

## Criminality in *The New Newgate Calendar*

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There has been a remarkable degree of interest of late in penny dreadfuls. Recently Rosalind Crone has argued that penny bloods and penny dreadfuls served to provide the Victorian reading public with an outlet to indulge in violent entertainment.<sup>1</sup> In general, a lot of scholarship tends to focus on specific titles and their authors, such as the serials of G. W. M. Reynolds (1814-1879),<sup>2</sup> and Pierce Egan the Younger's *Robin Hood and Little John* (1840).<sup>3</sup> This paper will focus upon a penny serial that has not yet been subjected to critical examination: *The New Newgate Calendar*. Inspired by eighteenth-century publications of the same name, its pages were a compendium of the lives of the most notorious criminals from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, featuring well-known thieves and highwaymen such as Jack Sheppard (1702-1724) and James Maclane (1724-1750). It will be argued here that this particular penny serial disregarded the Victorians' sociological, class-based explanation of criminality in favour of an older, theological explanation from the eighteenth century; a belief held that all people, regardless of their social status, could in theory become a criminal because all men were sinners from birth.

Let me begin by discussing the dominant theory relating to the causes of criminality which was prevalent during the Victorian era. The Victorians believed in the existence of a 'criminal class'. In his *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861)<sup>4</sup> Henry Mayhew reported that there were certain sections of society which suffered from a 'moral defect;' 'the indolent, the vagrant, the professional mendicant and the criminal.'<sup>5</sup> According to this notion, there was a distinct group of people existing apart from respectable society emerged in the early 19th century.<sup>6</sup> Into this class of people would fall men like Fagin and Bill Sikes from *Oliver Twist*, or the Cracksman from G.M. Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London*. The emergence of these criminal classes was seen as a direct corollary to the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation which occurred in

Britain throughout the nineteenth century, in which the poor gathered in the slum districts of the major cities. In Reynolds' *Mysteries of London* (1845), the main criminal characters such as the Cracksman and Crankey Jem were depicted as being a native of 'all the flash houses and patter cribs [...] of Saffron Hill.'<sup>7</sup> The same rookery of Saffron Hill was depicted by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1838) as a place where 'from several of the doorways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging, bound, to all appearance, on no very well-disposed or harmless errands.'<sup>8</sup> And the notion that there was a certain section of society which existed and subsisted solely upon the proceeds of crime remained current throughout the nineteenth century, with various solutions proposed for the containment of this class. Such measures included measures involving relatively harmless surveillance of the people who were thought to constitute this class.<sup>9</sup> Other measures were more radical, involving the forced resettlement of members of this class to rural areas, and restrictions on their 'breeding.'<sup>10</sup>

And yet this class-based, sociological explanation of criminality was rejected in *The New Newgate Calendar*. This nineteenth-century periodical held to an earlier explanation of criminality: the doctrine of the criminal-as-sinner. Everyone was the same – and anyone, at any moment, could, as a consequence of original sin and their inherent human depravity, fall into a life of vice and crime.<sup>11</sup> It is a belief that first appears in print in 1655 (though it stretches farther back than that) in *A Funeral Elegie upon George Sonds, Esq*, in which Sonds' life is presented as a catalogue of ever increasing human depravity. His sins begin small in scale, but inevitably these small sins lead to larger ones, until eventually he is executed by the authorities for some criminal act.<sup>12</sup> Crime was therefore a consequence of sin – an addiction almost. Small scale sins were almost like 'gateway' sins, which led the offender onto harder offences, in much the same way that it is believed today that 'soft' drugs lead onto harder drugs.<sup>13</sup> As the author of *The London Merchant* in 1731 exclaimed, 'one vice naturally begets another.'<sup>14</sup> This doctrine of the criminal-as-sinner can be found being repeated in various more famous works such as Richard Head's *The English Rogue Described in the Life of Meriton Latroon* (1665). In Head's work, the first instance of sin, or cruelty, is when he was around five years of age, for he took one of his father's turkeys, and '[used] what little strength I had, to beat his brains out with my cat-stick; which being done, I deplumed his tayl, sticking those feather's in a bonnet, as the insulting trophies of my first and

latest conquest.’<sup>15</sup> In Alexander Smith’s *A Complete History of the Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen* (1719), someone who we today might consider the greatest and most heroic thieves, Robin Hood, is not even immune from the consequences of sin. Smith records how ‘Robin Hood had continued in his licentious course of life for 20 years.’<sup>16</sup> And of course the doctrine of the criminal-as-sinner appears in earlier eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century versions of *The Newgate Calendar*. In the case of Richard Faulkner, a boy murderer, the account opens with the somewhat dramatic statement that ‘Well may it be recorded in Holy Writ that “man is born in sin,” when every year, month, nay day, bring to our knowledge some instance of infant depravity.’<sup>17</sup>

The serialised version of *The New Newgate Calendar* commenced publication on Saturday 24 October 1863 and its publisher was Edward Harrison, who died in 1880. Little is known about Harrison’s life, though he did put out some well-known penny serials during his life time such as the anonymously-authored *Black Bess; or, Knight of the Road* (1866).<sup>18</sup> At first glance, it might be supposed that this magazine simply rehashed the tales of criminals found in earlier 18th-century *Newgate Calendars*. But it actually took earlier accounts and expanded them into lengthy prose adventure stories. So the story of the 18th-century highwayman James Maclaine was converted into a long-running narrative spread over several chapters. In addition, *The New Newgate Calendar* contained news of the latest sensational crimes that occurred in and around the capital. The 28 November 1863 edition of *The New Newgate Calendar*, for example, contained special supplement relating the news of ‘The Strange and Horrible Cab Tragedy’ about the time when a woman and her two children were brutally murdered in a train carriage.<sup>19</sup> There were also pieces of what we might now term ‘investigative journalism’ such as the ‘Christmas in Newgate’ issue which took readers on a tour through Newgate on Christmas Day. And it was whilst I was reading this that I came across an interesting quote:

Christmas in Newgate! – and why not? You are free from its sombre, grimy walls, but all are not so fortunate! You are certain of a slice of rich plum pudding, and a cut of turkey, or tit-bit of fat goose...thank your lucky stars that you are well provided for. And while you revel in good cheer, make your friends welcome, romp with your children, or stir your glowing fire, do so in a spirit of thankfulness; forget not that thousands hunger without your door, and that many poor wretches, driven to crime by want and evil companionship, *have sinned and sinned again, and broken our laws*, until, in their evil fortune, they are

compelled to eat their dinner in solitude on Christmas Day, and that within the brick walls of Newgate.<sup>20</sup>

So the periodical appears to have had two functions. It was a source of entertainment but also a source of news for the latest crimes occurring in and around the capital. And it was the reference to sin in the preceding passage from the 'Christmas in Newgate' article, instead of any reference to a supposed criminal class, which caught my attention and got me wondering about how this magazine explained criminality in its columns.

In my study of this periodical, I have decided to concentrate upon tales of highwaymen, and this article will focus primarily upon the story of the famous highwayman James Maclean. It begins in a similar manner to many of the earlier accounts of Maclane in 18th-century criminal biography, by giving accounts of the offender's parents and brothers, so as to highlight the offender's sinfulness. Maclane did not come from a "bad" family as such, for *The New Newgate Calendar* says that:

The father of this most notorious malefactor was a *gentleman of good birth*, a native of Scotland, in which country he received a most liberal education. When he reached his twentieth year he went to reside in the country town of Monaghan, in the North of Ireland [...] when about twenty-five years of age, Mr. Maclane married a very handsome and accomplished young woman, by whom he had two sons. *The elder son, Thomas [...] was a man much beloved [...]* The career of the younger son [Maclane] was, alas, less fitting for commendation. (emphasis added)<sup>21</sup>

Yet James is not inherently bad, as some other criminals such as the Cracksman from *The Mysteries of London*, are portrayed during the 19th century. The inclusion of the criminal's birth and early family life was often used in eighteenth-century accounts of a criminal, according to the novelist Henry Fielding (1707-1754), to act as foils against them,<sup>22</sup> and in order to highlight their depravity against the 'goodness' of their family. That Maclane is someone who is at heart a good person is seen when his father dies: 'James shed many a tear, for his heart was naturally good, and he dearly loved his father, who had ever been to him the kindest of indulgent parents.'<sup>23</sup> Then four months after his father dies, James' mother dies also, and though he is left with a substantial inheritance, 'James was soon surrounded by the crowd of idlers and flatterers who are ever too ready to toady and cringe to young and inexperienced men of means.'<sup>24</sup>

Eventually Maclane makes his way to London, and falls in with yet more 'idlers and flatterers,' whilst trying to live the life of a gentleman, until he is forced to take

employment as his means are squandered.<sup>25</sup> He becomes servant to a gentleman, but in a typical idle apprentice manner, is lazy and disdains working, so he is dismissed, which reduces him to poverty. After this event, despite the attempts of his friends 'to reclaim him from his vagabond propensities,' his 'ruling passions, his love of dress and female society became more apparent every day.'<sup>26</sup> In *The New Newgate Calendar*, the offenders' family members usually recognise their criminal propensities and try to steer them away from their 'ruling passions.' The tale of Richard Valentine, executed for forgery, is a case in point, where it is said that his father, 'sent the boy to Portsmouth, where he entered him on board a ship of war then bound for the West Indies, thinking such a course most likely to prevent him from the commission of future crimes.'<sup>27</sup> The doctrine of criminal-as-sinner implies that crime is almost an addiction. But there is always a chance for the offender to turn away from his sinful ways and live a respectable life.<sup>28</sup> Maclane's friends evidently tried to help him to turn away from his wicked ways but to no avail. This is seen even when he meets William Plunkett, an apothecary, who sees his reduced circumstances and convinces him to take to the road with him. The 'goodness' in Maclane's heart makes him initially apprehensive about undertaking such a scheme, for the periodical records that: 'Maclane's reasoning showed that some remnants of Christian feeling still lingered about him.'<sup>29</sup> So the two men take to a career upon the road, until eventually Maclane is captured by the authorities and hanged at Tyburn. What we get in Maclane's story, then, is an account of a graduated sequence of steps downwards into ever greater sin, which is how all criminal narratives displayed the life of thieves during the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup> His love of good living in chapter one is merely part of an enduring sequence of the effects of human depravity that lead only to one place: Tyburn.

I have focused on Maclane's story here simply because he is probably the one that many people will have heard of, and there was actually a movie about him entitled *Plunkett and Macleane* (1999). But the representation of thieves as though they were sinners is repeated in many of the other tales of highwaymen which are contained in *The New Newgate Calendar*, such as the American robber Joseph Hare (1780?-1818) whose account concludes with the following:

Thus perished, in the thirty-second year of his age, the celebrated robber, Joseph Thomas Hare. He was a man of large natural abilities, great personal courage and determination, and, notwithstanding his wicked course of life, was full of

generous and manly qualities. He unfortunately fell a victim to the corrupting influence of idle habits while a boy, and his career furnishes a terrible evidence to youth of the fatal consequences of the first false step.<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen also in the 'Christmas in Newgate' article, the poor souls incarcerated in Newgate Gaol on Christmas day had 'sinned and sinned again, and broken our laws.'<sup>32</sup> Why the authors chose to adhere to earlier discourses of criminality, and portray criminals as sinners rather than as members of a criminal class is difficult to investigate. The personal motives of the authors of the various articles in *The New Newgate Calendar* cannot be known as they were all anonymous. Originally I thought that it might just be a natural consequence of the fact that the content of this nineteenth-century periodical is adapted in many cases from eighteenth-century accounts, but then that doesn't account for the fact that the criminal-as-sinner doctrine is applied to 19th-century criminals also. At the very least, however, *The New Newgate Calendar* highlights the persistence of two competing discourses in the theory of criminality during the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there was the 'elite' theory of criminality which holds that there is a separate criminal class, existing apart from respectable society, which is responsible for the majority of crime because their sole 'profession' is to exist and subsist upon the proceeds of crime. In contrast, there is, in the popular literature of crime, a more, dare I say, 'egalitarian' explanation of criminality, one which holds that all men are capable of crime because all men are sinners.<sup>33</sup> The ideology that is contained in pieces of what we might think is thoroughly "Victorian" print culture, therefore, actually has its roots in much older beliefs and theories of crime.

In conclusion, whilst the notion of a criminal class gained currency amongst social reformers and the elites of Victorian society, it is clear from these penny periodicals that not everybody was willing to accept the belief that there was a separate criminal class of people which lurked underneath respectable society. The case of *The New Newgate Calendar* highlights this fact. Offenders such as James Maclane were presented as people who had an addiction to vice and crime. They were just the same as anybody else except in the degree to which they allowed themselves to succumb to their own inner depravity. Yet this older theory of the criminal-as-sinner was not simply a product of the fact that *The New Newgate Calendar* was inspired by its eighteenth-

century forbear, for this theological explanation of crime found itself grafted onto accounts of nineteenth-century offenders also. Thus what we have in *The New Newgate Calendar* is not a “Victorian” periodical as such, but the last breath of eighteenth-century criminal biography.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Crone *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See Anne Humphreys and Louis James (eds.) *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-century Fiction, Politics, and the Press* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Knight *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) & *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> There had been parts of this work published in the 1850s, but date given here is when the complete edition of Mayhew’s work was first published.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Mayhew *London Labour and the London Poor* [1861] ed. by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.330.

<sup>6</sup> James A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550-1750* (Harlow: Longman, 1999), p.135.

<sup>7</sup> George William MacArthur Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London: Containing Stories of Life in the Modern Babylon* [1845] (London: Published for the Booksellers, 1890), p.81.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* [1838] (London: Odham’s Press, 1930), p.63.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Crofton, *The Criminal Classes, and their Control. Prison Treatment, and its Principles* (London: Reforming Section of the Social Science Congress, 1868), p.6.

<sup>10</sup> See Ruth Doherty, “‘Under the blue sky, and, if possible, amid the green fields’: The Rural Settlement as Solution to the Metropolis’s Population Problems in Nineteenth-Century Britain’ ed. by Rosemary Mitchell *Towards the Metropolis? Approaches to the Modern City: Leeds Working Papers in Victorian Studies*, Vol. 14 (Leeds: LCVS, 2014), pp.75-86.

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln B. Faller, *Turned to Account: The Forms and Functions of Criminal Biography in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.54.

<sup>12</sup> William Annand, *A funeral elegie, upon the death of George Sonds, Esq; &c. Who was killed by his brother, Mr. Freeman Sonds, August the 7th. anno Dom. 1655. By William Annand Junior, of Throwligh. Whereunto is annexed a prayer, compiled by his sorrowfull father Sir George Sonds, and used in his family during the life of the said Freeman* (London: John Crowch, 1655), see Faller, *Turned to Account*, p.94.

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- <sup>13</sup> Andrea McKenzie, *Tyburn's Martyrs: Execution in England, 1675-1775* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), p.59.
- <sup>14</sup> George Lillio, *The London Merchant; or, the History of George Barnwell* [1731] cited in McKenzie, *Tyburn's Martrys*, p.61.
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Head, *The English Rogue Described in the Life of Meriton Latroon, A Witty Extravagant. Being a Compleat History of the Most Eminent Cheats of Both Sexes* (London: Printed for Henry Marsh, at the Princes Arms, Chancery Lane, 1665), p.16.
- <sup>16</sup> Alexander Smith, *A Complete History of the Lives and Robberies of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Foot-pads, Shoplifts, and Cheats, of Both Sexes. Wherein their most Secret and Barbarous Murders, Unparalleled Robberies, Notorious Thefts, and Unheard-of Cheats are set in a true light and exposed to Public View for the Common Benefit of Mankind* [1719] ed. by Arthur Heyward (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1933), pp.408-412.
- <sup>17</sup> Anon. 'Richard Faulkner' ed. by Andrew Knapp and William Baldwin, *The New Newgate Calendar; Being Interesting Memoirs of Notorious Characters, Who have been convicted of Outrages on The Laws of England, During the Seventeenth Century, Brought Down to the Present Time. Chronologically Arranged*, Vol. 5 (London: J. & J. Cundee, 1810), pp.17-20 (p.17).
- <sup>18</sup> Anon. *Black Bess; or, the Knight of the Road. A Tale of the Good Old Times* (London: E. Harrison, 1866).
- <sup>19</sup> Anon. 'Gratis Illustrated Supplement: The Strange and Horrible Cab Tragedy' *The New Newgate Calendar: Containing the Remarkable Lives and Trials of Notorious Criminals, Past and Present*, Vol. 1, No. 6, Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> November 1863, pp.2-4.
- <sup>20</sup> Anon. 'Christmas in Newgate' *The New Newgate Calendar: Containing the Remarkable Lives and Trials of Notorious Criminals, Past and Present*, Vol. 1, No. 11, Saturday 2 January 1864, p.162.
- <sup>21</sup> Anon. 'Adventures of James Maclane: Seducer, Swindler, and Highwayman' *The New Newgate Calendar*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Saturday 31 October 1863, p.21.
- <sup>22</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of the Life and Death of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* [1743] (London: John Bell, 1775), p.4.
- <sup>23</sup> Anon. 'The Adventures of James Maclane,' p.21.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Anon. 'Adventures of James Maclane,' p.22.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Anon. 'Richard Valentine Thomas, Executed for Forgery' *The New Newgate Calendar*, Vol. 1, No. 45, Saturday 3 September 1864, p.718.
- <sup>28</sup> Faller, *Turned to Account*, p.99.
- <sup>29</sup> Anon. 'Adventures of James Maclane,' p.27.



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<sup>30</sup> Faller, *Turned to Account*, p.127.

<sup>31</sup> Anon. 'The Life and Adventures of Joseph Hare' *The New Newgate Calendar*, Vol. 1, No. 10, Saturday 26 December 1863, p.160.

<sup>32</sup> Anon. 'Christmas in Newgate,' op cit.

<sup>33</sup> Faller, *Turned to Account*, op cit.