

BOOK REVIEW

Adrian Bingham¹

***Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility, 1820-1910.* Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson and Samantha Pegg. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 272 pp. £55 hardback. ISBN: 978-0-230-30359-1**

Stories about crime and punishment have been a staple of popular culture ever since the advent of printing. As newspapers developed into a recognisably modern format from the late eighteenth century, they adapted and updated the crime and court narratives traditionally found in printed broadsides and ballads, and enticed readers with this reliable, and cheap, supply of tales of transgression, shame and legal retribution. In the mid-nineteenth century, Sunday newspapers such as *Lloyd's Weekly News* and the *News of the World* found sensational court reports to be the most effective means of attracting a mass audience, while at the end of the century, crime was a key element of the 'human interest' provided by the new wave of popular dailies that were introduced in the wake of the success of Alfred Harmsworth's *Daily Mail*. Crime reporting has always featured prominently in elite and respectable newspapers too, given the vital information that it provides both about the state of society and the operation of the legal system. Scholars of various kinds have long made use of this rich seam of material, both as a source of fascinating individual stories and as a way of exploring broader social and cultural themes, such as experiences of the law, attitudes to morality, and gender, class or ethnic identities. This work remains fragmented, however. Much of it focuses on specific cases; most of the rest addresses fairly narrow issues over, at best, a few decades.

Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson and Samantha Pegg have therefore made a valuable and timely contribution to the field by offering an expansive and thought-provoking overview of crime reporting across the whole of the modern period. With controversies about crime journalism once again at the top of public agenda in the wake of the Leveson enquiry and the trials of Rebecca Brooks and Andy Coulson, former editors of the *News of the World*, this

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volume provides the best available means of contextualising the phone-hacking scandal in the long sweep of history.

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into eight chronological chapters, three on the nineteenth century, four on the twentieth century, and a concluding discussion of the issues raised by the events at the *News of the World*. Each chapter examines the production, content and style of the 'crime intelligence' provided by mainstream newspapers, and provides a wealth of information about celebrated cases, noted reporters, and the implications of legislative change. There is an emphasis throughout on the personal and professional relationships between journalists and lawyers, and the changes in the dynamics of this relationship underpin the overall analysis. Indeed, the book's most distinctive contribution is to expose the interconnections between law and journalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the 1860s, the authors demonstrate, many newspaper court reports were penned (anonymously) by lawyers, which ensured they had a high level of authority and precision; a number of leading figures in the legal profession, such as James Fitzjames Stephen, also used opinion columns and letters pages to discuss legal issues and debate reforms. The closeness of this relationship enabled the press both to raise the prestige of the legal system – at a fairly low level in the first half of the nineteenth century – and to ensure the public were relatively well informed about the laws that regulated their lives.

The mutually beneficial relationship did not last. The shift to the 'new journalism', which prioritised entertainment over accuracy, the steady abandonment of anonymity, which provided essential cover for the lawyer-reporter, and the increased focus on scientific forms of detection that occurred before trials, all gradually created a gulf between lawyers and journalists in the early decades of the twentieth century. The loss of legal expertise in newsrooms meant that court reporting, in particular, became less well-informed, and titillating private details squeezed out legal context and procedure. Reporters became more interested in their relationships with police officers – who might give them pre-trial tip-offs – than with barristers or solicitors. By the second half of the twentieth century, the desire for scoops and the 'story behind the story' meant that tabloid newspapers repeatedly risked interfering with the course of justice and being held in contempt of court. The authors suggest, persuasively, that the recent scandals were the inevitable outcome of a journalistic culture that became increasingly ignorant and contemptuous of legal knowledge.

In works of this range and scope, one can always question the selection of material or the emphasis of the argument. There is a tendency to assume that the quality and integrity of reporting steadily and inexorably declined over the twentieth century, and that the pressures were always for greater sensationalism. Yet some mid-century practices, such as paying for the defence of those accused of murder in return for exclusive stories, became unacceptable later on. After the *News of the World* nearly derailed the Moors Murders trial in 1966 by having a contract with the chief prosecution witness, new restrictions were put on 'chequebook journalism' (even if they were not always followed). There is some fascinating material about the coverage of domestic violence in the nineteenth century; it would have been interesting to know whether a combination of feminist pressure and the greater presence of women in the newsrooms in recent decades has changed the reporting of this subject (Rebekah Brooks, after all, ran a high-profile campaign on this issue in the *Sun*, even if her own domestic circumstances ensured that it came back to haunt her). There are also a couple of minor slips on the details of press history – I'm not sure, for example, that the *Daily Telegraph* was as focused on the working-class market in the nineteenth century as is claimed here.

These are only quibbles, though. This is a fine work of scholarship that fills a real gap in the literature. It also demonstrates the virtues of interdisciplinarity, which are discussed much more than they are put into practice. The authors' combination of historical and legal expertise ensures a far more rigorous and rounded analysis than would have been emerged from the individual disciplines alone. Anyone interested in the history of crime, the legal system, or journalism, or who simply wants to find how the phone-hacking scandal could have come about, will learn much from this book.