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# Conference Report: Lives, Trials and Executions: Perspectives on Crime c.1700-c.1900, Liverpool John Moores University, 24 May 2017

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**Conference Report**  
**Lives, Trials and Executions: Perspectives on Crime c.1700-c.1900**  
**Liverpool John Moores University, 24 May 2017**

***Rhiannon Pickin***<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of the biannual British Crime Historians Symposium and SOLON's yearly conferences, it is not very often that academics who focus on crime and punishment history can gather together to discuss developments in their research. The *Lives, Trials and Executions* conference, which took place on Wednesday 24 May at Liverpool John Moores University, was organised in an attempt to remedy this. Stephen Basdeo and Sam Saunders, PhD students of Leeds Trinity University and Liverpool John Moores University respectively, were the organisers of the conference and both gave papers at the event. The former convent that is now the John Foster Building was well suited to a conference that welcomed around 50 delegates at different stages in their academic careers. Academics who were in attendance included Judith Rowbotham and Bob Shoemaker, as well as Heather Shore who provided the keynote on her new research project 'Borstal Lives'. A number of PhD students and established academics studying crime history were provided with an opportunity to speak at this event, converse with fellow crime historians and be inspired by research developments within this field of study.

There were around 40 speakers each giving papers in sessions that stretched across three rooms, with attendees being spoiled for choice with 12 panels running in total during four sessions throughout the day. The event highlighted the importance that should be placed on researching the lived experiences of criminals within history and the possibilities this has for engaging policy makers, the public and historians with these new research methods and findings. The weather brightened as the day progressed, with plenty of time for conversation during the coffee breaks and lunch, which was provided by the University's catering team. This was enjoyed by everyone whilst gathered in deep discussion following the keynote. Over lunch there was an opportunity to try the virtual reality headset experience that had been designed by researchers involved in Plymouth University's 'Everyday Crime' project. This offered delegates the chance to experience a recreation of an eighteenth century gaol

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<sup>1</sup> Rhiannon is currently working on her PhD at Leeds Beckett University on the theme of 'Experiencing Crime and Punishment: Emotions, Perceptions and Responses to Crime and Penal Heritage in Courtroom and Prison Museums', [r.pickin7956@student.leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:r.pickin7956@student.leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

and demonstrated the current public engagement work that was discussed by the speakers from Plymouth University at the roundtable session.

This roundtable discussion, 'Rediscovering the Narratives of Everyday Crime', was chaired by Judith Rowbotham. Speakers on this panel included Daniel Grey, David Cox, Craig Newbery-Jones, Rob Giles, Kim Stevenson and Iain Channing, all of whom discussed their involvement in the project and the skills and perspectives they brought to it. The session employed a witness seminar approach to exploring the ways in which those on the panel have used a comparative snapshot approach to understand everyday offending in Plymouth across the two time periods of 1880-1920 and 1980-2020. The discussion also detailed how digital technologies have been used and will be used to tell the stories of the lives, trials and executions of historical individuals whilst encouraging the revisiting of existing data to produce new perspectives on this historical topic. Two particularly fascinating points were made by Craig Newbery-Jones and Rob Giles, who expressed their views on the importance of using digital technologies to open up new and exciting ways of engaging with history. The panel also highlighted the importance of community participation in creating a project like this, which seeks to aid the learning of crime and penal heritage for academics and the public. The importance of a microhistory approach to the project was commented upon by those in attendance to the session who questioned the members of the panel about why Plymouth had been chosen as a focus. In answer to this, the speakers commented on the possibilities that arise from examining history through focussing on specific locations. This included the project's potential to attract local people to participate in this as well as influence other towns and cities to conduct and disseminate crime history research in similar ways.

One of the second panels of the day featured papers on Newcastle's West Walls Murder. Helen Rutherford and Claire Sandford-Couch, from the University of Northumbria, spoke about the developments that have followed on from research they presented in Edinburgh at the October 2016 Crime Historians Symposium. This was followed by a paper given by Patrick Low, of the University of Sunderland, who related this murder case to his research on nineteenth century executions in the North-East of England. Each of these papers took a microhistory approach to researching crime history through alluding to this specific case from 1863. This featured the historical analysis of emotions that were expressed in the nineteenth century courtroom and the reporting of the murder and trial within local newspapers, which was the focus of Rutherford and Sandford-Couch's papers. This related very well to the overall theme of the conference and emphasised how it is important to examine the emotional experiences of those who were involved in committing or witnessing a crime, trial

or execution of specific cases. This then makes it possible to understand these macro-historical issues in crime and punishment history at a micro level.

Lynsey Black, of Trinity College Dublin, and Rian Sutton, of the University of Edinburgh, continued on a similar thread of historical emotions and experiences in the following session on gender and crime. In their paper they argued how gender stereotypes impacted popular depictions of female murderers in late nineteenth and early twentieth century London, New York and Ireland. This was particularly related to how these contemporary pre-conceptions had an effect on the description of these murderesses in the press reports of their trials. Black and Sutton explained how these representations depended on the type of murder these women committed and if they were considered to be young and attractive. Bob Shoemaker and Nell Darby also gave papers during this session. For this Shoemaker focussed on his research concerning eighteenth century male criminal celebrities in London and how it is possible to better understand society at this time through analysing sources related to these historical figures. Darby, on the other hand, led on from Black and Sutton's paper with her analysis of female stereotypes affecting press depictions of the Hampstead Murder in fin-de-siècle London. These papers made it clear that an importance needs to be placed on the way crime historians examine the lives of historical individuals who experienced these historical systems of criminal justice first-hand. This was an idea that was also discussed earlier in the day during the roundtable discussion, which was concerned with how social understandings of crime in history are significant for understanding crime and punishment in in a modern and historical context.

The process of understanding the lived experiences of these historical individuals continued as a theme into the keynote speech that was given by Heather Shore of Leeds Beckett University. As many who are involved in crime history perhaps already know, Shore and her colleague Helen Johnston of the University of Hull recently secured funding for their project titled 'Borstal Lives: Young People, Crime and Institutionalisation in Twentieth-Century England and Wales', which is set to provide the first full history of the Borstal system. In her keynote she spoke about the history of the Borstal system and its representations in popular culture as well as explaining how the project will conduct oral history interviews with people who were once incarcerated within UK Borstals during the second half of the twentieth century. During this session the methodological approach and ethical implications were highlighted and the potential for the project to influence public policy was also touched upon. It was this particular aspect of the keynote that raised comments from Sarah Wilson, from the University of York, who in the previous session on fraud and legal history had given a paper on policymaking and history. Sarah explained how in her paper she suggested that

Crime History should be more ambitious in reaching out to other cognate disciplines, centrally Law and Criminology, and really liked the discussion of the challenges arising for getting policymakers and lawmakers to listen to historians.<sup>2</sup> In reply to these comments Heather mentioned that several individuals have come forward to be part of the project because of their experience of Borstals. She explained how many of them are immensely pleased by the fact this history is no longer being ignored. This emphasised how projects such as this are immensely useful and meaningful for the public as well as indicating the great potential crime history research has to influence public policy.

The current microhistory approaches and public engagement strategies that are being employed by historians of crime and punishment also dominated the discussions of one of the final sessions of the day, which was titled 'Crime, Heritage and Conservation'. In this session Rhiannon Pickin, of Leeds Beckett University, Daniel Johnson, from the University of York, and Helen Rogers of Liverpool John Moores University, spoke about the ways in which history is currently presented to the public and the possibilities of doing this in the future. The first two papers given by Pickin and Johnson focused on the representation of individual criminal experiences in museums of crime and punishment. These posed the question as to how these museums can present this history in a responsible way whilst simultaneously attracting visitors who travel to these sites for entertainment purposes. Rogers' paper examined the ways in which she can publicly disseminate her research on nineteenth century gaols and a microhistory of Great Yarmouth Gaol in the form of a blog, under the title of 'Conviction: stories of a nineteenth century prison', and as a published book called 'Conviction: Sin and Salvation in a Victorian Gaol'. The panel continued to highlight the common issues that were identified during the other conference sessions. This included the potential of crime history to engage the public with historical and modern crime and punishment through uncovering criminal experiences. This enrichment of understandings concerning society through crime history was a comment that Sarah Wilson also made in relation to the event. She stated how 'Learning about this through experiences, individual, institutional and societal, of lives lived, accusations of crime and then punishment brought to life should remain a priority for historians.'<sup>3</sup> This potential also perhaps extends to how historians can engage with external partners to emphasise the importance of interpreting history to the public in responsible ways that do not sensationalise or distort this history, even if this is fraught with difficulties.

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<sup>2</sup> E-mail to Rhiannon Pickin from Sarah Wilson, June 5, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

It is hoped that this event will inspire crime historians to continue developing interdisciplinary research that will provide future opportunities for academic and public engagement. Sarah Wilson hopes that following the conference a ‘...workshop targeting more specifically issues raised by Crime History’s potential for contributing to current concerns about crime’ can be organised in the future.<sup>4</sup> The day ended with a drinks reception, where final discussions of the key conference issues took place before delegates made their way back home. Farewells were met with assurances that the *Digital Panopticon* conference, which will be taking place at Liverpool in September 2017, will be the next opportunity to discuss these ideas further. This future event will examine the outputs of the ‘Digital Panopticon’ project, which is a collaborate effort between the University of Sheffield, Liverpool University and the University of Tasmania. The topics of microhistory, digital technologies, public engagement and the potential to impact public policy are likely to resurface at this upcoming conference. This *Lives, Trials and Executions* conference did achieve its aim of providing crime historians with an opportunity to discuss current developments in their research. It highlighted prominent discussions that are currently taking place within the field at this time and acted as a precursor to the ideas and issues that will be addressed at future events. The event’s success was evident in the compliments given at the end of day to Basdeo and Saunders, with many delegates stating how much they enjoyed this significant and much-needed event.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.