

low-life 'dreadfuls', notwithstanding their commercial derivation from the popular works of republican authors such as Reynolds and Sue. Far from recommending the values of a criminal or oppositional subculture, 'dreadfuls', as Wilkie Collins wrote of the serials found in penny journals, managed somehow to combine 'fierce melodrama and meek domestic sentiment.' Current work on narrative theory tells us, apparently, that the manner ('fierce melodrama') of the telling is not just a stylistic addition, but can work to modify a story's apparent values. Otherwise, the subtext of 'dreadfuls', like that of seventeenth-century ballads and chapbooks, appears primarily conservative, steadfastly maintaining orthodox beliefs through fidelity to the sentimental language of popular discourse. The author of the most popular highwaymen serial of all time, *Black Bess*, which is reputed to have sold over two million copies through 30 years of constant reissue, claimed in defence of his creation's moral probity that:

in no place will vice be found commended and virtue sneered at; nor will any pandering to sensuality, suggestions of impure thoughts, or direct encouragement to crime be discovered; neither are there details of seduction, bigamy, adultery, and domestic poisonings, such as are indispensable ingredients of our popular three-volume novels.⁵⁸

3

'PENNY DREADFUL' PANIC (II): THEIR SCAPEGOATING FOR LATE-VICTORIAN JUVENILE CRIME

Some attention has been given by social historians to both crime and popular culture as independent variables in the past, but few attempts have been made to look at the interchanges between the two. Victorian middle-class moralists were less scrupulous and hence their attempts to link delinquency with the reading of cheap fiction. The most vociferous critics of new forms of entertainment for the young were recruited from the ranks of the expanding professional middle class and the intellectual clerisy rather than from the manufacturing or business middle class. 'Boys and girls reared in the cellars and garrets of large cities' were accused in 1865 by Harriet Martineau, political economist and champion of middle-class values, of reading a literature of 'animal passion and defiant lawlessness'. She went on, echoing a familiar complaint, 'lives of bad people, everything about banditti anywhere, love stories from any language, scenes of theatrical life, trials of celebrated malefactors, love, crime, madness, suicide, wherever to be got in print, are powerful in preparing the young for convict life.' If compulsory elementary education from the 1870s onwards did not lead working-class school-children towards the high ideal of self-improvement, comments Joseph Bristow, 'then it would appear to have abandoned them to the supposedly corrupting influence of penny fiction'.¹

Did 'penny dreadfuls', by glamorizing criminals, make crime attractive to youthful audiences? Miss Martineau's thesis, shared by many in authority, that cheap fiction for working-class juveniles encouraged and even

instigated delinquency, will be fully addressed in what follows. The questions an historian asks of a past age are, of course, determined by the analogous issues of his or her own present. 'Anyone who reads what is said . . . about the entertainment offered to the children of the towns, about the way Jack Sheppard and similar heroes bulked large in their lives whilst they did not know more respectable heroes, must hear the echoes of the modern discussions which were in the author's mind as he wrote', confessed crime historian J. J. Tobias in 1967. Uncovering a long history of adult censoriousness concerning young people's entertainment struck a familiar chord for Tobias alongside recent memories of the British campaign to ban 'horror comics' (see Chapter 5) and the perennial debate about violence on television. His pioneering work on crime and industrial society in the nineteenth century none the less exaggerates the impact of Victorian penny reading on the young, because of excessive reliance on parliamentary 'blue books', such as the hearings of the 1852 Select Committee on Criminal and Destitute Juveniles, which promote the standard middle-class 'panic' over aspects of popular culture.²

The main focus of this chapter will be on reports of English criminal trials, extending from local police courts to the Old Bailey, that inferred a connection between juvenile crime and the reading of 'penny dreadfuls'. Where possible, generalized scare stories of crimes supposedly caused by the reading of 'dreadfuls' have been traced to a specific court room source. Misrepresentation of the dangerous effects of such highly stylized and melodramatic fiction on the young suggests that Victorian reporters, magistrates, policemen and watch committees preferred to target a convenient cultural scapegoat for outbreaks of delinquency, rather than lend credence to more fundamental social and economic explanations. In any event, the peak period for press reporting of the harmful effects of the 'penny dreadful' on susceptible youth in the last quarter of the nineteenth century has been linked by modern crime historians to an unexpected statistical decline in juvenile larceny rates. Official and press reaction to cheap fiction, on the evidence presented here, tells us more about adult middle-class impressions of working-class youth culture than about the actual dimensions and causes of juvenile crime. Middle-class observers, with few exceptions, came to exaggerate or distort the nature of popular reading so as to nurture due chagrin at the disappointingly escapist fruits of a working-class literacy that they had themselves helped to nourish.³

Across the Atlantic, rising Irish and southern European immigration into America from the late-nineteenth century onwards meant an ever-expanding urban working population. In response to such new markets for

entertaining reading, cheap popular books like the 'dime novel' were sold at newstands, station kiosks and on the trains themselves. Intended mainly for young adult readers, 'dimes' flourished between 1860 and 1885. They were also read by shopkeepers, local professionals, clerks, small farmers and their families but they were not part of a wide and inclusive middle-class culture. 'Dime novels' were part of the popular culture of the 'producing classes', argues Michael Denning, centering on admiration for the 'honest mechanic' and the virtuous 'working girl'. Smaller folio-sized 'half-dimes' or 'nickel weeklies', gaining in popularity in the 1880s, were deliberately aimed at a larger replacement market of adolescent boys and girls. 'The most ardent class of patron . . . are boys', said an 1879 observer describing 'the traffic on publication days'. The predominant audience for 'dimes' was found, therefore, among literate, mobile and entertainment-starved young adults, until the advent after 1880 of 'half-dime novels', story papers and libraries directed more explicitly at boys and girls living in the cities and mill towns of the north-east and west of America. Yet 'half-dimes' were not intended as children's literature because the bulk of story-paper readers were young craftworkers, factory operatives, labourers and servants, internally divided by gender, embracing German and Irish immigrants but excluding blacks and Chinese. Such reading matter was the commercial product of a growing industry employing as authors relatively educated professionals, such as journalists, teachers or clerks.⁴

Anthony Comstock (1844–1915), a name synonymous with American prudery, portrayed 'half-dimes' as 'corrupting the young, glamorising criminal behaviour', and as responsible for the 'fearful increase of youthful criminals in our cities in recent years'. A prodigious moral crusader, Comstock was secretary and chief special agent of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), bankrolled by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and multi-millionaire J. P. Morgan, in which capacity he campaigned until his death in 1915 to put 'dime novel' publishers out of business. Under the Federal Anti-Obscenity or 'Comstock' Law of 1873, the NYSSV lobbied strenuously to suppress cheap fiction, tightening restrictions on the second-class postage rate and arresting publishers sending 'pernicious literature' through the mails. Comstock kept records of all those he arrested, with details of occupation, aliases, nature of offence, inventory of stock seized, and subsequent prosecution. Several Irish newsstand dealers along New York's Broadway indicted by Comstock for selling 'stories of bloodshed and crime' were imprisoned until bail could be raised. While the career of a 'vice ideologue' such as Comstock cannot be taken as fully representative of late-nineteenth-century American culture, he was

still part of a much larger reforming and temperance endeavour which obtained the support of both rural-puritan and urban-philanthropic groups. The NYSSV's major campaign against 'half-dime' novels centred on the western outlaw stories of the late 1870s and early 1880s, such as those featuring Jesse James (see Appendix II), converging with the Postmaster-General's threat to remove the economic privilege of mailing under 'second-class matter' from publications not meeting with Comstock's approval. This assault on American freedoms met with surprisingly little unfavourable publicity, as compared to Comstock's more ludicrous campaigns against 'obscenity' in painting and statuary.⁵

The 'Penny Dreadful' as Scapegoat

In England there was a continuing debate about the effects of nineteenth century criminal romances glamorizing Claude Duval, Dick Turpin, Jack Sheppard and other heroes of crime. Late-Victorian intellectuals, in particular, were highly critical of cheap forms of printed fiction intended primarily for the young which they categorized as 'sensational'. The process of establishing taste differentials in effect became a symbolic weapon in the struggle between classes and generations for ideological domination. Understanding how cultural hierarchies were established has as much of an application to 'penny dreadfuls' as to any other form of denigrated popular entertainment. Thus construction of this derogatory label in the 1870s, to encompass English cheap printed instalment fiction and boys' weekly periodicals reaching a predominantly lower-middle and working-class audience, signified anxiety over juvenile reading among the ideologues of cultural standards writing for the newspaper and periodical press. 'Dreadfuls' were the ultimate in 'bad taste'.⁶

'When it is remembered that this foul and filthy trash circulates by thousands and tens of thousands week by week amongst lads who are at the most impressionable period of their lives', anguished literary critic Francis Hitchman in 1890, 'it is not surprising that the authorities have to lament the prevalence of juvenile crime'. Nominated as 'filthy trash' were such oft-reprinted Charles Fox titles of the late 1870s as *Spring-Heeled Jack, or the Terror of London*, *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, *Turnpike Dick, Three-Fingered Jack, the Terror of the Antilles*, *Jack Sheppard, Broad Arrow Jack* and *Captain Macheath, the Prince of the Highway*. A deep suspicion of mass fiction also long persisted among unbending Tory evangelicals, such as fac-

tory reformer the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury. In apocalyptic mood, he warned a meeting of the Pure Literature Society in 1868 that if 'pernicious' juvenile literature went on unchecked, within four or five years, 'they would see such a development of infidelity and profligacy, and of everything that was subversive of society and antagonistic to religion, as to terrify them to their hearts core'.⁷

'The police-court reports in the newspapers are alone sufficient proof of the harm done by the "penny dreadfuls"', according to an editorial in the first issue of *The Halfpenny Marvel*, a new boys' weekly started by Alfred Harmsworth in 1893 to undercut his rivals:

It is almost a daily occurrence with magistrates to have before them boys who, having read a number of 'dreadfuls', followed the examples set forth in such publications, robbed their employers, bought revolvers with the proceeds, and finished by running away from home, and installing themselves in the back streets as 'highwaymen'. This and many other evils the 'penny dreadful' is responsible for. It makes thieves of the coming generation, and so helps fill our gaols.

Harmsworth, later Lord Northcliffe, found it convenient to endorse the 'moral panic' scenario linking 'penny dreadfuls' with crime for sound commercial reasons, sanctimoniously offering a 'healthy' antidote to their 'poisonous' influence with his own, equally improbable, boys' weeklies.⁸

Cheap serialized fiction and weekly periodicals were accused of provoking the commission of juvenile crimes ranging from theft to murder. Such allegations will be tested here through close analysis of specific legal attempts to identify delinquent acts with the reading of 'penny dreadfuls'; thereby creating a 'moral panic' in the public mind linking popular culture with a complex phenomenon such as disaffected urban youth. Periodic 'moral panics' related to fear of the latter temporarily involved a much wider section of society than those active in censorship campaigns. A reductionist cause-and-effect argument that impressionable youth would necessarily imitate criminal acts dramatized on stage or fictionalized in weekly serials was commonplace in this period. In part this was a Platonist paradigm of art influencing life inherited from the eighteenth century, but it was also a Victorian middle-class 'panic' reaction to supposedly rising urban crime rates, coincident with a vast outpouring of cheap entertainment for the new proletariat. Working man Thomas Wright was more sceptical, pointing out that 'the admiration for things criminal of the

boy-readers of the "dreadfuls" is abstract and theoretic, not practical and imitative'.⁹

Is it possible to ascertain the power of 'penny dreadfuls' either to entertain or corrupt? Focusing merely on the critical reaction to popular icons immortalized in print, such as Jack Sheppard and Spring-Heeled Jack, reveals much about Victorian middle-class attitudes towards youth, crime and popular entertainment, but little about the actual culture which inspired such moral disapproval. A content analysis of 'penny dreadfuls', on the other hand, in terms of their cultural conventions, symbolic codes and linguistic discourse, cannot alone prove or disprove sweeping claims that popular fiction had the power to corrupt innocent youth. Instead, what follows approaches how the label 'penny dreadful' was constructed from above by middle-class journalists, and came to be equated with juvenile delinquency, by drawing on the public reporting of selected criminal prosecutions. An urbanized and commercialized popular culture was on trial here as much as the youthful defendants.

The Campaign against Highwayman Dreadfuls

'Give me a highwayman and I was full to the brim; a Jacobite would do, but the highwayman was my favourite dish', recalled novelist Robert Louis Stevenson of his Edinburgh boyhood reading in the 1860s. 'I can still hear that merry clatter of the hoofs along the moonlit lane . . . and the words "post-chaise", the "great North road", "ostler", and "nag" still sound in my ears like poetry.' Yet in 1874 James Greenwood urged his fellow scribblers to use their pens lance-wise 'in assaulting and killing the hideous dragon that, in the shape of "Boy Highwaymen" and "Knights of the Road", of late years has been nestling with our boys, growing every day more daring and pestilential.' Highwaymen titles were singled out, in what was otherwise an all-embracing indictment of the 'penny dreadful', because they offered an heroic and romanticized image of criminals on horseback successfully defying ineffective Hanoverian law officers.¹⁰

'No doubt it appears, at first sight, the name was gained by highway robbery', ran a vindictory advertisement for a new Hogarth House edition of *Tyburn Dick, the Boy King of the Highwaymen* (c.1878). 'This is quite a mistake, as the hero was a young nobleman, but, being in the way of his high-born mother's schemes, the unnatural parent used every means within her power to drive her handsome son to commit crime, and in this she was

aided by the celebrated thief-taker Jonathan Wild.' The contents of *Tyburn Dick* were further extolled by this handbill, denying sordid criminal motives, as romantic adventures set in a vanished age. Certainly the anonymous author studiously avoids reference to the squalor, greed, blood and violence of real Newgate crime. Instead, the reader is offered conventional melodrama, or 'the life and exploits of an unfortunate but gallant young nobleman, who was hounded almost to the gallows by his unnatural relatives, and who, after many struggles, regained his position and estates, thus entirely defeating his enemies'. Romantic and chivalric, the stereotyped highwaymen in 'penny dreadfuls' represented no real threat to social hierarchy, for these heroic adventurers were typically idealized gentlemen, even noblemen. There is abundant evidence that highwaymen were indeed of a higher social and educational level than other eighteenth-century criminals, but parsons' sons and aspiring artisans featured more often than dispossessed noblemen.¹¹

Popular highwaymen serials published by the Newsagents' Publishing Company (NPC) made several appearances in court as the specific instigators of juvenile crime. In May 1868, for example, a boy of 14 was charged before the Worship Street magistrate in Finsbury, north-east London, with the heinous crime of having stolen two sacks from his employers. The arresting officer, Inspector Fife, discovered on the prisoner, besides the stolen property, issues of Edwin Brett's long-running *Boys of England* and reprints of the NPC weekly instalment series *Tales of Highwaymen; or, Life on the Road* (1865-6), 'both referring to the achievements of notorious malefactors, which were invested with alluring colours of heroism and magnanimity'. The unfortunate accused was sent to prison for a fortnight on hard labour and Mr Ellison, the magistrate, recommended that steps be taken by the Inspector to prosecute the appropriate printer. 'It was greatly to be wished that something could be done to suppress such publications, which are quite as mischievous in their way as the particular kind of books contemplated by Lord Campbell's [Obscene Publications] Act are in theirs.'¹²

Rather than being a Newgate-Calendar-style compendium of sordid real-life criminal biographies, in actuality *Tales of Highwaymen* was entirely imaginary. It contained such far-fetched continuous stories as 'Captain Macheath, the Daring Highwayman and the Black Rider of Hounslow'; 'The Shadowless Rider; or, The League of the Cross of Blood. A Mystery of the King's Highway'; and 'Black Hugh; or, the Forty Thieves of London'. There is a strong reliance upon excessive Gothic elements, typical of the NPC 'dreadful' in the mid-1860s, rather than the fully realized iconography of the highwayman tale evident in publisher Edward

Harrison's best-selling *Black Bess; or, The Knight of the Road* (1863–8). This voluminous serial of 254 weekly parts featured the adventures and narrow escapes from Tyburn of Dick Turpin, Tom King, Claude Duval and Jack Rann (Sixteen-String Jack), readers not being satisfied with one highwayman, despite the fact that Turpin lived in the early-eighteenth century and Duval in the mid-seventeenth. *Tales of Highwaymen* looked back to the Lloyd-style 'penny bloods' of the 1840s, as well as forward to serials for the young such as Aldine's *Dick Turpin Library* (1902–9) which presented the highwayman as some kind of admirable and charismatic Robin Hood figure.¹³

'Captain Macheath' from *Tales of Highwaymen* is an innocuous historical melodrama that opens at a masquerade ball held in early-eighteenth-century London's Vauxhall Gardens. On the way to her carriage, Lady Ellen Wayne is almost robbed of her jewels by the devilish Black Rider of Hounslow, until interrupted by the 'daring' highwayman's convenient arrival, sword in hand. "Captain Macheath", said the Black Rider, as, mad with pain and baffled in his purpose, he glared at his antagonist, "we are deadly foes from tonight; beware of me, and take care of her. The Black Rider never forgives." The hack author was anxious to pad out his material with extraneous diversions, so there follow several retrospective chapters devoted to Neapolitan beauty Lulinne's experience of kidnapping at the hands of Italian brigands, a popular theme in mid-Victorian escapist fiction. She is eventually taken by brigand chief Signor Adriani, a confederate of the Black Rider, to a deserted house in Highgate. Macheath is soon in hot pursuit. "Come, gentlemen, to the haunt of our foes. This will be a night of blood, for we go to a den of savage wolves", he cries.¹⁴

A reissue of *Tales of Highwaymen* was also to figure prominently in the court reports of an 1872 office theft in the Gray's Inn area of central London. Seventeen-year-old Joseph Bennett and his younger confederate, George Constable, were charged at Bow Street petty sessions (magistrates courts) with breaking and entering. George Wyatt, the chief clerk of Messrs Wigg and Oliver, a firm of architects in Bedford Row, Holborn, stated that, arriving at work, he had found Constable there before him. The boy clerk, on going to his desk and attempting to open it, claimed that his drawer had been cut into and robbed of five pounds and ten shillings. Suspicious circumstances led to the police suspecting Constable. The arresting officer, Police Constable Chamberlain, in his testimony to the court, appeared to regard the accused boy's reading of highwaymen tales as almost synonymous with criminal intent:

Yesterday afternoon about 4 o'clock, I went to 7 Bedford Row. I saw Mr. Wyatt in the office. Mr. Wyatt asked me to look at the drawer in the table. Constable was present. I asked Constable for the key. He said, 'I have it; I took it home with me'. Amongst the papers [in the desk] were some numbers of a weekly publication called *Tales of Highwaymen; or, Life on the Road*, with coloured and other illustrations. I said, 'That looks bad to read such things as these'. He touched me on the arm and said, 'Come outside, I want to speak to you'. I went on to the landing with him, and he said, 'I have been tempted to do this by reading the tales, and by a young man named Bennett, clerk to a solicitor in Furnivals Inn. He was in our office and saw the money and asked me to take it, adding that if I did not he would round on me and tell my master something. I believe he broke in last evening about seven o'clock. I knew he was going to do it, but I have not seen him since'. I took him into custody.

Guilt was inferred from mere possession of *Tales of Highwaymen* ('That looks bad to read such things as these'). Constable, despite obvious intimidation ('tell my master something'), may well not have participated in the actual theft, making it difficult to see the direct relevance of his reading habits. On the other hand, the young clerk's reported confession ('I have been tempted to do this by reading the tales') bears all the familiar signs of an attempt to mitigate a crime before a credulous law officer by shifting the blame onto popular entertainment.¹⁵

Literary critic Francis Hitchman, intent on linking the reading of cheap highwaymen stories with actual criminal behaviour, was easily deceived by testimony such as the above:

An errand boy or an office lad is caught in the act of robbing his master – 'frisking the till', embezzlement, or forgery. In his desk are found sundry numbers of these romances of the road, a cheap revolver, a small stock of cartridges, and a black mask. A little pressure brings out the confession that those 'properties' have been bought by the youthful culprit with the intention of emulating the 'knights of the road', the tale of whose exploits has fascinated him. It is necessary, for the sake of other lads in the same employment, to press for a conviction, and the boy is taken off to prison, to come out a passed recruit of the great army of crime.

'Penny dreadful' authors had a ready response to such simplistic indictments: 'Let not the "Life of Robin Hood" fall into the hands of such a one,

or, sure as fate, Sherwood Forest would be his destination, with a bow and arrows for his stock-in-trade.¹⁶

The contemporaneous report of a county court hearing, headed 'A Desperate Highwayman', also proffered the titles of some popular highwayman serials used in evidence by the prosecution. A youth of about 19 named Purdue had been arrested in rural Berkshire for daylight robbery. By trade a house painter, this 'modern Jack Sheppard' was caught wearing a mask and carrying a pistol. The so-called 'highwayman' had presented the pistol at his victims and, under threat of blowing out their brains if they raised an alarm, had stolen their watches and money. Eventually, a young victim held Purdue by the waist after a scuffle and brought assistance, whereupon the thief was lodged in the county lock-up at Speenhamland, the village which gave its name to the late eighteenth-century parish 'outdoor relief' system. The local constabulary, having discovered that their prisoner 'kept company' with a girl in service at Newbury, collected from her a quantity of penny serials left in her safe-keeping by the accused, among them reissued weekly parts of the long-running Dick Turpin serial *Black Bess* and its less popular sequel *The Black Highwayman* (1866-8), both credited to Edward Viles. Local law officers also found portraits of Turpin, masked in the style Purdue adopted, and a coloured engraving, of the kind given away free with the first two issues of penny serials, captioned: 'The Black Highwayman and Captain Hawk Rescuing the Countess of Blacklake'. This alone proved damning because the obviously impressionable Purdue had apparently told the victims of his three robberies that 'if any one desired to know who had stopped them, it was "Captain Hawk"'. Purdue's evident taste for 'penny dreadfuls' was probably not as crucial a determinant as the above incriminating evidence might suggest, given that other possible motives for his crimes, such as seasonal unemployment, were excluded by both police and judiciary.¹⁷

In the second weekly part of *Black Bess*, its anonymous author, now thought to be hack writer John Frederick Smith (1803-90), defended the highwayman story against criticism that 'the narration of such incidents as pertain to a highwayman's career, would tend to make the thoughtless endeavour to imitate them'. He pointed out that bold highwaymen who cried 'Stand and deliver!' were essentially figures from the past who had become as redundant as the stagecoach in the new age of the railway. How could anyone be ridiculous enough, in present-day society, to attempt to emulate their deeds? For the highwayman story was a chivalric romance about a vanished era, the courageous hero went about like a knight-errant redressing social wrongs in the course of adventures among high and low.

The truth was that 'those persons whose ordinary life is monotonous and void of incident, devour with avidity all tales of wild and wonderful adventure, for the simple reason that they present so vivid and remarkable a contrast to the routine of their own existence'. Penny fiction provided a cathartic fantasy escape from law-abiding everyday lives pursued in school, office, warehouse and workshop. Besides, someone like Purdue, who was weak-minded enough to think he could imitate the highwayman of fiction, 'would be just as likely, after reading some romance of chivalry, to don a suit of armour, and set out in quest of adventures like Don Quixote'.¹⁸

Prosecution of *The Wild Boys*

The only hard evidence of a major prosecution against a specific 'penny dreadful' unrelated to a juvenile crime was that brought against *The Wild Boys of London* by the Society for the Suppression of Vice (SSV) under the obscenity law. The SSV was founded in 1802 by orthodox churchmen not, as commonly assumed, by William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, largely to prevent the publication of blasphemous, licentious and obscene books and prints. It bore no relation to the New York society associated with Anthony Comstock. Late in 1877, a Mr Collette, the revived SSV's current solicitor, applied at Guildhall police court before Alderman Sir Andrew Lusk to take out a summons against the Shoe Lane, Fleet Street, printers of *The Wild Boys*. This was a reprint put out by publisher George Farrah a full 13 years after the serial's first NPC appearance. Charges were made under Lord Campbell's Obscene Publications Act of 1857, one of the great monuments to militant morality in mid-Victorian England which was also used in the 1950s to eradicate Hank Janson paperbacks popular among young adult males (see Appendix III). Police Inspector Peele and several police constables, acting at the Society's direction, had already visited 11 newsagents and seized upwards of 4000 copies of the serial's weekly parts. Collette, in making his application, claimed rather imprecisely that 'at its first start the publication appeared to be perfectly moral, but after some numbers had been published, a very immoral story appeared, which became worse as the numbers progressed'. Sir Andrew said he had read one or two passages from the publication referred to, 'and they were fearful. The prosecution was a very just one, and he thanked the Society for the Suppression of Vice for taking it up'.¹⁹

No sooner were the objectionable passages pointed out to the printers than they offered to give up the stereotype plates, recall all the numbers possible, 'and do all in their power to stop the publication of such trash'. The summons against them was consequently withdrawn. The SSV's case against the newsvendors was heard at Bow Street police court where the magistrate, Mr Flowers, declared that 'while the offending items were not so openly obscene as the books generally brought to this court under Lord Campbell's Act still, perhaps, they were even worse in their effect, for they were sufficiently well written as not to excite the same disgust the other books did'. Nearly all the defendants conveniently agreed with the magistrate that the serials should be destroyed, declaring with suspicious rectitude that had they had time to read them and find out the nature of their contents, they would never have sold them in the first place. These summonses were, with one exception, settled by the newsagents each paying two shillings costs.²⁰

The exception was an unconventional newsagent named John Wells from 76 Theobalds Road who took issue with the police over the infringement of his trueborn English liberties, indignantly refusing to have the serial destroyed, 'on the ground that he was not going to be treated like a child, that worse books were sold every day, and that he was a respectable man'. The magistrate told him he could not be respectable if he sold indecent books and his case was adjourned, pending the outcome of yet another summons taken out at Guildhall against the proprietor and publisher of *The Wild Boys of London*. Eventually, solicitor Collette told Alderman Lusk, just before Christmas 1877, that neither of these gentlemen had put in an appearance in court but that a letter had been received from them, indicating that they would agree to follow the example of the retail tradesmen and consent to the destruction of their publication. Accordingly, newsagent Wells was alone recalled to Bow Street and told that if he still refused to follow suit then the case would be sent for trial.²¹

A Dickensian exchange now took place between the magistrate and the newsagent which is worth citing in full, if only because its comic absurdity could have graced either the trial of Bardell and Pickwick or, a century later, the court of Beachcomber's Mr. Justice Cocklecarrot:

MR. FLOWERS: Well, Mr. Wells, what do you say now?

DEFENDANT: I wish, first of all, to apologize for my unseemly behaviour last week.

MR. FLOWERS: Oh, that's nothing.

DEFENDANT: Oh, but it is. It was my first appearance in a police court, and I felt the injustice of my case. You, I believe (*turning to Mr. Collette*) say you represent the society. Which society? What society?

MR. COLLETTE: Never mind.

DEFENDANT: But I do mind. Are you the treasurer? Are you the committee? Are you the chairman? What is your system?

MR. DOUGLAS, THE CLERK: Keep the man quiet.

DEFENDANT: But I have suffered severely through a false report getting into the paper. Who is the Reporter of this Court? Where is the penny-a-liner who sent such an account to the *Daily Telegraph*? and *Reynolds's*, too! I am suprised at the proprietor of such a respectable newspaper as *Reynolds's Newspaper* copying such a report from the *Daily Telegraph*.

MR. FLOWERS: If you don't mind you'll have it all down, and will have to complain of the penny-a-liner again.

DEFENDANT: And this man, too, who represents the Society of Donothings. He has done nothing; for I hold in my hand Lord Campbell's Act, which says - Did you ever (*turning to Mr. Collette*) have a man in your employment named Matherim?

MR. FLOWERS: This has nothing to do with the case.

DEFENDANT: What I was going to say is that *The Wild Boys of London* has been sold for 12 years. What has this man been about all that time? I have had these books bound in cloth for 10d. for a woman who wanted to keep them for the benefit of her family. I admit it is filthy, but it is classical (*loud laughter*). In the Bible you will find the same things.

MR. FLOWERS: Oh I see what this means now.

DEFENDANT: Yes, and in scores of books. The publisher in Shoe Lane wants to square it.

MR. FLOWERS: If you go on much more I shall have you removed from court.

DEFENDANT: Then burn them!

MR. COLLETTE: And will you promise not to sell any more?

DEFENDANT: I wouldn't sell such filthy things! (*laughter*)

MR. FLOWERS: I am very glad to hear you say so.

DEFENDANT: Quite right. I'm always glad to take your advice, your worship. You told me once that alcohol was the deadly drug of the country, and I took your advice and have been a teetotaler ever since. (*laughter*)

MR. FLOWERS: Very well, then, pay the 2s. costs.

DEFENDANT: Oh, not that sir; I have only 2s. in my pocket and I promised to take my children home 6d. worth of oranges.

MR. FLOWERS: You must pay the costs.

DEFENDANT: Then I have had enough of you.

The newsagent, clearly a well-known local character, was then taken out of court but discovered that he had only got a shilling in his pocket. To avoid

being locked up Wells borrowed the necessary sum from the parish beadle, who happened to be in court on other business.²²

A sensible question raised by Wells that the solicitor for the SSV noticeably left unanswered was why a summons under the Campbell Act was not attempted until 1877, given that *The Wild Boys* was first published in the mid-1860s. Either English society had become that much more repressive and puritanical in the interval or a specific complaint must have been made to the Society's officers. The implication of prosecutions cited throughout this chapter was to support campaigns attempting to ban the 'penny dreadful', tending to suggest that the above example of censorship may not be entirely isolated. The prosecutors of *The Wild Boys* claimed to have only one object in view and that was 'the stemming as much as possible the publication of all such literature which tended to the downward course of youth'. There is a remote possibility that the serial's suppression in mid-issue might have been due either to episodes in which the Wild Boys fight with the police or to their meeting three Irish Fenians come to London to proselytize their cause. This would assume a secret conspiracy between police, magistrates and the SSV, whereas there is no real evidence other than that the serial was discontinued on the, admittedly tenuous, grounds of moral obscenity.²³

The Scapegoating of Weekly Periodicals

Boys' weekly (secular) periodicals, another category of publication also confusingly labelled 'dreadfuls', are sometimes mentioned in press reports of late-Victorian trials. For if those who promulgate and enforce laws are to classify something as a social problem, it must first be brought to their attention. The provision of precise titles, allowing one to clarify police and magisterial suppositions, was far less common. Specific periodicals were identified by name, however, during a 1870 north London trial for theft which, surprisingly for such a trivial offence, received extensive local and national press coverage. The attention the trial received perhaps testifies to its importance for newspaper editors anxious to amplify 'moral panic' over boys' papers produced by rival Fleet Street concerns. Extensive coverage of this and other juvenile court cases also acted as a stalking horse for expanding government initiatives, such as reformatory and industrial schools directed against vagrant, destitute and criminal youth, by ensuring that the institutionalization of the young working class received the support of public opinion.

Early in 1876 Alfred Saunders, a 13-year-old London errand boy of Southampton Road, Hampstead, was charged before a magistrate at petty sessions with stealing seven pounds and four shillings belonging to his widowed father, the prosecutor, a 'respectable-looking' cabman (horse-cab driver) with two sons. His youngest, Alfred, was a 'bad' boy who had been charged on a previous occasion with robbing his father, 'who then begged him off'. The seven pounds mentioned in the charge was being saved up for the oldest son and the four shillings had been deducted out of the prisoner's own earnings to buy him boots and trousers. The money was kept in a locked cupboard, the seven pounds being stowed away in a sock, but the woodwork about the lock had been cut away and the lock forced. Suspicion soon fell upon the prisoner who was found to have only two shillings in his possession when the police were eventually called.²⁴

Young Alfred admitted to the police that he had taken the money and spent some of it on penny papers which 'dealt with the adventures of pirates and robbers'. Specimens of the 'exciting' periodicals produced in court by Detective Martin of 'S' Division included the Emmett brothers' periodicals *The Young Briton* (1869-77) and *Sons of Britannia* (1870-7), as well as their competitor Edwin Brett's widely circulated *Boys of England*. Significantly, the accused had also purchased a toy pistol, a lantern and a cigar-holder, items surrendered to the police. The prisoner further admitted that he had spent some of the money 'breakfasting and dining in rather an expensive way' at different coffee-shops. At his first examination, the father had volunteered that the prisoner's pockets were crammed with 'filthy books', such as George Emmett's *The Young Englishman* (1873-9), and that his son had thrown away his food at home. The boy's grandmother later testified that she had destroyed some of the periodicals brought home, as his father did not like him to read them. The prisoner, 'who appeared perfectly callous', pleaded guilty to taking only the seven pounds intended for his brother, significantly excluding the money contributed from his own wages. He was convicted and sent to Feltham Industrial School in Middlesex for 3 years. The magistrate told the boy's father that he would probably have to contribute two shillings and sixpence a week towards his son's maintenance.²⁵

The periodicals cited in court, whose titles offer a patriotic combination of male youth and national identity, were all controlled by the entrepreneurs mentioned in the previous chapter with offices in and around London's Fleet Street. Thus self-publicist Edwin Brett had managed the NPC before becoming proprietor and editor of numerous, largely boys' periodicals. Brett's most profitable and long-running weekly, *Boys of England*,

was first issued on 24 November 1866 and led off with three long-running serials: editor Charles Stevens' popular 'Alone in the Pirates' Lair'; followed by Vane St John's quasi-school story 'Who Shall be Leader?' and John Cecil Stagg's historical border tale 'Chevy Chase.' There were also five pages of miscellaneous items, such as 'Singular Facts' and 'Simple Gardening'; the start of a long historical series on the 'Progress of the British Boy'; a free gift of the first sheet of characters in a toy play of the Stevens story; and a chance to win 1400 prizes headed by two Shetland ponies. (Non-appearance of the latter was used against Brett by his gloating rivals.) The appellation 'dreadful' would seem an exaggerated description for such a harmless weekly pot-pourri. 'We spent our rare pennies in the uncensored reading matter of the village dame's shop, on the *Boys of England* and honest penny dreadfuls', upwardly-mobile novelist H. G. Wells confessed of his boyhood reading. 'Ripping stuff, stuff that anticipated Haggard and Stevenson, badly illustrated, and very very good for us.'²⁶

The stories in the Brett-style periodicals, with their Gothic ingredients and historical trappings – Roman gladiators, Goths, Teutonic knights, Crusaders, pirates of the Spanish Main – were not far removed from the instalment-novel 'dreadfuls' which they claimed to replace, despite their alleged high principles and grand patriotic titles. The same well-worn formulas and historical themes, now incorporating heroic apprentices, schoolboys and young working-class lads, were wheeled out again and again to charm hard-earned pennies from the pockets of their loyal readers. The most popular serials were removed and sold separately in penny weekly parts, later to be reissued in sixpenny or a shilling complete novel form with chromographed wrappers (all labelled 'dreadfuls'). Brett's *Boys of England* firmly established the pattern of weekly serialized fiction which was to be followed by all of his competitors, not excepting the more up-market *Boys' Own Paper* (1879–1967). The extent of competition for the pennies of late Victorian children and adolescents can be measured by the 96 secular or commercially oriented periodicals for boys (new titles and reissues) that were published between 1866 and 1900. To succeed in this over-crowded market place, editors had to achieve just the right combination of exciting adventure serials, masculine values, imperial patriotism and jocose schoolboy humour. In America, *Frank Leslie's Boys' and Girls' Weekly* (1866–84) and Norman Munro's *The Boys of New York* (1875–94) imitated the same weekly formula, to the extent of pirating serial stories from Brett's English publications.²⁷

The two rival firms of 'Hogarth House' (Emmett-Fox) and 'Boys of England' (later 'Harkaway House'), eager to supply an increasing juvenile demand for periodical literature, relied upon the economies provided by

improved transport, cheaper paper and the rotary printing press, to reach the new youth market. Purchase or hire of printing plants, often using borrowed capital, led to a technology-driven necessity for a constant stream of publications, in order to keep expensive steam-driven machinery supplied with product. This involved a social shift whereby from the 1860s, if not before, juvenile readers joined a wider cultural formation, the 'mass', that was not restricted to a single age group, gender or class. For example, Brett's trend-setting *Boys of England* was read, despite its 'penny dreadful' label, by the sons of the middle, lower-middle and skilled working classes, as well as by a less discriminating and poorer, semi-literate market. The ethos of Brett's paper has been aptly characterized as that of Samuel Smiles combined with patriotism and 'sensational' adventure. Consequently, *Boys of England* made its primary appeal to the upwardly mobile: young office boys, shop assistants, apprentices and junior clerks. It also seems evident from the editorial and correspondence pages that the paper reached many older working-class adolescents. The paper had a print run at the end of its first year in 1866 of 150,000 copies per week, rising to 250,000 by the late 1870s, when Brett ran Samuel Bracebridge Hemyng's wildly popular Jack Harkaway series about an adventurous, world-travelling schoolboy. Assuming that, on average, each copy was shared by at least two or three readers every week then, at its peak, the paper would have been seen by well over half a million children and adolescents; or at least one in five of all 10–19-year-old boys at the 1881 census.²⁸

Brett and the Emmett brothers were engaged in a furious cut-throat competition for the loyalty of a fickle juvenile audience throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s, both sides reputedly hurling insults at each other across Fleet Street at the height of their bitter struggle for readers. On the whole, Brett's boys' papers cultivated a spurious air of respectability, toning down the gruesome and stressing the melodramatic, whereas his rivals, the Emmetts, remained loyal to their original anarchic, blood-drenched and more horrific approach. Hence they did not shirk from a grisly engraving in *Sons of Britannia* (1870–7), depicting Christian babies being bayoneted by fez-wearing Turkish mercenaries, the Bashi-Bazouks, to illustrate a timely story of the 1875–6 Serbo-Turkish war. The Emmett periodicals appealed to a far smaller clientele than Brett's, boys from the lowest social stratum: sons of unskilled workers, errand boys, grocery assistants and young lads from the East End slums. 'High School boys read *Boys of England* [Brett] and *Young Folks* [Henderson], boys of lower social position read *Young Men of Great Britain* [Brett], lower still read *The Young Englishman* [Emmett], followed by *The Young Briton* [Emmett], while young shop

assistants and errand boys read *Sons of Britannia* [Emmett]', as one collector recalled the fine social distinctions of his late-Victorian boyhood.²⁹ Most Emmett readers, at the far end of this spectrum of taste, could not afford annual subscriptions and bought copies sporadically, whenever they could find a penny. Bound quarterly and half-yearly volumes of Brett's boys' papers, priced at one shilling and fourpence and four shillings apiece, were evidently produced for boys from well-to-do families. Brett's policy of steering closer to acceptable late Victorian moral standards meant that he had a far wider, more sustained and therefore more profitable readership.

Since all of the boys' papers indicted in the above petty sessions trial, with the exception of *Boys of England*, were managed or edited by the Emmett brothers, an indignant response from one of the clan was not long in arriving. 'We have been attacked by the Press and in the police-courts, and why? - because a youth who had plundered his father happened to have one of our journals in his pocket', wrote George Emmett, peevishly responding to a reader's inquiry through the letters page of one of his own periodicals:

Did it ever strike you, or any of those people who are continually crying down light literature, that the love of dress and jewellery has ruined more young men, and demoralised more women, than all the journals and 'penny dreadfuls' put together? Did you ever hear a police-officer give evidence to the effect 'We found this young man with a new suit of clothes on, made by Mr. Snip?' Certainly you have not.³⁰

This laboured attempt to exonerate Hogarth House periodicals from a charge of encouraging delinquency would have possessed greater credibility had Emmett relied on press details of the actual court hearing. Motherless Alfred Saunders, much persecuted for his reading habits, spent the better part of the money he had stolen in coffee-shops and on such items as a toy pistol, rather than on clothes, jewellery or even penny periodicals.

George Emmett, a heavily bearded ex-cavalry officer, sought to counter the bad press his boys' papers were receiving by winning the support of influential weeklies through a circular letter to their editors: 'I trust, in a spirit of fair play, you will spare a few lines, giving your candid opinion as to whether these works are pernicious. By so doing you will remove the odium caused by the remarks made by the Press and the Police Courts.' Seemingly, only James Mortimer, editor of *The London Figaro* (1870-98), a gossipy political, literary and satirical weekly, rose to the challenge. A magnanimous editorial discussed serials and periodicals submitted by Emmett.

'Both the incidents and the language are free from grossness, and we may add that, unlike some novels in demand at Mudie's [circulating library], a thin veil of propriety does not disclose a mass of impropriety', claimed the tolerant *Figaro* editor. 'They are not stuffed with ghostly horrors. They do not invest vice or crime with a halo of romance.' Mortimer's analysis of their stereotypical content followed:

In *Tom Wildrake's Schooldays* the hero dresses up as a girl, and for one or two mornings attends the classes at a ladies' school. This is not a clever joke, but the way it is told is perfectly harmless. *Shot and Shell* is a series of military stories [by George Emmett], but . . . does not contain any story of dissipation. It is, we presume, a tolerably accurate account of a soldier's early career, and parents need not fear that it will induce their sons to enlist, for there is plenty of dark shadowing in the picture. The leading story in *The Young Briton* is 'Master John Bull at the French Academy', and the two chapters before us are harmless boys' sprees. The leading story in the *Sons of Britannia* is 'Jolly Jack Johnson', and chapter xii is just the sort of fun to please boys, for Jolly Jack frightens a cellarman by concealing himself in an empty cask, and making the said cask move about.³¹

Although Mortimer was not so untypical a Victorian as to approve the absence of 'edification', he generously exonerated the Hogarth House weeklies from the charge of 'perniciousness' made against them. 'It is an absurd and altogether unjustifiable slander to say that Mr. Emmett's publications - according to sample - can tempt any boy to vice or crime.' Construction of the 'penny dreadful' label was, therefore, occasionally contested by contemporary opinion-formers.³²

The unpredictable circulations and economic instability of the Hogarth House periodicals eventually caused the Emmett brothers to get into serious financial difficulties, with the outcome that around 1875 William Laurence Emmett went bankrupt. Brother George assumed overall control until the Hogarth's former business manager, Charles Fox, a bluff gambling man, took over the premises. George Emmett Junior attempted to revive the family's declining fortunes, under the masthead of the St George's Publishing Office in Red Lion Court, but did not prosper for long. Fox made a steady profit from reprints and reissues in succeeding decades, while also starting several new titles of his own. The Hogarth House Library, for example, regularly published serials taken from the Emmett-Fox periodicals in separate weekly parts and later in collected

volume form (all labelled 'dreadfuls'). Fox's most successful venture was *The Boy's Standard* (1875-92), printed on inferior paper and with a highly emotive approach which singled it out for censure as a 'dreadful'. Profit margins for the popular *Standard* remained buoyant, but publishers such as Fox, who put out under-funded, badly edited weeklies, reprinting published material to save on production costs, over-supplied the market with a shoddy product.³³

Prosecutions of the 1890s

With the exception of the highwayman stories discussed earlier, 'moral panics' scapegoating the 'penny dreadful' do not resurface again until the 1890s, reflecting perhaps a renewed middle-class 'cycle of anxiety' concerning deviant juvenile behaviour. Hence in November 1892 a tenuous connection was made between the reading of 'trashy novels' and, saddest of all deaths, a child's suicide. W. T. Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette* featured a brief item, bluntly headed 'A Victim of the Penny Dreadful', which reported a local inquest on George William Seymour, a 12-year-old labourer's son found hanging dead in a Georgian house in Montpellier Crescent, Brighton, where he had been employed as a page boy. The evidence purportedly showed that 'he complained of a pain in his head from over-reading, and that he was addicted to reading penny novels'. Possibly a reference to the London-based Aldine Publishing Company's 'dime novel' reprints of the 1890s, with their brightly coloured covers. According to the local Sussex press, in his summing up the deputy coroner found Seymour to have been 'a lad with an active brain, who was fond of exciting reading, and no doubt had a predisposition to suicide'. Such was the press anxiety to scapegoat 'dreadfuls' that this qualified official verdict was converted by the *Pall Mall Gazette* into an outright accusation that the deceased 'committed suicide while temporarily insane, the insanity being caused by reading trashy novels'.³⁴

Three years later, a reader writing to the *Daily News* alleged that 'the recent murder by a boy of thirteen of his own mother may be traced principally to the taste he had imbibed of studying the characters that are being ominously portrayed by pictures and representations in these pernicious ["penny dreadful"] publications'. On investigation this turns out to be an allusion to the well-publicized Old Bailey murder trial, from 16 to 17 September 1895, of Robert Allen Coombes, the bright son of a ship's

steward, from Plaistow in the East End of London. Robert's 12-year-old brother, Nathaniel, had complained of being beaten by their mother, Emily Harrison Coombes, while their father was away at sea. The prisoner, 13-year-old Robert, promised to kill her, buying a sixpenny knife with which he stabbed his mother while they were in bed together (the younger son slept in another room). Next day, the two boys paid the rent, told the neighbours that their mother had gone to visit relatives in Liverpool, and spent the day together at Lord's Cricket Ground. The murdered woman's sister-in-law eventually discovered the body upstairs, in an advanced state of decomposition, and Robert confessed to the stabbing. Nathaniel, giving evidence for the prosecution, claimed that his brother was going to kill their mother because he wanted to 'get away to some island'. Robert had asked him to cough twice as a signal to commit the crime. At the end of the trial, Nathaniel was found innocent of a charge of incitement. Robert Coombes, who had a history of mental illness, pleaded guilty to the murder indictment with a smile upon his lips. He was found guilty but insane and sent to Holloway Prison for an undisclosed period.³⁵

A list of property found at the deceased's rooms was produced by the police, priority being given to a number of 'sensational story books'. Nathaniel gave evidence that his brother had indeed bought the paper-covered titles produced and that he had even seen Robert reading them. A doctor acting for the defence, and hence seeking a convenient scapegoat, claimed that 'pernicious literature would be worse for a boy suffering from mental affliction'. The prosecution also claimed, exaggeratedly, that the books found 'related to crimes of one kind or another'. Mr Justice Kennedy, responded: 'Some do certainly, judging from the titles.' Only one newspaper disclosed that these 'pernicious', supposedly crime-related, titles were in reality: *The Crimson Cloak*; *The Secret of Castle Cloney*; *The Witch of Fermoy*; *Revenged at Last*; *The Mesmerist Detective*; *Joe Phoenix's Unknown*; *Cockney Bob*; *The Rock Rider* and *The Witch*. Recognizable among these hastily listed titles was the prolific Edwin Harcourt Burrage's topical, but otherwise innocuous, short mystery-novelette for Charles Fox, *The Mesmerist Detective: Or, Strange Doings in Littlewood* (c.1890). The Aldine 'O'er Land and Sea' Library contributed *Joe Phoenix's Unknown, Or Crushing the Crook Combination* (c.1895), part of an American detective series set this time in New York's Wall Street, as well as the inaccurately transcribed Gothic mystery *The Secret of Castle Coucy: A Legend of the Great Crusade* (c.1895) and *The Rock Riders* (c.1895). The unlocated titles appear to exhibit harmless stage-Irish, Gothic and supernatural story themes of a kind published in their

hundreds by Fox, Aldine and Brett in reduced-size novelette or complete-novel 'library' form.³⁶

If suicide could be attributed to the 'penny dreadful', then why not matricide? *The Times* alone was mildly equivocal about this Old Bailey murder trial. 'How far madness was the impelling cause, and how far madness was due to the vile, sensational books which seem to have been his favourite study, may perhaps be in some doubt', proclaimed its leader column sagely. 'But still it will be generally felt that the jury have returned a satisfactory verdict'. The extensive coverage afforded the proceedings by newspapers ranging from the local East End press to *The Times* is ample evidence of yet another 'transforming event' shaping the creation of a 'moral panic' over the 'penny dreadful'. A footnote to this sad affair came in a subsequent reader's letter to the *Daily News*. 'Boys, some in an unfortunate case which was lately before the public, do not hesitate at crime to gratify the extravagant taste for sport and other pastimes, which are supposed to be natural to their age, and without which no hero could deservedly be a hero.'³⁷ This misguided reference to the brothers' attendance at Lord's on the day after the killing may shift the blame for matricide away from the 'penny dreadful' but also shows how easily reports of a prominent trial could be transmuted in order to serve a particular fixation.

Why Blame 'Penny Dreadfuls'?

What is going on that incites magistrates and prosecutors to blame crime on the reading material a young culprit possessed rather than on his taste for fine clothes or dining out in coffee shops? Arguments rehearsed in court and in newspapers about the causes of late-Victorian juvenile crime echoed the discourse about deviancy in those and other contemporary forums that placed a heavy emphasis on family moral responsibility. Industrial and reformatory school visitors of the 1870s and 1880s, reflecting the revival of moral puritanism among the middle class, lost no opportunity to condemn irreligious parents for the delinquent habits of their children. Parental neglect, drunkenness, or irresponsibility were nominated as the primary cause of delinquency, if no corrupting 'penny dreadfuls' were found, somehow detaching a sufficient cause from the surrounding necessary economic circumstances. Hence sections of the late-Victorian middle class tended to be particularly susceptible, when a rising crime rate was invoked, to the desire to improve the morals and leisure habits of working-class youth.

Cheap fiction was a particular target because it was felt that wider literacy had led to the corruption of literature until, among street boys, reading had become an almost criminal pursuit.³⁸

Male working-class adolescents were the focal point of concern here because they were perceived as potential delinquents and, therefore, in need of discipline, control, education and management. Hence the campaign against 'dreadfuls' coincided with a rise in the conscious regulation of working-class boys: encapsulated in compulsory schooling; a fixation with uncontrolled, high-earning 'boy labour'; and the rise of adult-organized youth movements. Ridiculing of authority in 'penny dreadful' highwayman and school stories has to be defined against the strict regimentation of the real late-Victorian classroom and, from 1883, of well-drilled church youth organizations such as the Boys' Brigade. Reading about the deflation of pompous masters by anarchic boarding-school pupils in 'penny dreadful' school stories provided a much-needed safety valve for the circumscribed state-school boy. The debate about the need for greater discipline and culture among the young working class also reached its height when imperialism was at its zenith. The promulgation of imperialist thinking was typified by the transition from *The Wild Boys of London* to 'penny dreadful' heroes, such as Jack Harkaway, adventuring overseas among comic or sinister foreigners. Alfred Harmsworth's campaign against 'dreadfuls' ultimately succeeded because of the more jingoistic and xenophobic tone of his halfpenny boys' papers, rather than their greater moral purity. The new recipe, 'approved by parents and children alike, was to blend much of the violence, boisterousness, and cruelty which had poured from the penny dreadfuls with the late-nineteenth century world view'.³⁹

If Victorian critics and moralists had taken the trouble to examine the publications of the NPC and its rivals without prejudice, they would have discovered that, far from recommending the values of a criminal or oppositional subculture, their 'point of view' was consistently aligned with support for the established order. In common with other forms of Victorian commercial entertainment, the outward animation of 'penny dreadfuls' concealed a remarkable degree of moral and social conservatism. As a self-confessed 'penny dreadful' author queried in 1895, with some legitimacy:

Personally, I should like to know if any members of the juries who attribute youthful crime to the so-called 'penny dreadfuls', which the tender-aged criminal is supposed to have devoured, have ever read one of the books on which they pass such wholesale condemnation? I have read

every book that an example of boyish depravity has brought to notice, and so far I have been unable to find any incentive to matricide, to dishonesty, or vice of any description. The villain is invariably outwitted, the hero is all honour and bravery, and the heroine chaste as the Lady in Milton's *Comus*.⁴⁰

Examination of the texts cited in the criminal prosecutions dealt with above would endorse a similar conclusion. The delusion that there was such a thing as a 'pernicious' taste in popular fiction rapidly became self-fulfilling. The actual content of highwaymen and London low-life serials suggests that, rather than encouraging crime, 'dreadfuls' offered little challenge to the prevailing middle-class moral ethos.

Decline of the Penny Dreadful

The expansionist 1890s, which saw a more pronounced racism and imperialism in English popular culture, were also to leave many 'penny dreadful' journals looking rather old-fashioned. They appeared relics of an era of breezy and jocular adventures, embracing Jack Harkaway, Tom Wildrake, Cheerful Ching-Ching and other disreputable young heroes, unable to compete in sales with Alfred Harmsworth's cheaper, more jingoistic boys' weeklies, such as *Halfpenny Marvel* (1893-1922) and *Union Jack* (1894-1933). After Edwin Brett's death in 1895, his executors carried on the business, seemingly for the benefit of his large family. Seven halfpenny or penny weeklies, mostly reissues, and numerous sixpenny novels continued to appear under the Harkaway House imprint. Ultimately, on 11 January 1900, the business was incorporated as Edwin J. Brett Limited with £30,000 nominal capital, operating from new premises in West Harding Street, near Fleet Street. Edwin Charles Brett, the eldest son, and the family's solicitors held over half of the stock. Company returns suggest that limited liability was almost synonymous with imminent collapse. For Edwin Charles, who presided over the firm as chief shareholder, manager and company director, possessed little of his father's business or editorial aptitude and profits soon plummeted. The Amalgamated Press, as the Harmsworth firm was renamed in 1902, had made publishing cheap fiction far more competitive and capital-intensive. Consequently, a new manager, journalist and novelist T. Murray Ford, was rapidly hired to avert the Brett company's complete failure.⁴¹

Ford came up against a nostalgic but unhelpful refusal, on the part of the family's trustees, to kill off the firm's many out-dated publications. Why interfere, he was told, with what had sold so well for decades? A sentiment made familiar from studies of the British industrial-export sector before 1914. None the less, Ford did persuade the company's directors to reprint Brett's *English Ladies' Novelettes* (1891-2) and to put out the narrow-shaped, romantic *My Pocket' Novels* (1900-24), which enabled the company to pay dividends for a brief period. Ford meanwhile discovered that Brett's were one of the last Fleet Street firms to print illustrations from expensive wood-engraving blocks; an impracticable memorial, perhaps, to the founder's early career as an artist-engraver. By 1906 Edwin Charles had retreated to Broadstairs, near the Brett family mansion at St Peter's, Kent, and the company was effectively without active family leadership. A generous offer for the business from Alfred Harmsworth, the future Lord Northcliffe, tempting shareholders with 38 shillings for every £1 share, was ill-advisedly turned down by the elderly and out-of-touch board of directors. As a result, Ford asked Edwin J. Brett Limited to cancel his contract and, not long after, went to work for Harmsworth.⁴²

One method of assessing the performance of small metropolitan publishers such as Brett's, in the absence of sufficient data for a proper econometric survey, is to utilize the 'classic' late-Victorian entrepreneurial failure thesis. This places an emphasis on the technological backwardness of British firms, their difficulties in raising capital, poor growth rates, deficient company structures and the business inadequacies of succeeding generations. The Brett firm's wood-engraved illustrations demonstrate an attachment to old technology and their reluctance to diversify into new areas of popular fiction by paying authors competitive rates, while profits could still be wrung out of low-cost reprints, exemplifies second-generation management failure. Publishing entrepreneurs such as Edwin Brett, who made small fortunes by acting as wholesale distributors to the local metropolitan market, would be judged as business failures in the longer term by the 'classic' performance criteria. They lacked large-scale distribution networks and were slow to identify market changes, plus their businesses were under-capitalized and, by the 1890s, no longer expanding.⁴³

Not unexpectedly, the Brett firm's reissued late-Victorian titles failed to find a new market in Edwardian England. Hence debentures of £5000 were secured on the firm's property assets, apparently for the benefit of the printers. In June 1907, excessive liabilities led inexorably to the company being wound up but, because the sale of its effects would not realize

sufficient to pay off debentures, the appointed liquidator suggested that another company, Edwin J. Brett (1907) Limited, be formed with £5000 capital to exploit remaining business assets. This company, operating out of Long Acre, traded at a loss and was also soon heavily mortgaged. In 1909 the debenture holders stepped in to salvage what they could and Edwin J. Brett (1907) Limited went into irretrievable collapse. Perhaps because Odhams Limited, one of the largest creditors, was made joint receiver, John Allingham claimed a few years later that a powerful combination of publishers held all Brett's original blocks and moulds. A remainder-buyer put out some Harkaway House titles on his own initiative but with often mismatched covers. This was a sad end for the publications of Edwin John Brett, neglected pioneer of boys' weekly periodicals and, until Harmsworth, the most significant figure publishing juvenile fiction for a mass audience.⁴⁴

Until too many entrants increased competitive pressures, returns from publishing a successful boys' periodical could be quite substantial. Yet long-term profits could only be guaranteed by volume sales, low unit costs and profitable reprints. The question of how lucrative or, on the contrary, how marginal a living could be made from this kind of publishing is complicated by evidence that while some proprietors became rich and prospered, others went bankrupt or ended their lives in alcoholic poverty. Thus Edward Lloyd, whose early-Victorian 'penny bloods' helped finance a cheap newspaper empire, left over half a million pounds in 1890. Five years later Edwin Brett left an estate valued at £76,500 (nearly seven times that of popular novelist Wilkie Collins) and was buried in a family vault on the west side of Highgate Cemetery. Conversely, Brett's business rival William Laurence Emmett became a bankrupt in the mid-1870s, ruined by a commercial warfare that necessitated the regular supply of new periodical titles. Equally, John Allingham was left in 1886 with a debt of over £16,000 when *The Boy's World* (1879-86), of which he was editor - proprietor, went under. Only by surrendering most of his assets and giving up the copyright to all of his stories was he discharged from liability. Fortunes were certainly made and lost by London's publishers of cheap juvenile fiction, suggesting the scale and significance of a business catering specifically to the cheap end of the juvenile market.⁴⁵

The history of London firms producing 'penny dreadfuls' suggests that ambitious journalists, engravers, newsagents, printers and even authors, could try to make fortunes by setting up their own publishing companies; at least until Fleet Street, with the advance of new technology, became subject to a much stricter division of labour. Small 'penny dreadful' publishers

and wholesalers, such as the Emmetts, Charles Fox and Edwin Brett, merit a secure place in the pantheon of Britain's economic innovators, pioneers in the mass production of standardized articles for commercial distribution. The small publishing houses surveyed here either went into liquidation or were swallowed up by the Harmsworth brothers' omnivorous Amalgamated Press in the 1900s. Relatively impersonal but highly successful large firms, presaging the rise of the twentieth-century corporate economy, henceforth dominated the publication of cheap periodical fiction and comics for the young, as well as mass-circulation adult magazines. The creative process was made subordinate to institutional management. 'In the old days, writing for boys was something of an adventure', lamented John Allingham, from the vantage point of 1913, 'now it is very much a trade.'⁴⁶

The 'penny dreadful' label lingered on for years after the First World War as an imprecise term for highly coloured adventure fiction read by the young. Teachers and librarians used it anachronistically as a term of abuse against a new breed of popular weekly story papers for boys put out by the Amalgamated Press and D. C. Thomson of Dundee. Yet only the tiny Aldine firm in Crown Court, off Chancery Lane, former specialist in reprinting 'half-dime novels' for the British market, retained any vestigial links with the late-Victorian 'penny dreadful', before itself succumbing in the early 1930s to lack of investment, poor sales and changing markets. The modern inter-war boy wanted more up-to-date scientific ingenuity in his adventure stories from new-style Sexton Blake-type detectives. 'Highwaymen, pirates, and red indians don't excite his imagination; he wants fights with submarines, daring stunts in aeroplanes, and wonderful electric machines', explained a news-agency's head salesman in 1925. 'Tales of Dick Turpin, Claude Duval and Jack Sheppard interest him not.'⁴⁷

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4 Gangster Film Panic: Censoring Hollywood in the 1930s

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