal* in 1879, recounted the dirty tricks, slanderous reporting and extortion which he and his boss employed to earn money.<sup>34</sup> When a cheque worth £500 was stolen from Lady Lydiard in Wilkie Collins' *My Lady's Money* (1877), the task of finding the thief was given to Old Sharon, a private detective portrayed as a 'rogue' and a 'scoundrel' with a shady past, who failed to capture the thief or retrieve the money.<sup>35</sup> His first appearance depicted him as a 'a dirty old man' with a loud and fierce laugh; he was later described as being as 'dirty as ever...with a tall white hat on his head, which looked as if it had been picked up in a gutter, a hideous leer in his eyes, and a jaunty trip in his walk'.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, some authors continued to create worthy and even imposing police detective characters after the 1860s, and not only in pseudo-memoirs.<sup>37</sup> In 1888 an unsigned *Scotland Yard Detective Series* comprising 12 booklets, six of which focused on a detective from a particular ethnic group or nationality (English, Scottish, Irish, French and Indian) and on a Londoner. These offered positive depictions of their investigators and their competence.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, with the expansion of the Metropolitan Police detective department in the late 1860s and the creation of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in 1878, a growing number of fictional police detective figures, including women, entered the indigenous body of literature as well as featuring in play scripts.<sup>39</sup> Yet, as far as can be judged from an eclectic survey of the fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fictional private detectives, be they amateur or

<sup>34</sup> 'A Private Detective Story', *Chambers's Journal*, 56, 18 January 1879.

<sup>35</sup> Wilkie Collins, *My Lady's Money*, in E. F. Bleiler (ed.), *Three Victorian Detective Novels* (New York: Dover, 1978), pp.110-11.

<sup>36</sup> Collins, *My Lady's Money*, pp.112; 114; 143.

<sup>37</sup> In the late nineteenth century, James McGovan (pseudonym of William Crawford Honeyman) published several pseudo-memoirs in which the lead character was an Edinburgh police detective who was both efficient and humane. Some of the titles are: *Hunted Down; or, Recollections of a City Detective* (1878), *Strange Clues. or, Chronicles of a City Detective* (1881), and *Traced and Tracked; or, Memoirs of a City Detective* (1884).

<sup>38</sup> *Scotland Yard Detectives Series* (London: The General Publishing Company, 1888). Also see Charles Gibbon, *A Hard Knot* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1885).

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of novels and stories featuring female detectives published at the close of the nineteenth century, see Maureen Reddy, 'Women detectives', in Martin Priestman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.192. For a detailed study of women detectives in English literature from the late nineteenth century to the First World War, see Joseph A. Kestner, *Sherlock's Sisters. The British Female Detective, 1864-1913* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

professional, continued to outnumber the official variety and to show greater abilities and accomplishments.

Misgivings about the quality of police detectives in the literature of this period were not usually focused on their moral standing or intentions, but instead on their rational faculties. By and large, they were honest and industrious and evinced perseverance and loyalty to their vocation. Clearly, the fears of those opposed to a regulated police did not manifest themselves in such narratives. Police detective characters operated in the spirit of the law and their contacts with criminals and devious methods usually served to benefit society. Moreover, while some were held 'in sorry esteem' by their authors and were not expected to attain results,<sup>40</sup> others showed shrewdness and a mental grasp of the criminal issues. What they often lacked, and emphatically so, was keen analytical abilities and a razor edge wit – essential ingredients in the making of a great fictional detective.

Significantly, the cerebral superiority of the private detective was best emphasised when he/she was pitted against police detectives in the same narrative, a scenario which became ever more popular in literary texts of the closing years of the nineteenth century. Sherlock Holmes's pre-eminence *vis-à-vis* the police remains well known and was a common thread in many of the stories and novels centred on him.<sup>41</sup> However, the inferiority of the police detective was a familiar element well before Holmes's emergence. As early as the 1840s, the American author Edgar Allan Poe had elevated his proto-detective figure, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin over Monsieur G-, the prefect of the Parisian police, in three stories: 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' (1842-43) and 'The Purloined Letter' (1844). In the first story, while Dupin, an impoverished aristocrat, displayed formidable skills in gathering clues that led to the resolution of mysteries, the police overlooked evidence and made wrong assumptions and errors in their findings. Well aware of the intellectual gap between them, Dupin had a low regard for the intelligence of police officers. The results attained by the police were for the most part 'brought about by simple diligence and activity. When these qualities are unavailing, their schemes fall'.<sup>42</sup> In the 'Purloined Letter', Dupin's attitude improved, and he even paid the police some compliments about their thoroughness, but he remained the supreme investigator who got at the truth.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1902), p.11.

<sup>41</sup> For examples of such texts, see *A Study in Scarlet* (1887); *The Sign of Four* (1890); 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery' (1891); 'Silver Blaze' (1892); 'The Adventure of Black Peter' (1904).

<sup>42</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), p.74.

<sup>43</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *18 Best Stories* (New York: Dell, 1974), p.253. For a discussion on the attitude to the police in Poe's stories, see George N. Dove, *The Police Procedural* (Bowling Green, Ohio:

These classic stories, although imported from across the Atlantic, had a seminal influence on the development of detective fiction in Britain, becoming particularly popular as from the 1870s.<sup>44</sup>

Whether mimicking Poe or pursuing this motif irrespectively, a tradition emerged depicting police detectives as not very perceptive or discerning, and often as simply inept, while the private detective shone, this explains why the police often could not accomplish their tasks without his help, and why private agents were distrustful of police judgment and often rechecked their findings. Even in the celebrated novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1886), which, while not a detective text, juxtaposed Inspector Newcomen of Scotland Yard with Gabriel Utterson (Jekyll's lawyer and friend, who acted as an unofficial investigator). The policeman was shown to be inferior to the amateur in rational thought, although both were repeatedly mistaken in their assumptions and conclusions.

A plethora of texts reiterated the same theme in the later 1800s,<sup>45</sup> although the author who most systematically entrenched this convention was Arthur Conan Doyle, portraying police officers, even when successful in their investigations, as conventional, distrustful of theory, and above all unimaginative and devoid of the mental acuity that characterised Sherlock Holmes.<sup>46</sup> A less known and less analysed series of texts – Arthur Morrison's tales which revolve around the private detective Martin Hewitt – offer another typical example. Morrison, who was distinguished for his social novels about London slum life such as *Child of the Jago* (1896),<sup>47</sup> published many of his Martin Hewitt stories in the same period. These appeared first in the *Strand Magazine*, later in the *Windsor Magazine* and then in book form. Hewitt made his debut as a literary figure just a few years after Holmes, in 1894. There can be no doubt that Morrison was influenced by Doyle's detective figure, as were other writers. Although Hewitt was no super-hero, and was perhaps less cynical than Holmes, he followed

---

Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982), pp.26-8. Also see Peter Thoms, *Detection and Its Designs* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), pp.44-70.

<sup>44</sup> Murch, *Development of the Detective Novel*, pp.78; 82; 181.

<sup>45</sup> One example is the three volumes by Arthur Griffiths entitled *Fast and Loose* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885). In it, Inspector Faske of Scotland Yard was shown as having good qualities. He was methodical, sharp in his observations, knew the world of crime in London and was competent at following people (vol. 3, pp.79, 146). But Sir Richard Daunt, the amateur detective in the novel, was so much more perceptive and logical, that he was the better detective. He was the one who solved the mystery and vindicated the innocent suspect. The two detectives collaborated closely (vol. 3, p.113), but in time Sir Richard was the one who gave Faske orders, with no objections on Faske's part.

<sup>46</sup> Typical examples are *A Study in Scarlet* and the stories in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892). For Holmes's attitude to the police, see Dove, *The Police Procedural*, pp.28-30.

<sup>47</sup> Also *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894)

in Holmes's footsteps in his relationship with police detectives. These relations, though often competitive and tinged with jealousy on the part of the police, were generally 'of a cordial character'.<sup>48</sup> Not only did Martin Hewitt feel comfortable, as a private detective, about dropping into a police station for a chat and information;<sup>49</sup> but both sides frequently joined forces in trying to get to the root of mystifying crimes.<sup>50</sup> In all points of contact, however, the private detective eclipsed the official law enforcers. In 'The Ivy Cottage Mystery' (later collected in the *Chronicles of Martin Hewitt*, published 1895), dissatisfaction with the police investigation of a case of murder and robbery led the victim's brother to seek out Hewitt to ask him to undertake the job.<sup>51</sup> Events, as expected, proved him right. As soon as Hewitt embarked on the case, he immediately detected a clue that has escaped the notice of the police. All in all, his superiority at observing details, amassing evidence and piecing all of it together was evident.<sup>52</sup> He also had considerably more general knowledge than they, and conducted independent inquiries in cases under their investigation to assist them.<sup>53</sup> While he was sure of his methods and his direction, the police were often shown to have been perplexed and uncertain about what should be done. Incapable of imagining all the possibilities, they were bound to make mistakes. Hewitt, with his acute reasoning, could help them much more than they could help him. Typically, the police were by no means inactive or invariably inefficient. Rather, they were portrayed as trying their best (for example in 'The Case of the Lost Foreigner'), although even if they followed certain clues correctly, they often failed to construct the whole picture. Like Holmes, Hewitt was not immune to failure, but ultimately it was he who enabled the police to make arrests and prosecute offenders.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, in a way that is similar to Holmes, Hewitt managed the investigation. He was a friend of the police and was willing to give them a hand, but clearly he was the expert, the person who summoned the police, gave them orders, questioned them and soon acquired all the details he needed, as a kind of senior partner.<sup>55</sup> He listened to them but then did not hesitate to restart the investigation from the beginning, implying that he trusted no one but

---

<sup>48</sup> Arthur Morrison, 'The Case of the Lost Foreigner', in *Chronicles of Martin Hewitt* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971. First published 1895), p.228.

<sup>49</sup> Morrison, 'The Case of the Lost Foreigner', and 'The Affair of the Tortoise', in Arthur Morrison, *Martin Hewitt, Investigator* (Kila, Mont: Kessinger Publishing, 2004). First published 1894, p.141.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Arthur Morrison, 'The Case of the "Flitterbat Lancers"', in *Adventures of Martin Hewitt* (London: Ward, Lock and Company, 1896), p.44; 'The Affair of the Tortoise', p.131; 'The Case of the Dixon Torpedo', in *Martin Hewitt Investigator*, p.65.

<sup>51</sup> Arthur Morrison, 'The Ivy Cottage Mystery', in *The Chronicles of Martin Hewitt*, p.5.

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Morrison, 'The Case of the Dead Skipper', in *The Adventures of Martin Hewitt*, pp.80-81; 102.

<sup>53</sup> Morrison, 'The Case of the Dead Skipper', p.83.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Morrison, 'The Affair of Mrs. Seton's Child', in *The Adventures of Martin Hewitt*, p.231.

<sup>55</sup> Arthur Morrison, 'The Case of Laker, Absconded', in *The Chronicles of Martin Hewitt*, pp.191-4; 209.

himself. For their part, as so often in this genre, the police complied with and followed his instructions, and sometimes openly admitted his superiority.<sup>56</sup> Another established motif was his magnanimous gesture of leaving it to the police to bring the culprits to justice.<sup>57</sup> With a similarly gentlemanly air, he refused to delegitimise the police as agents in the justice process, albeit this refusal was accompanied by a touch of condescension.

The convention in fiction that unofficial detectives were far more praiseworthy than their opposite numbers in the police, and that they were pivotal in enabling the police to capture criminals, reappeared, with certain variations, in a profusion of other texts during the 1890s. The police in another short story, Max Pemberton's 'The Ripening Rubies' (1894) heeded the instructions of Bernard Sutton, a jewel dealer and amateur detective, and only after he had completed the investigation did they arrest the criminals. During the investigation Sutton's servant kept them from arresting everyone in the house and then told his boss that 'It's agreed now that a dozen men will be at the Harrow Road station at your call till morning. They've a wonderful confidence in you, sir'.<sup>58</sup> Even female private agents, such as Loveday Brooke, created by Catherine Louisa Pirkis (1894), were at times stronger characters than police detectives, who were unable to discover the truth without their efforts. Loveday had a 'shrewd brain' and so much 'common sense that it amounts to genius'.<sup>59</sup> In *Dorcas Dene, Detective*, by George R. Sims (1897), police officers were described as 'genial' and 'good-hearted', but it was the female private detective, Dorcas Dene, who skilfully and meticulously conducted the investigation, with the police following her suggestions and instructions – often admiringly – on those occasions when she did decide to ask for their help.<sup>60</sup> Once the puzzle was unravelled, it was up to her to decide whether to hand the matter over to the police.

Detective fiction proliferated at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> Tried and true conventions were adapted or reformulated, weaving together diverse strands to create an endless series of plots to feed the public appetite for detective tales. Tantalising storylines were invented. More and more authors joined the pool of writers. All the same, despite the

---

<sup>56</sup> 'The Affair of the Tortoise', pp.143-4.

<sup>57</sup> Morrison, 'The Affair of the Tortoise', pp.15; 39. Also see 'The Case of the Dead Skipper' and 'The Case of Mr. Geldard's Elopement', in *Adventures of Martin Hewitt*.

<sup>58</sup> Max Pemberton, 'The Ripening Rubies', in Hugh Greene (ed.), *The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin, 1970. First published in Max Pemberton, *Jewel Mysteries I Have Known* (London: Ward, Lock and Bowden, 1894), p.36.

<sup>59</sup> Catherine Louisa Pirkis, *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (Kila: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p.4.

<sup>60</sup> George R. Sims, *Dorcas Dene, Detective* (London: Greenhill Books, 1986), p.7.

<sup>61</sup> For details, see Joseph A. Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective, 1901-1915* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Charles Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), pp.137-51.

enrichment of the world of detective fiction – formulaic and non-formulaic alike – the underlying conception endured that unofficial detectives were far more estimable and effective than their equivalents in the police, and that therefore they led the fight against crime.

In some narratives, such as Louis Tracy's *The Silent House* (1911), the crime – in this case the murder of an old man whose will cannot be found – was solved by the official police alone, the product of a joint effort by a local constable and a CID inspector.<sup>62</sup> In many other fictional texts, however, the option of reliance on various other persons was adopted, including people who are not linked to detection, but who take part in or even manage a particular investigation. In the *Old Man in the Corner* (1909), by the Hungarian-born Baroness Emmuska Orczy, the police again fail to solve crimes, which are unravelled from afar by an old man sitting in the corner of a teashop.<sup>63</sup> He develops a deep contempt for the police and refuses to share his findings with them, with the result that at times the criminals remain free and go unpunished.

Yet many other narratives reflect the motif of collaboration between the police and private detectives, which took a variety of shapes and forms. In most, the private detective was far more accomplished than the official investigators, who tended to obey his directives, knowing full well that they could never rise to his level. In Headon Hill's *Tracked Down* (1902), the police officers were cogs in an inefficient system: competition and jealousy governed the attitude of the Liverpool Police to Scotland Yard, rendering co-operation between them pointless.<sup>64</sup> So cumbersome was the system, that even Scotland Yard detectives – considered 'the upper class of detectives'<sup>65</sup> – could not perform their duties skilfully. In this context of police mismanagement, a Pinkerton sleuth confirmed the trust shown in him by succeeding in undertakings where the British police had fumbled. His character loomed large, and at the end of the novel he was offered a position in the British secret service.<sup>66</sup> A few years later, R. Austin Freeman created a medico-legal forensic private investigator, Dr. Thorndyke – an intelligent, kind-hearted character who appeared in a series of stories. In them the police regularly appealed to the doctor to assist them with their investigations, or at least did not object to his involvement. In *The Red Thumb Mark*

---

<sup>62</sup> Louis Tracy, *The Silent House* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1911).

<sup>63</sup> Baroness Emmuska Orczy, *The Old Man in the Corner*, Chapter XXI, in <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10556/10556-8.txt> Stories centred round the Old Man in the Corner first appeared in 1901.

<sup>64</sup> Headon Hill, *Tracked Down* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1902), p.143.

<sup>65</sup> *1878 Commission*, p.15.

<sup>66</sup> Hill, *Tracked Down*, p.319.

(1907) Dr. Thorndyke withheld the result of his inquiries from the police for a period, accusing the police of working to obtain a conviction rather than to discover the truth, and attributing this distortion of justice to a tendency to judge the efficiency of an officer 'by the number of convictions he has secured'.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, however, their collaboration was productive. In *John Thorndyke's Cases* (1909) Dr. Thorndyke more willingly agreed to police requests, and, despite minor differences, both sides seemed to enjoy the collaboration.<sup>68</sup>

Just before the outbreak of the First World War, a quite different type of amateur detective was introduced to the British public, also in the *Strand Magazine* – the blind, wealthy Max Carrados, who, making use of his other senses, as well as his private means, dedicated his time to advancing the cause of justice.<sup>69</sup> In these stories, the author, Ernest Bramah, also featured a former solicitor, Louis Carlyle, the owner of a private detective agency, who provided Carrados with mysteries to unearth and served as his eyes. Here again, because the police were insufficiently talented, they could not defend the citizenry against delinquency and disorder and had to rely on private investigators. The duo worked with the police, but whether because police involvement was unnecessary, or because the victims preferred not to call them in, the two sometimes carried out their detection single-handedly without bothering to bring in the police at all. When they did, the help they got was marginal.<sup>70</sup>

On the whole, both private and police detectives in fiction used all the deceitful methods abhorred by those who had, in reality, opposed the establishment of more interventionary policing in the first half of the nineteenth century: notably manipulation, trickery, disguise, probing, spying, and intimacy with criminal elements. Conceivably, this reflected the wide acceptance by the late nineteenth century of such means as intrinsic to actual detective work. However, it was the private detective who demonstrated a greater propensity to innovate and who pioneered the application of scientific methods and forensic techniques in detection. Notably amongst the late Victorian private detectives it was Holmes who most

---

<sup>67</sup> R. Austin Freeman, *The Red Thumb Mark*, ch. 5, in <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/1/1/2/11128/11128.txt>

<sup>68</sup> R. Austin Freeman, *John Thorndyke's Cases* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909).

<sup>69</sup> Ernest Bramah, *Four Max Carrados Detective Stories* (1914) in <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12932/12932-8.txt>

<sup>70</sup> At times punishment was also incurred without police involvement, such as in the story 'The Knight's Cross Signal Problem' (in the first collection of Max Carrados stories, published in 1914 under the title *Max Carrados*), in which Carrados refrained from handing over a criminal who orchestrated fatal railroad accidents to the police, forcing him instead to put an end to his own life. For another text published on the eve of the war, which adhered to the conventional formula outlined above, see E. C. Bentley, *Trent's Last Case* (1913). Interestingly, in this novel, both detectives were wrong in their conclusions. For details, see Martin Priestman, *Detective Fiction and Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp.115-23.

obviously possessed a scientific outlook.<sup>71</sup> A popular series a few years later, by Headon Hill, featured a private detective, Sebastian Zambra, who, unlike the police, used a hidden camera.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, without his help the police could not solve difficult cases. From the beginning of the twentieth century, scientific tools of investigation were utilised more extensively by literary detectives, including the police. In *The Four Just Men*, by Edgar Wallace (1905), police detectives deployed advanced methods in their attempt to catch four terrorists who have murdered the British Foreign Secretary.<sup>73</sup> Even so, it was more frequently the private investigator who introduced new ideas and technologies and brought in expert knowledge to a case. Significantly, the Dr. Thorndyke character was pronounced by Ellery Queen (a pseudonym for two American cousins) to be 'the greatest scientific detective of all time'.<sup>74</sup>

### 3 A Shift in Perception

Despite the persistence of the entrenched perception of the superiority of the private detective, a certain shift was discernible in the new century towards a greater appreciation of the performance of police detectives in fictional works. Vivian Grey's *Stories of Scotland Yard* (1906) reflected the institution as a 'great machine designed by society to uphold law and order', which worked relentlessly 'in the never-ceasing campaign against crime', casting police detectives as quick, clever, skilful, alert, zealous and endowed with 'deductive faculties'.<sup>75</sup> At one point the author paused and interjected: 'Too much praise cannot be given to the Scotland Yard authorities for the masterful way they handled what must have been a tremendous problem'.<sup>76</sup> Their task was to 'stand for ever in stately dignity to protect the children of the empire from the trespasses of evil-doers'.<sup>77</sup> In *The Chronicles of Addington Peace* by B. Fletcher Robinson (1904) the principal investigator was Inspector Peace of the CID, who was accompanied by an artist, Mr. Phillips, a Watson-like friend who narrated his adventures. The inspector was charismatic, highly intelligent, civil and somewhat mysterious, a 'bachelor with principles' who in story after story unveiled the

---

<sup>71</sup> Already in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the first Sherlock Holmes text, the latter uses a fingerprint as evidence (Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.208, 222, 226). A fingerprint department was established at Scotland Yard in 1901.

<sup>72</sup> Headon Hill, *Clues from a Detective's Camera* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1893). In 1894 he published another collection of stories entitled *Zambra the Detective*.

<sup>73</sup> Edgar Wallace, *The Four Just Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>74</sup> Ellery Queen, *Queen's Quorum* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969), p.55.

<sup>75</sup> Vivian Grey, *Stories of Scotland Yard* (London: Everett, 1906), pp.3; 118.

<sup>76</sup> Grey, *Stories of Scotland Yard*, p.68.

<sup>77</sup> p.118.



identity of the perpetrators of crimes.<sup>78</sup> Initially, the artist viewed the Scotland Yard men as tiresome, but he soon discovered their worth and began to admire the inspector – a transformation of perspective that may be deemed a metaphor for the shift in public opinion as seen by the author. In a similar vein, George R. Sims published several tales in the *Sketch Magazine* in 1911 which were advertised as having been conveyed to the author by Inspector Chance, a commanding and effective Scotland Yard detective.<sup>79</sup> Baroness Orczy's Lady Molly was another ingenious character who worked at the Yard, although she stood head and shoulders above the stature of her colleagues.<sup>80</sup> She headed the female section there and was the main character in a series of stories.

Thus the representation of police detectives in fiction gradually improved, even in works by Conan Doyle. In time they earned grudging respect from the master detective himself and were often essential to his work.<sup>81</sup> Possibly the fact that police detectives in reality were getting a much improved press in the new century was a factor in delineating the official crime fighters in more complimentary terms. This change continued in the inter-war period. While the lion's share of fictional detectives were still private sleuths, and the ethos of amateurism persisted, thoughtful and skilful police detective heroes such as Detective Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn, invented by Ngaio Marsh, Inspector Joseph French, created by Freeman Wills Crofts and Superintendent Henry Wilson, devised by G. D. H. Cole, were also popular among readers. Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, the epitome of the cerebral and meticulous detective, was described as a retired police detective who had fled from Belgium during the First World War, and thus arrived in London.<sup>82</sup> In summary, fictional police detective characters generally were no longer subject to ridicule. At the most, their depictions were subjected to a gentle mockery.<sup>83</sup> It was, however, only in the course of the second half of the twentieth century that police detectives gained the professional and social status in the media associated with them today. It was in this period that police detectives

---

<sup>78</sup> B. Fletcher Robinson and J. Malcolm Fraser, *The Chronicles of Addington Peace and The Trail of the Dead* (Shelburne, Ontario: The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, 1998), p.57.

<sup>79</sup> George R. Sims, *Detective Inspector Chance* (London, 1974). The series of nine stories appeared between 9 Aug. and 4 Oct. 1911.

<sup>80</sup> Baroness Orczy, *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard*, intro. by Alice Thomas Ellis (Pleasantville, New York: Akadine Press, 1999). She first appeared as a protagonist in 1901, but the stories were published in book form in 1910.

<sup>81</sup> Examples are the stories 'The Adventure of Black Peter' and 'The Adventure of the Six Napoleons', both published in 1904.

<sup>82</sup> The first Poirot story was written in 1916, though only published in 1920.

<sup>83</sup> Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime, Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p.160.

became the lynchpins of the plots of innumerable series, both written and filmic, and the police procedural became highly familiar to a popular audience.<sup>84</sup>

Why then did popular detective fiction in the late Victorian and pre-war era typically adhere to the formula of private detectives outwitting police detectives while working side by side? The answer cannot lie in the influence of the press, which was the source of most of the information the public had about the nature of detection and its operatives in the real world. Authors often drew their inspiration from cases publicised in newspapers,<sup>85</sup> yet the narrative trajectories discussed above could not have derived from press coverage. Certainly, the press was highly critical of the performance of official detectives in the late 1870s in the wake of revelations about corruption at Scotland Yard,<sup>86</sup> and during the first half of the 1880s against the background of Fenian terror. At the very same time that Holmes came into existence (1887), press reports blamed both uniformed officers and detectives for failing to preserve law and order, and in the late 1880s for failure to solve the Jack the Ripper murders.<sup>87</sup> Thereafter, however, the mainstream press softened its attitude to the police significantly.<sup>88</sup> If in the nascent years of police detective departments in the mid-century, or before, the figure of the police detective was bound up with spies and the covert policing by certain continental powers, by the end of the century he was often presented as a great personality in the press. True the press still criticised police detectives in the twentieth century every time a sensational or baffling crime remained unsolved, but otherwise it extolled their collective accomplishments and highlighted biographical sketches of individual detectives and their contribution to curbing transgression in society.<sup>89</sup>

It may be said that the police detective of this period emerged in the press as a kind of a plebeian knight. Furthermore, although much of the crime in the country was unreported and therefore absent from the pages of the press, the official statistics suggested a decline in crime rates in the latter part of the century (though followed by a rise in the early twentieth century) that implied police success;<sup>90</sup> Yet, precisely at this juncture, with the advent of Sherlock Holmes and similar fictitious characters, the mediocre image of police detectives in fictional discourse was consolidated. Moreover, press coverage, even when critical, cannot

---

<sup>84</sup> For an analysis of the police procedural, see Dove, *The Police Procedural*.

<sup>85</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, "'What is 'Sensational' and the 'Sensation Novel'", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), pp.9-10

<sup>86</sup> For details, see George Dilnot, *The Trial of the Detectives* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928).

<sup>87</sup> Shpayer-Makov, 'From Menace to Celebrity', pp. 682-86

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.687.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.688-9.

<sup>90</sup> Rob Sindall, 'Middle-Class Crime in Nineteenth-Century England', *Criminal Justice History*, 4 (1983), pp.23-4.

account for the superiority of the private detective and the better skills with which he/she was endowed in numerous narratives, as private detectives hardly figured in press reports. When they did, they were rarely positively represented in the reportage.<sup>91</sup>

#### 4 A Legacy of Self-Help

Rather, the preponderance in the fiction of the period of characters with no detective experience, or private detectives who repeatedly handle cases of crime, whether for a fee or not, might be a carry-over of the eighteenth century tradition that the victim, and not the authorities, commonly initiated the pursuit and prosecution of the offender; and therefore the entire process of detection and substantiation of evidence.<sup>92</sup> All this was done at the victim's own expense. The official agents of the law did participate in this process prior to the rise of the new police. The local constable was at times called upon to track down offenders and bring them to justice. Magistrates interrogated suspects, but 'neither constables nor magistrates thought it their duty to do anything more than respond to information supplied by others'.<sup>93</sup> From the mid-eighteenth century the Bow Street Magistrate's Office in London (which also functioned as a summary court) engaged a handful of detectives, later called the Bow Street Runners, though they could also be hired privately for a fee.<sup>94</sup> From the end of the eighteenth century, other, newly formed, Police Offices in London tasked some of their experienced officers with detective assignments, but the overall number of these detectives and the Bow Street Runners was very small – not more than 60 or 70 – and these were deployed both in London and in the provinces.<sup>95</sup>

The detection of crime before the formation of the new police thus relied mainly on persons who were not part of the formal system of law enforcement. As in works of fiction, the aggrieved party was assisted by family, neighbours and friends, and if he employed servants and other workers, by them also. During this period, people of means were increasingly aided by men who offered detective services for a fee or reward (commonly called thief-

---

<sup>91</sup> *Police Review*, 2 November 1894, p.524, citing *Manchester Evening Mail*; 'Amateur Detectives', *Police Review*, 26 April 1895, p.198, citing *The Globe*.

<sup>92</sup> See John Beattie, *Crime and the Courts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp.35-6, on the responsibility of victims in prosecutions in this period.

<sup>93</sup> John Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.131; John Beattie, 'Early Detection: The Bow Street Runners in Late Eighteenth-Century London', in Clive Emsley and Haia Shpayer-Makov (eds), *Police Detectives in History, 1750-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p.15.

<sup>94</sup> John Beattie, 'Sir John Fielding and Public Justice: The Bow Street Magistrates' Court, 1754-1780', *Law and History Review*, 25 (Spring 2007), pp.62-3.

<sup>95</sup> For the provincial duties of the Bow Street Runners, see David J. Cox, *A Certain Share of Low Cunning: A History of the Bow Street Runners, 1792-1839* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2010).

takers),<sup>96</sup> and by privately-organised prosecution associations which helped their subscribers prosecute offenders or retrieve stolen property.<sup>97</sup> Landowners and private companies had their own internal procedures to detect (and punish) misdemeanours and deviant behaviour within their confines.<sup>98</sup> Advertisements in the press by private individuals, prosecution associations and official guardians of the law appealed to members of the public to act as detectives and provide them with incriminating information for a pecuniary reward.<sup>99</sup> Customarily, small communities preferred to resolve crimes in their midst through informal justice with no resort to legal procedures.

Consequently, although the newly created police forces gradually expanded their mandate to react to the commission of crime, in mid-nineteenth century – the early days of detective fiction – it was perhaps natural for writers of fiction to assume that all kinds of people unconnected with the police would be involved in chasing offenders. This was the reality in which they lived. The retention of this motif in late-nineteenth century fiction suggests that many people still thought in terms of self-help when it came to solving crime. Indeed, many of the private arrangements traditionally designed to help victims redress their grievances were still in operation.<sup>100</sup> In fact, the number and diversity of private bodies and agents who carried out detective tasks actually expanded as the century progressed.<sup>101</sup> Sometimes the police informally allowed private detectives to undertake tasks they themselves did not want to do (and, alternatively, provided services to private companies or individuals for a fee).<sup>102</sup> This practice may have also fostered an awareness that even if detective departments were formed in the urban police forces in growing numbers in the latter part of the century, police success in solving crimes still relied to a large extent on people who were not detectives by profession. The actual number of official detectives in the country remained small throughout

---

<sup>96</sup> John Beattie, 'Garrow and the Detectives: Lawyers and Policemen at the Old Bailey in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Crime, Histoire and Sociétés/ Crime, History and Societies*, 11 (2007), p.8; Tim Wales, 'Thief-takers and Their Clients in Later Stuart London', in Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (eds), *Londinopolis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Ruth Paley, 'Thief-takers in London in the Age of the McDaniel Gang, c. 1745-1754', in Douglas Hay and Francis Snyder (eds), *Policing and Prosecution in Britain 1750-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>97</sup> David Philips, 'Good Men to Associate and Bad Men to Conspire: Associations for the Prosecution of Felons in England, 1760-1860', in Hay and Snyder, pp.114-26; Peter King, 'Prosecution Associations and Their Impact in Eighteenth-Century Essex', in Hay and Snyder, pp.171-207.

<sup>98</sup> Nigel South, 'Law, Profit, and "Private Persons": Private and Public Policing in English History' in Clifford D. Shearing and Philip C. Stenning (eds), *Private Policing* (Newbury Park, Ca: Sage, 1987), pp.97-100.

<sup>99</sup> John Styles, 'Print and Policing: Crime Advertising in Eighteenth-Century Provincial England', in Hay and Snyder, pp.55-95.

<sup>100</sup> Chris A. Williams, 'Constables for Hire: The History of Private "Public" Policing in the UK', *Policing and Society*, 18 (June 2008), p.199.

<sup>101</sup> 'Report of the Director of Criminal Investigations', in *Report of the Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis for 1881*, PP, 33 (1882), p.336.

<sup>102</sup> *1878 Commission*, pp.174-5, 251. Also see above note 5..

the period, and they were forced to avail themselves of the services of people who could supply them with criminal intelligence on a regular basis.<sup>103</sup> In addition to informants and informers with close connections to the underworld, pawnbrokers, hotel managers, railway porters or occasional bystanders routinely provided invaluable information for the police, whether voluntarily or for a fee. Detectives themselves acknowledged this assistance in tackling cases.<sup>104</sup> This state of affairs probably in part inspired the profusion of unofficial detectives in the emerging genre.

Although the unswerving trend in public life was towards the greater involvement of government and its agents in maintaining law and order, there were those who cast doubt upon the advisability of this development. The press, focused on factual reporting, accepted the new tendency as a given, but the evidence in the fictional medium implies that many people continued to rely on voluntary action or on the entrepreneurial sectors in society to solve crimes. Detective fiction may have also reflected an inclination to continue the long-standing preference for settling grievances outside the criminal justice system. The ubiquitous presence of private detectives in fiction – whether amateurs or professionals – and the more effective results attributed to them, suggest this lingering perception. Striking failures to find the culprits guilty of serious crimes, such as those of the so-called ‘Jack the Ripper’ in Whitechapel in 1888 strengthened notions of self-help in the fictional as well as the real world.

The implication may have been that many authors conceived private service not only as more efficient but also as preferable to public crime fighters. Still, in surveying the cumulative message of a vast array of fictional detective narratives, it is evident that the tacit desire was not to dispense with official authority, but to mend it. Although some crimes are resolved outside the legal system, intertwined in the narrative of many other texts is not only the need for law and order but also for the detective police force. Its performance may be denigrated, but not its legitimacy. Fictional police detectives were not necessarily persuasive characters and they made many mistakes, but they represented a force in society that was necessary if society was to be managed adequately. Moreover, they were viewed as committed public

---

<sup>103</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Metropolitan Police, 1868* (henceforth *1868 Committee*), p.5, NA, HO347/1. In 1879, following the reorganisation of the London detective department in the aftermath of the turf scandal and the creation of the CID, the size of the detective branch was 267 in a total force of about 11,000 policemen ('Report of the Director of Criminal Investigations', in *Report of the Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis for 1879*, PP, 34 (1880), p.416. No figures were found for the overall number of police detectives in the country, but each of the few existing detective departments was much smaller than that of the Metropolitan Police.

<sup>104</sup> Francis Carlin, *Reminiscences of an Ex-Detective* (London: Hutchinson, 1920), pp.56; 102-3; Macnaughten, *Days of My Years*, pp.64-5.

servants. Although they were often assigned to physical rather than mental work, or were present only to effect the arrest, they did all they could to find the criminals and bring them to justice. What the actual official law enforcement process seemed to require was in-depth reform, and the literary conventions discussed above signalled, even if inadvertently, how this was to be achieved.

## 5 Abiding Class Preconceptions

Evidence shows that the majority of real-life police detectives came from the working class, with a minority coming from the lower middle class.<sup>105</sup> Conceivably, because people from these backgrounds were not associated in the public mind with glamour and important accomplishments, popular writers tended not to portray them as heroes, and certainly not as super-heroes, in the belief that the reading public, which was largely (though not exclusively) middle class, would not easily identify with such heroes. As very little was known about real private detectives, authors were less bound by readers' expectations when it came to fleshing them out, and they could draw on their imagination more freely. The result was that fictional private detectives, particularly if they were the main investigators, were often depicted as having a middle- or upper-class identity, and so could be portrayed without reservation as highly talented or even as outstanding.

Interestingly, many pseudo-memoirs of detectives invested their police detectives with a higher status than was the case in real life. Usually, these detective heroes belong to the reputable classes (or at least to families 'in fair circumstances')<sup>106</sup> and, not surprisingly, are indeed competent and professional in their thinking. Such a background, therefore, required an explanation as to why they chose to work for the police. Often, the answer is that they were fallen gentlemen (or gentlewomen) forced to become police officers by dire circumstances, as was the case with Waters in *Recollections of a Police-Officer*. Another example of a detective pseudo-memoir where the hero was depicted as a man of good stock who had experienced a change of fortune before he entered police service was *Tom Fox or The Revelations of a Detective*, published anonymously in 1860. Tom Fox's father had lived well and left him some money, but it disappeared due to Tom's human frailties. Promising readers to tell them 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth', Tom confessed his

---

<sup>105</sup> Haia Shpayer-Makov, 'Becoming a Police Detective in Victorian and Edwardian London', *Policing and Society*, 14(3), (2004), p.9.

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, *Autobiography of an English Detective* (London: John Maxwell, 1863), vol. 1, p.7. The book appeared under the assumed name of Waters, but is generally attributed to the journalist William Russell. One exception is the central character in *The Detective's Note-Book* (written by Charles Martel (pseudonym for Thomas Delf) and published in London by Ward and Lock in 1860), who is a village boy who was 'one of nature's policemen', cut out for the job in his youth (p.1).

'passion for dice and cards, and some partiality for the bottle', but after convincing readers of his sincerity, he proceeded to establish his credentials for detective work by asserting that he had always made use of his 'eyes and ears and said little – a precept every Detective should lay to heart.'<sup>107</sup>

Surprisingly, some of the pseudo-memoirs featured women detectives. One example was Mrs. Paschal in the unsigned and lengthy book (308 pages) *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864), who was portrayed as 'well born and well educated'. Readers were informed that she had had to join the Metropolitan Police after her husband had died suddenly, leaving her badly off.<sup>108</sup> To a much lesser extent, some fictional narratives other than pseudo-memoirs also endowed police detective characters (usually the chief investigators) with an advantaged background and a reason for becoming a sleuth. For example, Baroness Orczy's *Lady Molly* was the daughter of an earl and entered the police force in order to clear her husband of a murder charge.<sup>109</sup>

It stands to reason that the recurring elevation of the status of the private detective reflected prevalent class attitudes, which affected literary taste and commercial deliberation. While consensual opinion both inside and outside the police held that uniformed officers – by far the majority of the country's police force – should be enlisted from the working class. The controversy was essentially over whether they should come from a rural or urban background. However, the body of detective fiction conveyed the message that detection required personnel drawn from higher up in the social hierarchy.<sup>110</sup> Real police officers agreed that engagement in detection necessitated special attributes which were not essential in uniformed police work. Central to police ideology was the notion that detectives should be 'superior in intelligence' to, and more 'competent' than the preventive branches.<sup>111</sup> These qualities seemed particularly vital for the group of detectives working from Scotland Yard – the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police – who dealt with the more serious crimes in the country and with international and political crime. Its members were expected to be a 'superior class of men...with a certain turn of mind...men of intelligence as to the ways of the world...[who] can bring into a case an amount of knowledge and energy that was not in the

---

<sup>107</sup> *Tom Fox or The Revelations of a Detective*, 2nd edn, (London: George Vickers, 1860), pp.3;134.

<sup>108</sup> *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (London: George Vickers, 1864), p.3.

<sup>109</sup> Orczy, *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard*

<sup>110</sup> Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Making of a Policeman. A Social History of a Labour Force in Metropolitan London, 1829-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp.44-56; 60-2.

<sup>111</sup> 'Memorandum in relation to detective powers of police', 14 June 1842, Commissioners of Police of the Metropolis to Home Secretary James Graham, pp.14, 17, NA, HO45/OS/292; *1878 Commission*, pp.xv-xvi, 130.

division'.<sup>112</sup> This objective presupposed that detectives had to be 'of some education'.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, police authorities throughout the period almost invariably recruited detectives from the uniformed ranks, the vast majority of whom shared a working class background. This adherence to internal recruitment evoked repeated criticism, principally from outside the police, which was articulated in fictional texts.<sup>114</sup> An MP in H.F. Wood's *The Night of the 3d Ult* made the following observations:

How is a Detective Force, I ask, to adequately answer the very purpose for which it has been created...when the men who enter the force must first have belonged to the Constabulary! That is to say, the detectives are chosen from among the constables – it doesn't affect my argument to tell me that the constable may have been promoted sergeant or inspector. What percentage of superior material do you get in this way, or are you ever likely to get? They reply to you that, as a rule, promotion comes quickly, and that it is a man's own fault if he does not rise. But what procures him his promotion? He is to be steady, capable, and fit to be trusted...And out of that material we manufacture our detective officers. A man stamped head to foot a constable goes out in what they call plain-clothes, for the detection, pursuit, and capture of daring and astute criminals.<sup>115</sup>

Convinced that high intelligence and brilliance were much more prevalent in the middle or upper classes, such criticism implied that police detectives – or at least the prestigious cadre at Scotland Yard – should come from those social strata. Over and above assumptions about ability, the writers and readers of fiction would have preferred that policemen (and later women) of their own class entered their homes when investigating crimes affecting the middle or upper classes. Even if eccentric, as was Holmes, a detective from the same class could be assumed to be more discreet and sympathetic.<sup>116</sup>

## 6 A Need for More Professional Policing?

A related message conveyed by critics of non-fictional detectives was the vital need for the police to adopt a professional approach to the field of detection. Intrinsic to the fictional genre was the argument that limitations of class rendered police detectives inferior to private sleuths not only in terms of innate abilities and codes of conduct, but also in education and hence in professional skills. Although many fictional private detectives were amateurs, lacking any detective experience or expertise, quite a few of the chief investigators were shown to be professionals of one kind or another – lawyers (Louis Carlyle), doctors (Dr. Thorndyke), journalists (Philip Trent in E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* (1913)) and people such as Holmes with a high degree of general knowledge and erudition who excelled in their

---

<sup>112</sup> *1878 Commission*, pp.14, 16, 23, 167; E. Henry to Under Secretary of State, 13 May 1912, TNA, HO45/11000/223532.

<sup>113</sup> *1878 Commission*, p.4; *1868 Committee*, pp.282, 291.

<sup>114</sup> For example, *Daily Mail*, 8 Feb. 1906, p.6.

<sup>115</sup> H. F. Wood, *The Night of the 3rd Ult* (New York: George Munro, 1890), p.111

<sup>116</sup> Anthea Trodd, *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p.53.



work because of their intellectual propensities. Selecting detectives in reality from the educated classes would ensure a higher level of expertise in the police organisation. Unsurprisingly, most fictional detective texts were not concerned with crime in the streets and the petty crime suffered by the common people – which were the staple preoccupation of police detectives in real life, but which were not the material for mass appeal. Apart from mysteries and puzzles which did not involve violations of the law, fiction concentrated on murder, fraud, intricate theft, blackmail and bigamy. To deal with these, the authors seemed to prefer more sophisticated investigators.

That this theme was central to the fiction of the time is not unexpected. Positions in public service were increasingly based on merit in the latter nineteenth century and education became the spring-board to a professional career, while the need to enhance national efficiency more generally was an important issue as the century drew to a close.<sup>117</sup> Against this backdrop, and given the widespread consensus regarding the importance of law enforcement to the well-being of society by then, fiction writers drew on public debate in recommending the recruitment of men with recognised skills and expertise. Another idea in advocating the recruitment of more educated individuals into the detective service was that the police would benefit by incorporating middle class values and norms into their work. The successful fictional private detectives embodied autonomous thinking. Their activity was most often described as stemming from innate strength, freedom of action and resourcefulness rather than from external pressures emanating from bureaucratic regulations or from team work as in the 'police procedural'.<sup>118</sup> In fact, even in depicting successful police detectives the emphasis of the narrative is on personal experience and achievement. They ordinarily did not appear as typical bureaucrats filling in forms and submitting reports to their senior officers, as in real life (and in Edgar Wallace's *Four Just Men* (1905) and R. Austin Freeman's *The Red Thumb Mark* (1907)). Instead they were depicted as self-motivated crime fighters pursuing criminals in a manner similar to amateur or private detectives working outside the official organisation. Throughout most of the plots, though they may have got help from their colleagues in the police, they relied on their own intuition and judgment and made independent decisions. These self-directed individuals were thought best suited to detective work, even if their performance was at times deficient.

---

<sup>117</sup> G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (London: The Ashfield Press, 1971), pp.73-83.

<sup>118</sup> The 'Police Procedural' is a type of story developed after the Second World War in which 'the mystery is solved by regular police detectives, usually working in teams and using ordinary police routines' (Dove, *The Police Procedural*, p.1).

### ***The Ideal of Collaboration between Public and Private Detection***

Over and above the proposition to base recruitment to the detective ranks on more selective criteria, the formula that runs through many works of detective fiction advocates collaboration between private and public detection as a more workable alternative to dependence on either one alone. If in reality 'state policing tended to assume that its dominance relied upon the suppression of private initiative',<sup>119</sup> the fictional narratives ignored this premise and communicated the notion that the contribution of private investigators was essential to remedy the situation of imperfect service. Not every co-operation was fruitful and some texts mirrored the contemporary actual tensions and power struggles between police detectives and the press. In 'The Greenstone God and the Stockbroker' by Fergus Hume (1894), the Yard detective pointed to the press not as a collaborator but as a factor in undermining the imposition of law and order: 'Those minute press notices do more harm than good. They gratify the morbid appetite of the public, and put the criminal on his guard. Thereby the police work in the dark, but he [the criminal] – thanks to the posting up of special reporters – knows the doings of the law, and baffles it accordingly'.<sup>120</sup> In Wallace's *The Four Just Men*, the press co-operated with the police solely to gain an advantage, while the detectives tried to limit the information reaching the press.

Other combined endeavours, however, produced the desired consequences, such as in Arthur Griffiths' *In Tight Places* (1900), where the protagonist, Lionel Macnaughten-Innes, a former Scotland Yard detective turned private agent (thus comprising an interesting composite figure that embodies private and police detective), often worked hand in hand with Scotland Yard and other police forces in England and abroad. Their relationship is in contrast to many other detective stories in which the private investigator does the thinking and analyzing and the police implement his recommendations. Even though Macnaughten-Innes was the senior investigator, the private and the public agents consulted each other with mutual respect. Described as possessed of 'charm', 'abundant knowledge', 'a most retentive memory' and 'almost intuitive insight into motives and meanings', Macnaughten-Innes, having worked for the police, served as a bridge between the two spheres.<sup>121</sup> The significance of this recommendation may suggest that not only should the real police recruit men from the higher classes, but they should also be systematically aided by private agencies and private citizens, whether professional detectives or amateurs. The implication in real life is that private policing had a significant role to play in imposing law and order and

---

<sup>119</sup> Lucia Zedner, 'Policing Before and After the Police', *British Journal of Criminology*, 46 (2006), p.90.

<sup>120</sup> Fergus Hume, 'The Greenstone God and the Stockbroker', in Michael Cox (ed.), *Victorian Tales of Mystery and Detection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.279.

<sup>121</sup> Arthur Griffiths, *In Tight Places. Some Experiences of an Amateur Detective* (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1900), p.8.

that a close partnership should be formed between the public police and the private sector; thus prefiguring a trend in policing that was to become widespread in the late twentieth century.<sup>122</sup>

This reading of the texts supports Foucauldian interpretations of detective literature as an ideological agent of policing. For Foucauldians, the novel, including detective fiction, is one of the disciplinary mechanisms operating in modern society, which, by enforcing strict distinctions between normative and deviant behaviour, serves to entrench power relations as well as self-regulation. Supporting this approach, D. A. Miller argued from a Foucauldian point of view in his seminal book, *The Novel and the Police*. His point was that it was not necessarily the institution of the police but rather the subtle, less visible modes of social control, such as the narrative technique of the novel, that instilled acquiescence to surveillance and regulation associated with police work in the consciousness of the reading public.<sup>123</sup> Accordingly, the proposal intrinsic in detective fiction for a more efficient and competent police force working side by side with private agents may be interpreted as an endorsement of the idea of the centrality of surveillance in the newly emerging urban and industrialised community.

Moreover, in certain texts, the detective operates in an intrusive manner. As Miller observes, the police intervention in bourgeois domestic settings in *The Moonstone* constituted an affront to the community.<sup>124</sup> The presence of the police detective, and his equal treatment of all suspects, threatened the predominant social order, while his systematic spying on members of the household violated their sacred sense of privacy. Thirty years later, the protagonist in Ernest William Hornung's *Dead Men Tell No Tales* (1897), who was the survivor of a ship destroyed by fire *en route* to England from Australia, protested against the invasive questions of Detective Inspector Royds, who investigated the alleged accident.<sup>125</sup> Towards the end, the reader realised that the detective had indeed been intrusive, operating surreptitiously behind the scenes.

Generally, however, detective fiction did not call for unremitting surveillance, nor was the state agency of control invariably presented as an intrusive, fearsome body with unlimited powers. When private and public fictional detectives are lumped together they may, perhaps, create this impression, but this was not the usual image projected by the police themselves.

---

<sup>122</sup> Williams, 'Constables for Hire', p.191.

<sup>123</sup> Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, pp.viii, 18; 23; 52.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, pp.37-8.

<sup>125</sup> Ernest William Hornung, *Dead Men Tell No Tales* (London: Methuen and Company, 1897), <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/dmtnt10.txt>

## Conclusion

The English police detective, as depicted in indigenous fiction is neither tied to a despotic government nor reminiscent of the dreaded continental police spy. In fact, many writers of detective fiction articulated deeply-felt concerns that social control was insufficiently resolute and was often in the hands of ineffectual agents. The ascribed role of the detective police may have been comprehensive surveillance, but, according to detective fiction, they did not usually function towards this end, as was feared by the opponents of regulated policing. Police detectives were neither active nor strong enough. Not infrequently, crimes were not solved by them but by other people, by coincidence, or not at all. The vigilance of police officers was by no means constant. In too many instances when people needed the police they were absent. Arguably, as Miller contended, the fictional portrayal of the police as incompetent deluded readers into thinking that the public enjoyed freedom of choice, when in actuality this image fostered a more effective imposition of discipline.<sup>126</sup> Precisely because the police did not appear as a threatening force but evinced weaknesses, it was easier for the reader to accept their presence. That the texts cannot be construed as imparting an image of a repressive type of police or of a panoptic governmental style such as was associated with some of the continental systems, illuminates contemporary British attitudes towards the forces of law and order. Moreover, it also reveals the wider tensions and contradictions in society. Most prominently, the juxtaposition of private and official detectives echoed the ongoing intellectual and political ferment increasingly discernible in the liberal camp of the late nineteenth century (but also outside it, and cutting across party lines) regarding the desirable balance between individual freedom of action and state regulation. This was by no means a new debate, but it intensified in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Liberalism never constituted one coherent set of principles, and at any one time was composed of a diversity of theoretical strands and sentiments.<sup>127</sup> Yet, during the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century, a certain shift away from *laissez-faire* individualism and a gradual acceptance of state authority was evident in liberal thought as well as in the policies of the various governments in power.<sup>128</sup>

The appearance of a growing number of police detective figures, including as minor characters, in the late Victorian and Edwardian literary corpus may be read as a metaphor for this shift of attitude towards a more conscious advocacy of government regulation as a

---

<sup>126</sup> Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, pp.52-7.

<sup>127</sup> John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p.122.

<sup>128</sup> Michael Freedon, *The New Liberalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp.33-5; Philip Harling, 'The Powers of the Victorian State', in Peter Mandler (ed.), *Liberty and Authority in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.48-49.

necessary instrument for attaining social justice and defending society's interests. The police of that period might not have performed their tasks entirely laudably, but they were perceived to have been an integral part of the preservation of internal security. In this context, the superiority in fiction of private over official detectives indicates the countervailing impulse in intellectual thought and in public rhetoric emphasising the superiority of individualism over regulatory tendencies. The fictional repertoire of these images embodied a range of possible interactions between the two trends, from lingering antagonism to the growth of state power to acquiescence or even enthusiasm regarding the new trend. However, underpinning this repertoire were doubts about the ability of the state to meet the growing expectations effectively. Notably, detective fiction flourished against the backdrop of the erosion in Britain's supreme position in the world markets, the attendant economic depression in the country, and the appearance of cracks in the façade of Victorian optimism.

The period also saw the rise of socialism with its call for radical change, and the women's movement, which threatened established patriarchal values. The riots and disturbances that accompanied these developments seemed to confirm existing fears.<sup>129</sup> Intertwined with these events was a heightened recognition of the detrimental effects of pervasive urban poverty, as manifested in the slums of the East End and in the distressing results of the medical examinations of recruits to the Boer War. Fenian terrorism in the 1880s and continuing problems in Ireland further diluted confidence in the government, as did fears of a foreign invasion on the eve of the First World War. No less telling was the growing disillusionment in certain intellectual circles with the powers of reason. Other sources of alarm for some were the rise of universal education, mass literature and mass journalism. These represented threats that were seen by many to be symptomatic of a general decline.<sup>130</sup>

Nonetheless, although the narrative codes in detective fiction are fraught with frustration, or apprehension that the criminal justice system (and hence the state) was unable to contain the new menacing challenges, the advice they provided as to how social problems might be handled displays neither loss of nerve nor sabre-rattling militancy. Essentially, what detective fiction offered was a kind of equilibrium between reliance on the individual and reliance on the state. It grappled with the interlocking and shifting relations between self-interest and social responsibility by negotiating a reconciliation between personal freedom and bureaucratic centralisation. The state was the embodiment of the common will, possessing

---

<sup>129</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp.284-314.

<sup>130</sup> See the collection of twelve papers entitled *Anarchy and Order* (London, 1914), published by the Duty and Discipline Movement.

the right to coerce individuals to follow the law and state regulations for the good of society, and in this sense its activity encouraged social discipline. Yet, simultaneously, it took the aspirations of the individual into account, and even permitted certain above-average individuals the freedom to operate outside the parameters of the state and, implicitly, to guide it. Compromise was the key principle. Middle-class values such as self-help and self-reliance were encouraged, but within limits. Most detective initiative had, ultimately, to be conducted within the confines of the law. In a similar manner, the state could not act without self-imposed constraints.

This reading of the texts refutes any sweeping theories about the disciplinary role of the detective novel and the coercive interests it served. It reveals that while considerable pressure was exerted through detective fiction of all kinds to strengthen the role of the police, in reality it called at the same time for moderation and restraint in the criminal justice system, and, by implication, in the state sector as a whole.