

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Richard W. Ireland, *Land of White Gloves: A History of Crime and Punishment in Wales*, London: Routledge, 2015 148pp. £85.00 hardback. ISBN 978-0415501996**

In a recent discussion piece published in *Law, Crime and History* provocatively titled '[why everything we know about criminal justice history is wrong](#)', Richard Ireland put forward a series of observations regarding the historiography of crime and punishment in England and Wales. Seeking 'to examine the often unstated and unformulated assumptions which affect our analysis of the past, assumptions related to the backgrounds, geographical location, skills and sources which we carry into our work as researchers' (p. 130), he commented on a range of issues, such as the need for digitization of sources, as well as the need to shift the focus of research from serious crime, the Higher Courts, the gallows, and transportation, down to forms of petty crime. Crime Historians, he argued, also need to shift their focus further back than the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ireland's final proposition was that the historiography of crime and justice was almost exclusively an urban, if not Metropolitan, affair; focused inordinately on London, the south-east, and the Old Bailey. While not denying that there has been important work undertaken looking at the provinces, he argued that this state of affairs meant that we perhaps have an overly one-sided view of crime and justice in the past, dominated by one court, one city (albeit the capital) or, at best, one region. Consequently, there is a need to shift attention to the provinces and to rural areas to explore whether the well-documented trends of the capital are to be found 'out in the sticks'.

Ireland's discussion piece provides a useful point of entry to consider his new monograph, *Land of White Gloves? A History of Crime and Punishment in Wales*. The title refers to the practice of presenting judges at Assizes where no serious crime had been tried with a pair of white gloves, a practice it was believed at the time was particularly prevalent in Wales (the land of white gloves – *gwlad y menig gwynion*). At its core, Ireland's monograph has two main aims. First, to present the historiography of crime and justice in Wales, thus offering a useful regional study. Second, arguably

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more important, is his attempt to overcome the views that the Welsh experience is either radically different from that of England (a land of white gloves) or 'simply [the] English experience with a rather different accent' (p.10). Neither of these views, he argues, is the case; rather, the evidence points to a much more nuanced picture.

The monograph is structured chronologically, tracing in five chapters the history of crime and justice in Wales from the Middle Ages through to the twentieth century. Prior to the sixteenth century, Wales operated a legal code distinct from England, a law based on customary rules recorded in law texts. However, during the reign of the Tudors, increasing concern about perceived lawlessness in the Marches of Wales combined with a desire to eradicate judicial anomalies between the two provinces, led in the mid-sixteenth century to the imposition of English legal structures on Wales. Consequently, English became the legal language (officially at least), Courts of Great Sessions (the equivalents of Assizes) were established, and the traditional Welsh practice of compensation was abolished. Nevertheless, older attitudes to the law died slowly, and for several centuries these continued to exist in an uneasy relationship with the new structures. In particular, traditional ideas about dispute resolution continued to dominate Welsh legal practice, with wrongdoing seen as something that should be dealt with informally within the community rather than formally through legal redress. Moreover, while the official language of the court was English, defendants, prosecutors and juries often still spoke Welsh as their only language. The operation of justice in Wales was therefore characterized by the interplay of different English, Welsh, traditional/communal, abstract/legal elements. Indeed, as Ireland shows, this state of affairs continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite the growth of urban areas and the increasing drive towards centralization and rationalization of the criminal justice agencies during the period.

*Land of White Gloves?*, then, offers an image of crime and justice in Wales from the middle ages to the twentieth century that is both similar to and distinct from the pattern found in England. While both provinces shared the same legal structures and processes, the Welsh experience was characterized by a strong continuity with older, more informal, communal understandings of justice. The monograph's main strength, apart from providing an excellent survey of crime and justice in the province, is in exploring the ways in which the administration of English justice in Wales was both coloured by and intersected with these older, communal ideas. It deserves to be read by historians of crime both within Wales and more widely as a useful corrective to the dominant south-east/Metropolitan bias within the specialism.