

Introduction

Narratives of Crime in Interwar Britain

It is . . . the business of the detective tale to provide us first of all with something that is not in the least like a death and follow it up with something that does not remotely resemble life.¹

He had done his duty. By a lucky series of circumstances he had been guided to the solution of the mystery – but he felt no elation, no triumph, no satisfaction. Murder was all right in books and plays, but in real life it was a sorrowful, suffering business.

Never again did he want to find himself caught up in the sordid realities of a murder case. He felt utterly dispirited.²

When we think about the literature of crime in the interwar period, we think of detective fiction, a type of writing that has often been seen as a way of confronting dark emotions and hidden anxieties at arm's length. A conventional view, which evolved at the time and has to some extent persisted, is that classic detective fiction represents crime, particularly murder, in an antiseptic and unsensational way, and provides an element of ratiocinative exercise which tempers its escapism and grants it greater intellectual respectability than other kinds of crime writing and indeed other kinds of popular fiction. My focus in this study is on what, if anything, interwar detective fiction might have been trying to escape *from* and whether this escape was or could ever be successful. I will bring to light some of the varied non-fictional accounts of crime from this period, and also examine novels that refuse to comply with the 'rules' of detective fiction but which are centrally concerned with crime and criminality, often reworking in fictional form cases that would have been familiar to contemporary readers.

My contention throughout this book is that it behoves us to examine these contemporaneous narratives about, and ways of understanding,

¹ Evøe [E. V. Knox], 'Fiction in 1929', *Punch*, 10 April 1929, 400–1 (400).

² John Bude, *The Cornish Coast Murder* (1935; London: British Library, 2014), p. 271.

crime because detective fiction was not hermetically sealed from a broader, pervasive field of representations of criminality. E. V. Knox identifies a lack of realism as the stock-in-trade of detective novels, their 'business'; he mocks their conventions while admitting that he finds them an 'anodyne'.³ But a more complex view of crime can sometimes be glimpsed in the interstices of detective novels themselves. The moment in John Bude's *The Cornish Coast Mystery* (1935) when Reverend Dodd recognises that although his reading of detective fiction has helped him solve a 'real life' murder, literary representations fall short of conveying the 'sordid realities' of such cases, is one example of detective fiction's potential for self-referentiality. The reader is reminded of the gulf between fact and fiction while the rather conventional narrative of which Dodd himself is a part is framed as being true to life; as Janice MacDonald argues, rather than breaking the frame of the narrative, such self-referential comments serve to 'extend the distance between the acknowledged formulaic genre and the particular example at hand'.⁴ It is also significant, however, that in Bude's novel, as in others to be considered here, crime 'in real life', as well as depictions in 'books and plays', is a reference point. As Shani D'Cruze has argued of interwar Britain, 'Crime, thriller, murder or mystery stories, both fictional and factual, were widely produced and marketed in a range of narrative styles, some highly populist, some rather more literary . . . There were . . . certain overlaps in the narrative strategies of different kinds of crime stories, and part of the reading pleasures involved depended on the frisson when genres touched sides.'⁵ This frisson, though, as the Reverend Dodd's comments indicate, could provoke anxiety rather than being pleasurable.

Explicit and implicit references to either historical or more recent criminal cases within novels indicate authors' recognition that, although detective fiction was increasingly perceived as a discrete and codified form, its readers could hardly avoid being exposed to other crime narratives that were in circulation. George Orwell makes this point in his often-quoted 1946 essay 'Decline of the English Murder', when he describes an imaginary interwar reader, cosy by the fire, being drawn to accounts of famous murders, those 'whose story is known in . . . general outline to almost

³ Evoe, 'Fiction', 400.

⁴ Janice MacDonald, 'Parody and Detective Fiction' in Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (eds.), *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 61–72 (p. 69).

⁵ Shani D'Cruze, 'Intimacy, Professionalism and Domestic Homicide in Interwar Britain: The Case of Buck Ruxton', *Women's History Review*, 16.5 (2007), 701–22 (714).

everyone and which have been made into novels and rehashed over and over again by the Sunday papers'.⁶ This is a type of context, a shared canon of 'classic' crimes, that is less readily available to present-day readers of interwar fiction; similarly, forays by novelists including Dorothy L. Sayers into factual crime writing are not now widely known but, like the ongoing debates about the nature of detective fiction during this period, can enrich our understanding of interwar crime culture. Orwell dates the 'great period in murder' to 'between roughly 1850 and 1925',⁷ and Victorian and Edwardian crimes and their representations are important reference points for post-First World War writers. Crime is not just of interest as a topic in itself but as a means of exposing, and, potentially, critiquing both historical and contemporary sociocultural attitudes.

In the interwar period (and indeed beyond), the varied discourses about crime that are the subject of this study continued to express the kinds of concerns that V. A. C. Gatrell identifies in his discussion of the impact of developments in social organisation and the criminal law in the early nineteenth century: 'Crime was becoming a vehicle for articulating mounting anxieties about issues which really had nothing to do with crime at all: social change and the stability of social hierarchy.'⁸ Adrian Bingham has shown that reports of court proceedings were one of the few ways in which the interwar public could find out what happened in other people's marriages, and the glimpses they were offered, often in 'evasive and euphemistic styles', were for the most part of relationships gone wrong.⁹ More specifically, Lucy Bland sees concerns about female emancipation, exemplified by the figure of the flapper, being expressed in newspaper reporting of trials in the early 1920s: 'In making the private world of domesticity, sexual relationships, and marriage shockingly public, ... accounts [of trials] generated ... public debate.'¹⁰ In the case of Edith

⁶ George Orwell, 'Decline of the English Murder' (1946) in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume 4: In Front of your Nose 1945–1950* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), pp. 98–101 (p. 98).

⁷ Orwell, 'Decline', p. 98.

⁸ V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Crime, Authority and the Policeman-State' in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950 Volume 3: Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 243–310 (p. 249).

⁹ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers?: Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918–1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 141. My focus is on the depiction of murder trials; as Lucy Bland shows, press reporting of divorce cases was enough of an anxiety to prompt the Judicial Proceedings (Regulation of Reports) Act (1926), which 'prohibited the publication of detailed press reporting of divorce cases'. *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 200.

¹⁰ Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 2. Frederick Bywaters, who was having an affair with Edith

Thompson and Frederick Bywaters, examined by Bland and which I discuss in Chapter 2, the unregulated passion of an extra-marital affair was seen to have led to a man's death; the trial of Patrick Mahon the following year for the murder of his lover Emily Kaye presented the spectacle of an apparently highly charismatic individual unable to charm his way out of a death sentence. In Chapter 4, I examine fictions that engage with this case, and which display an acute awareness of the role that the media, principally the newspapers, play both in offering access to the private lives of others and in passing judgements of a kind that will most usually reinforce the moral message upheld by the court proceedings. Authors as different in their aesthetics as Elizabeth Bowen and Agatha Christie tread the fine line between critiquing and indulging in sensationalism, producing stories that question the representational strategies of both fictional and non-fictional crime writing. Vicarious pleasure may be gained from reading about other people's domestic difficulties but the importance of retaining one's own privacy and 'respectability' permeates these narratives, regardless of their class settings.

The central aspect of private life addressed in this material is marriage, and the ways in which relations between men and women are addressed (or avoided) in narratives of crime are important for this study. The majority of authors under discussion here are women, and they take varied stances towards gender issues and marriage; they are certainly not always progressive in their views, and not always sympathetic towards other women, be they victims or criminals. My focus on women writers reflects the prominence of female authors in both factual and fictional crime writing during this period. A number of explanations have been offered for the rise of the so-called 'Queens of Crime'.¹¹ John Cawelti suggests that the relatively low status of detective fiction as a literary form meant that it was 'more open to

Thompson, stabbed and killed Edith's husband Percy in October 1922. Edith claimed to have been unaware that he was going to do this, but they were charged jointly with murder, both found guilty, and both hanged.

¹¹ This term 'Queens of Crime', which usually encompasses Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, with Josephine Tey also sometimes included, was a relatively late coinage, seeming to have first been popularised by Maurice Richardson, in detective fiction reviews that he wrote for the *Observer*. He described the now little-known Josephine Bell as 'queen of crime' in a 1939 review ('The Crime Ration', 22 October 1939, 6), and the following year, praised 'the Queen of Crime's scheming ingenuity' in a review of Christie's *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe*. 'The Crime Ration', 10 November 1940, 5. This quotation was picked up by Christie's publisher, William Collins, who began to describe her in this fashion on the dust-jackets of her novels. By 1948, a profile in the *Observer* (possibly also written by Richardson) felt warranted to describe Christie as 'the acknowledged queen of crime-fiction the world over'. 'Profile: Agatha Christie', 3 October 1948, 3.

women than was “serious” literature’.¹² At the same time, however, as Anthea Trodd has noted, detective fiction, unlike romantic fiction, ‘was addressed to a mixed audience with a strong upmarket segment, conferring an unusual kind of status and authority on those who practised it’. In Trodd’s view, it was also ‘a flexible form which could be revised to accommodate women’s perspectives and interests’ while retaining its appeal to both female and male readers.¹³ As Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple observe, women ‘who, in real life, are less often criminals than victims, are clearly drawn to a genre dealing with transgression of the law’.¹⁴ As I will show, a similar argument can be made about popular factual crime writing.

Other aspects of the wider sociocultural context are also relevant. The interwar years saw not only legal changes that affected women’s place as citizens but also new kinds of involvement in the legal process for women. Female police patrols were first seen on Britain’s streets during the First World War; by 1940, the Metropolitan Police employed 282 female officers.¹⁵ Following the passage of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, women could be called for jury service (although only if they were property owners);¹⁶ Virginia B. Morris notes that the relatively recent admission of women as jurors adds point to the fact that, when Harriet Vane is on trial in Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Strong Poison* (1930), Lord Peter Wimsey’s assistant Miss Climpson, one of three women on the jury, stands firm in her resistance to a guilty verdict, and is joined in her objections by another female juror who draws on her experience as an

¹² John Cawelti, ‘Canonization, Modern Literature, and the Detective Story’ in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, pp. 6–15 (p. 6).

¹³ Anthea Trodd, *Women’s Writing in English: Britain 1900–1945* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 130.

¹⁴ Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple, ‘Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction’ in Helen Carr (ed.), *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women’s Writing in the Postmodern World* (London: Pandora, 1989), pp. 39–57 (p. 51).

¹⁵ Clive Emsley, *The Great British Bobby: A History of British Policing from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quercus, 2009), p. 245.

¹⁶ The writer Mary Butts was an early female juror, and was involved in a trial which raised the question of, as *The Times*’s headline had it, ‘Women Jurors in Unpleasant Cases’. William Nelson had accused James Moir (a former heavyweight boxing champion known professionally as ‘the Gunner’) of slander, after Moir accused Nelson of ‘an act of indecency’ with his (Moir’s) son. The judge gave the female jurors the option of being released, explaining, ‘The question at issue in this case involves relations between two men. It will involve sexual points of the gravest indelicacy – questions which even men would hesitate to discuss among themselves.’ One of the three female jurors took the opportunity to leave, but the other two, including Butts, decided to stay. *The Times* reported, ‘[O]ne of them remarked: “We think that if we are called at all we ought to sit whatever the case is”.’ ‘Women Jurors in Unpleasant Cases’, *The Times*, 4 November 1922, 4. The court found in Nelson’s favour. See Nathalie Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from a Life* (London: McPherson, 1998), pp. 123–4.

observer at other trials.¹⁷ Female magistrates could also be appointed from 1919,¹⁸ and the first women were called to the Bar in 1922, but the law remained a male-dominated profession.¹⁹ This could further explain why crime writing proved attractive to female authors; it was a means of engaging with a field in which women had otherwise limited opportunities to participate.

The writers who are key to this study – Marie Belloc Lowndes, F. Tennyson Jesse and Elizabeth Bowen, as well as Sayers – could not be said to constitute a network, although connections of various kinds link them together. They often had work in the same short story anthologies or essay collections; some had contact with each other in social contexts. Lowndes and Jesse, the least well known now, were prolific authors with high profiles in the 1920s and 1930s. Sayers and Bowen, whose work has received increasing critical attention in recent years, each wrote in a wider range of genres than is often acknowledged: Sayers's non-fiction and Bowen's engagement with crime in her short stories will be considered here. While the centrality of these writers in the chapters that follow reflects their prominence in the interwar period, consideration will be given to works by a range of other authors, both male and female, whose work also sheds light on debates about crime, criminality and its representation, including Francis Iles, Elizabeth Jenkins, Patrick Hamilton and Daphne du Maurier. While the majority of these authors would usually be thought of as middlebrow in terms of the concerns and style of their writing, they did not ignore the experiments with the depiction of consciousness that had characterised modernism in the early 1920s, and some attempted to incorporate aspects of a modernist aesthetic into their own works. They also display, to varying degrees, an awareness of the reconsiderations of crime, criminality and the law that were underway in the wider culture at this period. Opening up discussion of interwar crime writing beyond detective fiction helps both to contextualise detective fiction itself and to uncover these complex and wide-ranging debates.

¹⁷ Virginia B. Morris, 'Arsenic and Blue Lace: Sayers' Criminal Women', *Modern Fiction Studies*. 29.3 (1983), 485–95 (486). See Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (1930; London: New English Library, 2003), pp. 39–42.

¹⁸ Kristin Kalsem notes that an exception, prior to the 1919 Act, was Mary Slessor, a Scottish missionary, who was appointed as district magistrate in Calabar, Eastern Nigeria, in 1890. *In Contempt: Nineteenth Century Women, Law and Literature* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), p. 114.

¹⁹ The front page of the *Pall Mall Gazette and Globe* for 21 December 1922 juxtaposed its report on the ongoing appeal stage of the Bywaters and Thompson case with an article entitled 'Portia wins her First Case', describing a success for Helena Normanton in the divorce court.

Investigating Crime in Fact and Fiction

The interwar period is often referred to as the ‘Golden Age’ of detective fiction. John Strachey, writing in 1939, seems to have been the first to use this term,²⁰ and critics have since debated where the exact parameters of this era should be drawn.²¹ What is certainly striking is the extent of efforts to codify detective fiction during the 1920s and 1930s. The most famous statement of detective fiction’s generic characteristics is the so-called ‘Decalogue’ of Ronald Knox, a Catholic priest who was himself a detective novelist. This was included in the Preface to a 1929 short story anthology which Knox co-edited.²² At the core of the ‘Decalogue’ is the notion of ‘fair play’, the idea that the reader should be given enough information to be able to solve the mystery for him- or herself. From this follows, for example, the rule that the criminal should be ‘someone mentioned in the early part of the story’, and Knox also asserts that clues discovered by the detective must immediately be ‘produced for the inspection of the reader’.²³ Later in the Preface Knox goes so far as to list the points in the anthologised stories at which the reader should be able deduce the solution. But Knox himself acknowledges that ‘Rules so numerous and so stringent cannot fail to cramp the style of the author, and make the practise of the art not difficult only, but progressively more difficult’.²⁴ As readers become wise to conventions, so authors must become more ingenious: ‘it is almost impossible nowadays to think out any system of bluff which the seasoned reader will not see through’.²⁵ This applies to not only plot points but also character: ‘the friendless and penniless female who looks up with such appealing eyes into the face of the detective’s friend, may quite possibly be a murderess’.²⁶ Knox favoured minimal characterisation and a focus on the mechanics of the crime, what is sometimes termed the ‘clue-puzzle’ form. This increasingly faced competition from works which aimed at greater realism of both characterisation and action.

²⁰ John Strachey, ‘The Golden Age of English Detection’, *Saturday Review*, 7 January 1939, 12–14.

²¹ Whether the Golden Age includes the pre–First World War period depends on whether short stories or the novel are under consideration: Strachey’s focus is on the novel. For a brief overview, see the entries on ‘Golden Age Forms’ and ‘Golden Age Traditions’ in Rosemary Herbert (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (New York, NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 183–6 and pp. 186–8.

²² Father Ronald Knox, ‘Introduction’ in Father Ronald Knox and H. Harrington (eds.), *Best Detective Stories* (1929; London: Faber and Faber, 1935), pp. vii–xxiii. The Decalogue is at pp. xi–xiv. I have been unable to trace any earlier publication of the Decalogue, which Knox notes that he ‘laid down long ago’ (p. xi).

²³ Knox, ‘Introduction’, p. xi, p. xiv. ²⁴ Knox, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.

²⁵ Knox, ‘Introduction’, p. xvi. ²⁶ Knox, ‘Introduction’, p. xviii.

As Stephen Knight notes, Dorothy L. Sayers is one of a number of authors whose work shows ‘that the classic clue-puzzle was being rejected by some as soon as it was recognised as a sub-genre’.²⁷ Indeed, Knox’s comments acknowledge that, even as he was devising his ‘rules’, they were being tested and parodied. At around the time the ‘Decalogue’ appeared, Sayers was involved in the setting up of the Detection Club, a society for authors of detective fiction, and the ‘Detection Club Oath’, sworn by new members, contains a further light-hearted but telling statement of the ‘fair play’ rules. Authors undertook to avoid using ‘Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition . . . Coincidence or the Act of God’ in their plots, and ‘never to conceal a vital clue from the reader’.²⁸ The Detection Club published a number of edited or jointly authored volumes during the 1930s in order to raise funds. One striking characteristic of volumes including *Ask a Policeman* (1933) and *Double Death* (1939), which were produced round-robin style, with each author writing a chapter in turn, picking up where the previous one left off, is how varied the authors’ contributions are, notwithstanding the (apparent) constraints of genre. These books fail as coherent detective novels because each author wants to move the action in a different direction, each picks up on different clues from earlier chapters and approaches to characterisation vary wildly. The genre is revealed to be far less formulaic and much more open to each author’s interpretations and interests than the existence of ‘rules’ might lead a reader to presume.

Writing in 1928, in the introduction to one of a series of short story anthologies that she edited, Sayers welcomed new developments in characterisation in particular (not least because they fitted with her own practice): ‘The automata – the embodied vices and virtues – the weeping fair-haired girl – the stupid but manly young man with the biceps . . . are . . . disappearing from the intellectual branch of the art, to be replaced by figures having more in common with humanity’.²⁹ Later, in her 1935 lecture ‘Aristotle on Detective Fiction’, she indicated that in some cases the limits of this new approach had been exceeded: ‘A few years ago, the tendency was for all detective stories to be of the characterless or “draught-

²⁷ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p. 101.

²⁸ ‘The Detection Club Oath’ in Howard Haycraft (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1946), pp. 197–9 (p. 198). The exact date of the founding of the Club is not known but it was certainly in existence by 1930. The Oath is thought to have been written jointly by Sayers and G. K. Chesterton.

²⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, ‘Introduction’ in Dorothy L. Sayers (ed.), *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, First Series (1928; London: Victor Gollancz, 1930), pp. 9–47 (p. 41).

board” variety; to-day, we get many examples exhibiting a rather slender plot and a good deal of morbid psychology.³⁰ The question of the appropriate balance between character and plot, and indeed of how far the author should go in considering ‘morbid’ – or abnormal – psychology, was one that Sayers continued to wrestle with, and which was worked through, as I will show in Chapter 3, in her fictional and non-fictional works of the mid- and late 1930s. Definitions of criminality and the shading of criminality into psychological disorder also provide a point of contact between fictional and non-fictional writing, and characterisation – the attempt to construct a coherent and credible depiction of an individual’s motives and actions – is a procedure that occurs in both fictional and non-fictional accounts of crime.

Underpinning Knox’s approach was a rejection of what Maurizio Ascari has termed the ‘sensational lineage’ of detective fiction, including not only sensation fiction, the mid-Victorian form which often drew on real cases for its plots, but also supernatural fiction. This rejection led to a focus instead on rationality, ‘grounding [detective fiction’s] literary status on its associations with scientific method and highbrow literature’.³¹ Christopher Pittard goes so far as to describe this exclusionary process as a ‘eugenics of genre’.³² However, Knox’s essay itself shows that the quest for a ‘pure’ genre was never going to be successful: detective fiction was in a constant state of evolution during the interwar years and, as Ascari has argued, reader engagement often stemmed from ‘a fruitful tension between the domain of the intellect and that of the emotions’.³³ Nicola Humble connects this to gendered patterns of reading, suggesting that the ‘ratiocinative elements’ of detective fiction offered ‘the illusion of an active, intellectually engaged reading, rather than a passive abandonment, allowing the male reader to indulge in escapist reading without experiencing a feared loss of control’.³⁴ The claim that murder can ever be considered as a purely intellectual exercise on a par with a chess puzzle becomes further complicated when other writing about crime from this period, the culture of crime of which detective fiction was a part, is considered. The novels

³⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, ‘Aristotle on Detective Fiction’ in *Unpopular Opinions: Twenty-one Essays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), pp. 178–90 (p. 180).

³¹ Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 1. Ghosts were forbidden by the Detection Club Oath.

³² Christopher Pittard, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), p. 26.

³³ Ascari, *A Counter-History*, p. 10.

³⁴ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 53.

that I discuss in Chapter 1, for example, were not classed as detective fiction at their time of publication and show a direct engagement with the legacy of sensation fiction in both their plots and their focus on the motivations of the criminal rather than on the detection of the crime. They expose explicitly issues relating to women's social position and particularly marriage. The urge to systematise described by Ascari means that, although widely read in their day, such novels have received little or no critical attention, even from critics concerned with defining detective fiction in a more inclusive fashion.

As well as characterisation, fictional and factual crime writing have other narrative techniques in common, including suspense, irony and, more generally, emplotment.³⁵ A writer may choose to offer a reinterpretation of a criminal case in the form of a novel or short story rather than an essay, but both factual and fictional forms provide scope for speculation on individuals and their motives. The most frequently revisited cases tend to be those which were unsolved, or required extensive detective work, or that took a dramatic turn in the courtroom. For Orwell, as for the authors under discussion in this book, 'famous crime' is almost always synonymous with 'famous murder', not least because murder was still punishable with the death penalty. It is the individual for whom crime is an exceptional act who is of interest: habitual criminals or criminal gangs do not pose the same kind of intellectual challenge.³⁶ In his essay 'The Guilty Vicarage' (1948), W. H. Auden argued that detective fiction requires as its setting a 'closed society', providing a limited number of suspects, and that, over the course of the narrative, the purging from this society of the guilty person returns it to a state of 'innocence'.³⁷ A similar impulse underpins some factual crime writing, though this urge to the restoration of order is necessarily complicated by unsolved crimes, and indeed by limits on the extent to which authors are prepared to critique social institution and systems including the police and the law. Given that it treats historical,

³⁵ What I term 'factual crime writing' here could be described as 'true crime', but this is a post-Second World War coinage and seems jarringly anachronistic when applied to the earlier period.

³⁶ Organised crime was of course a problem in interwar Britain and does find its way into fiction, most notably in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938). The memoirs of Ex-Detective Chief Superintendent Edward Greeno of Scotland Yard, describing his career from the early 1920s to the late 1950s, focus largely on the problem of 'race gangs', that is, gangs involved in crimes centred on horse racing, which also feature in Greene's novel. Greeno's brand of detective work, based on cumulative knowledge of a particular criminal milieu, holds little interest for authors of what is now considered classic detective fiction. See Edward Greeno, *War on the Underworld* (London: John Long, 1960).

³⁷ W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage' (1948) in *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), pp. 146–58 (p. 149–50).

rather than imagined, criminals and victims, factual crime writing might be expected to have a gravity that detective fiction often lacks. In fact, although some writing about real crimes had intense seriousness of purpose, intending to highlight perceived miscarriages of justice, other examples, as we shall see, adopt what can seem like a disjunctively ironic stance on the action described. Perhaps most significantly, factual accounts of crime, and novels that are not constrained by genre, are much more likely than detective fiction to encompass an account of the trial.

Detective novels tend not to recount the trial of the individual whom the investigator identifies as the guilty party because the watertightness of the investigation itself acts as a substitute for the depiction of the judicial process. An account of the trial would simply reiterate the findings of the investigation that has formed the body of the narrative. Thus the detective figure is a substitute for both the police and the legal system; in Robin Woods's view, the detective 'avenges crime, without state or community ever having to take responsibility for judicial homicide', thus acting as a 'link between criminal and society while holding them apart'.³⁸ For Woods, this is a means of protecting readers from the knowledge that criminals may indeed be people like them, living in their communities. As Woods acknowledges, however, in some instances the questioning of the verdict of the courts can be the impetus for the plot, reinforcing the importance of the investigative narrative over the judicial. Sayers's *Strong Poison* and Allingham's *Flowers for the Judge* (1936) both feature investigations that are spurred on by what are believed, and eventually proved, to be wrongful accusations, with imminent court proceedings providing a deadline by which the real culprit must be found. In these examples, detective fiction could be seen as offering a space where the potential fallibility of the judicial process, and indeed the police, is exposed and, simultaneously, compensated for. Accounts of real cases, by comparison, more frequently describe court proceedings in some detail, so that both the investigation and the construction and presentation of the case by lawyers are subject to scrutiny. The action of detective fiction tends to remain within the private sphere; it is the trial and accounts given of it in newspapers that bring the accused into public view.

Jonathan Grossman notes that once capital punishment, previously carried out in public, went behind closed doors in 1868, the trial, now

³⁸ Robin Woods, "'His appearance is against him": The Emergence of the Detective' in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (eds.), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 15–24 (p. 19).

the last occasion on which the accused appeared publicly, took on a new importance: 'As punishment moved out of sight, the long-standing public process of the courtroom trial, itself freshly amplified as a mode of re-telling narratives, came to occupy a newly central place both in the process of state justice and in a marketplace that turned the materials of state justice into print products.'³⁹ Although, as Lizzie Seal points out, 'the audience [for capital punishment] was no longer physically present . . . this did not mean it had disappeared. Rather, it had transformed'.⁴⁰ A much larger audience could read about trials, and indeed executions, than could ever have attended either. Changes in the conduct of trials, and particularly the role of lawyers, from the 1830s onwards meant that trials began to last for days rather than hours, though late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trials still seem remarkably speedy by present-day standards, with two or three days being a not uncommon length even for a murder case.

This nevertheless meant that, compared with previous practice, there was 'space for courtroom drama and individualized narratives to develop'.⁴¹ The actual trial might not have lasted longer than a few days, but it would be preceded by an inquest that had the power to name the person believed to be the guilty party, and by the defendant's appearance at the magistrates' court, both of which would help provide 'ready-made and daily text for the voracious, growing industry of newspapers'.⁴² Newspapers were limited in the amount of commentary that they could produce on cases while trials were underway, but this itself meant that verbatim trial transcripts in newspapers gained currency not just as that day's instalment but as the raw material for a potentially more durable record that could then be reconsidered and debated. By the interwar years, the increasingly challenging market for newspapers and competition for readers 'ensured that older restraints . . . were dispensed with', and as Bland has suggested, '[r]eading and talking about sensational trials was a central form of popular cultural entertainment'.⁴³ As I will show in later chapters, newspapers were willing to risk being prosecuted for contempt of court in the search for a fresh angle on a story, and reporters were occasionally accused of attempting to subvert the role of the police. However, there was evidently still a readership for

³⁹ Jonathan Grossman, *The Art of Alibi* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 7.

⁴⁰ Lizzie Seal, *Capital Punishment in Twentieth-Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 33.

⁴¹ Grossman, *The Art*, p. 20. ⁴² Grossman, *The Art*, p. 30.

⁴³ Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson and Samantha Pegg, *Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility, 1820–2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 115; Bland, *Modern Women*, p. 2.

works which went beyond reportage or scandal-mongering, presenting famous cases as re-interpretable narratives and either challenging or reinforcing the mythologies that grew up around them.

What trial narratives often bring to the fore, and what prefaces and essays dealing with criminal causes célèbres also reveal, is the relative opacity of ‘character’. For most of the nineteenth century, until the passage of the 1898 Evidence in Criminal Cases Act, the accused was not permitted to speak in his or her own defence, meaning that his or her motivations had to be reconstructed from what was said about him or her in court by others. There were partial exceptions: in the case of Madeleine Smith, heard in 1857 and discussed in Chapter 1, letters from Smith to the man she was accused of poisoning, her lover Emile L’Angelier, were read aloud in court, supposedly private communications substituting for the retrospective self-exculpation that she was not allowed to utter. After the passage of the 1865 Criminal Evidence Act, the defendant could read a prepared statement to the court, though this was not given on oath. Florence Maybrick, accused of poisoning her husband with arsenic in 1889, delivered such a statement, but was nevertheless found guilty; the death sentence, which was mandatory following guilty verdicts in capital cases at this period, was commuted to life imprisonment and Maybrick served fifteen years. Once the defendant was permitted to take the stand, a tactical decision had to be made as to whether being cross-examined would actually be helpful to their case. Edith Thompson gave evidence against legal advice, a decision that, as I will show, proved counterproductive. Attempting to explain his or her behaviour could often result in the defendant presenting him- or herself to the jury in an unfavourable light, and in many trial accounts, the defendant is an absent presence, existing only at the intersection of what is said about him or her. The defendant’s physical presence in court was subject to close scrutiny and was often ‘read’ for clues to guilt or innocence; discussing the 1910 trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen, who did speak in his own defence, Lindsay Farmer points out that ‘both counsel and the judge [directed] the jury to base their judgment on an assessment of the self-presentation of the accused person’.⁴⁴ In many instances, however, when the defendant remained silent, the indirect nature of much of the information presented

⁴⁴ Lindsay Farmer, ‘Criminal Responsibility and the Proof of Guilt’ in Markus D. Dubber and Lindsay Farmer (eds.), *Modern Histories of Crime and Punishment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 42–65 (p. 56). Crippen was found guilty of the murder of his wife and hanged, having been the object of a dramatic pursuit across the Atlantic after he fled the country. This was famously the first time that wireless telegraphy was used to assist a murder investigation.

about him or her provided an uncomfortable parallel with the deceased. Both the defendant and the victim were spoken on behalf of in the courtroom setting, with competing narratives emerging in relation to each.

In detective fiction, the guilty party is usually allowed to offer an explanation for his or her behaviour. Motive is conjured from the intersection of character and circumstances: although apparently unmotivated killing, or killing for its own sake, does feature in narratives from this period as I will show in Chapter 3, in many Golden Age novels, the crime is committed not by a hardened or career criminal but by a hitherto law-abiding person caught up in intractable circumstances. Golden Age detective fiction, then, is principally concerned with asking the reader to imagine the local pressures that might drive an individual to commit crime, rather than with attempting to understand criminality *per se*. This aim is shared by some of the other novels to be discussed here, in which the criminal protagonist is also the focaliser of the action, and which figure crime as a desperate response to social circumstances. But what accounts of trials and novels concerned with crime have in common is their construction of crime as exceptional or aberrant. Both kinds of narrative, I argue, are therefore a means of attempting to explain and control crime, with the incorporation of a greater or lesser degree of social critique.

Creating the Crime Canon I: The *Notable Trials* series

Crimes may be constructed as aberrant, but this does not mean that individual examples cannot be contained within a history or typology; indeed, the insertion of crimes into organising grand narratives, whether these be essay anthologies or book series, is itself a means of asserting control. Looking back to the early nineteenth century, Keith Hollingsworth notes that the 1820s ‘saw the completion . . . of a serious work of legal history, the *State Trials*. This was begun in 1809 . . . and [t]he thirty-third volume appeared in 1826 . . . This fifth edition remained a standard work for many decades.’⁴⁵ In the Preface to his *Famous Trials of the Century* (1899) J. B. Atlay acknowledged the gap left by the breaking off of the *State Trials*, and noted that, as a consequence, ‘[t]he criminal annals of the last eighty years remain for the most part buried in the files of the daily press’.⁴⁶ Atlay offers his own accounts of trials that ‘in their day

⁴⁵ Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830–1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens and Thackeray* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 53.

⁴⁶ J. B. Atlay, *Famous Trials of the Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1899), pp. vii–ix (p. viii).

have merited the designation of *causes célèbres*’ and intends these not ‘for the schoolroom nor the law student’ but as a means of showing ‘that the drama of real life does not fall behind the boldest imaginative efforts of the detective novelist’.⁴⁷ This claim, that a factual narrative can be as dramatic as a fictional one, is repeated often in interwar accounts of real-life crimes, and implies that factual authors such as Atlay saw themselves as competing for readers with the increasingly popular genre of detective fiction.

Atlay was a contributor of introductions to the *Notable Trials* series, which was initiated in the early 1900s by William Hodge & Co. This series provided writers with a professional involvement in the law, such as Atlay, a qualified barrister, as well as others, including F. Tennyson Jesse, whose knowledge of law and criminology was self-taught, with the opportunity to provide commentaries on both current and historical cases. Each volume included an often lengthy introduction, directing the reader to the key points of interest in the case, followed by a lightly edited transcript of the trial itself. Hodge & Co was a firm which supplied shorthand note-takers to the courts of Edinburgh and Glasgow, and publishing was essentially an off-shoot from this other activity. Beginning with a series of *Notable Scottish Trials* (1905–15), the company soon widened its remit, with *Notable Trials* covering both contemporary and historical cases from across Great Britain. In its heyday in the 1920s the series was edited by James Hodge, the son of Harry Hodge who had devised it. In the early 1940s, having recognised that the introductions could be read as stand-alone essays on the cases in question, the Hodges came to an agreement with Penguin, whose publication of omnibus volumes of selected introductions brought them to a new readership; this format was based on *Black Maria* (1935), a one-off anthology of trial prefaces that was published by Hodge & Co in conjunction with Victor Gollancz, a company that had a prominent crime fiction list. James Hodge’s correspondence with Penguin’s Director Allen Lane when this venture was first being discussed in the mid-1930s provides a glimpse of how Hodge conceived of the series and its readership:

The finest stories are the old ones which appeal to all lovers of biography and the strange events of old times – such as Charles I, Mary Queen of Scots, . . . Jack Shepherd [*sic*], etc. On the other hand, if one wants to appeal to those whose normal interest are [*sic*] in blood-curdlers and detective fiction then the more modern murder yarns are the best. In this section I would place

⁴⁷ Atlay, *Famous Trials*, p. viii.

G. J. Smith (Brides in the Bath), Madeleine Smith, Oscar Slater, Crippen . . . etc.⁴⁸

Hodge separates the ‘strange events’ of history from ‘modern murder yarns’ which are liable to excite what he frames as more prurient interest and in this context it is relevant that during the 1920s and 1930s the series covered very recent murder cases, as well as those that had become ‘canonical’ through the passage of time. The authors of some of the lengthy prefatory essays for the later volumes evidently attended trials while they were in progress with a view to writing about them later for the series. Hodge seems to distinguish between two different kinds of reader – the lover of biography and the reader of detective fiction – but allows that the series can appeal to both.

A catalogue sent to Lane by Hodge outlined the intentions of the series in more high-minded terms, stressing its educative rather than entertainment value: ‘A *Notable British Trial*, it may be explained, is neither a camouflaged “shocker” nor a legal textbook.’ Importantly, it can help members of the public understand what happens in court: ‘In this connection the ordinary newspaper report is of no use whatever. It is inevitable that only the matters of more lurid interest in the trial can be set forth there.’⁴⁹ Hodge’s letter to Lane admits that the ‘lurid’ nature of the events described in murder cases may be part of their appeal, but he retained a desire to use the series to educate the public about legal process rather than to titillate with gruesome details.⁵⁰ When James Hodge was called up for service in the RAF during the Second World War, his father Harry continued negotiations with Allen Lane, and the first of the Penguin *Famous Trials* series appeared in 1941. Ten volumes in all were published in the same green livery as Penguin’s detective fiction titles, the final one

⁴⁸ James Hodge to Allen Lane, 28 July 1936, University of Bristol, Penguin Books Archive, DM 1107/338. William Hodge & Co’s papers appear to have been disposed of when the publishing arm was sold on in the 1970s, so this correspondence with Penguin provides a rare glimpse of their working practices. Jack Sheppard was a prolific burglar who escaped several times from captivity but was eventually hanged in November 1724. George Smith was convicted and hanged in 1915 having married three women in turn over the previous three years and drowned each of them in the bath soon after the wedding; see Chapter 4. Madeleine Smith, accused of murdering her lover, is discussed further below and in the next chapter. Oscar Slater was imprisoned for murder in 1908 but released on appeal in 1927. On Crippen, see note 44 above.

⁴⁹ *Notable British Trials* Catalogue (1938), University of Bristol, Penguin Books Archive, DM 1107/338.

⁵⁰ This comes through in a letter of 17 November 1948 from Hodge to A. S. B. Glover, an editor at Penguin, in which Hodge reminds Glover that the Hodge series is concerned with famous trials, rather than famous cases, and argues for the inclusion of the ‘outstanding trial’ of Mrs Maybrick, as opposed to the more recent, in his view less well known, and although he does not say so explicitly, more lurid case of Sidney Fox. University of Bristol, Penguin Books Archive, DM 1107/338.

appearing in 1964. The republication of selected prefaces under the Penguin imprint reinforces the extent to which the Hodge & Co series was an important contributor to the creation of the interwar crime canon.⁵¹

The *Notable Trials* were never very profitable for Hodge & Co and they ceased publication in 1960. The widespread cultural currency of the series in the interwar period, however, is indicated not least by the springing up of imitators. As D'Cruze notes, Hodge & Co's was always the more respectable series: 'Their "Notable Trials" were more reticent and scholarly in tone than other imitators, for example the Geoffrey Bles, "Famous Trials" series.'⁵² In Gladys Mitchell's *Death at the Opera* (1934) a murdered school teacher is described by one of her colleagues as 'just the sort of woman you read about in the "Great Trials" series – you know – morbid and quiet, with all sorts of repressions and complexes'.⁵³ Mitchell skewers the pretensions towards respectability of some of these volumes by suggesting that the speaker here, the Physical Training Mistress, has gained only the loosest grasp of the nature of 'repressions and complexes' from her reading; these 'repressions and complexes', she implies, will fit one for victimhood. It is signal that in Sayers's *Strong Poison*, Wimsey favours the 'more reticent and scholarly' series, and his consultation of the 'bright scarlet volumes of the *Notable British Trials*' is instrumental in helping him solve the case.⁵⁴

These scarlet volumes, appearing within a fictional narrative, signify in many different ways. They are a reminder of how Wimsey's method of investigation tends to work; he is not intuitive, but puts in hard hours of study when he needs to. They also remind the reader that, like trials, both the commission and investigation of crime operate through reference to precedents. Wimsey is investigating a poisoning and studies accounts of famous late nineteenth-century poisoners, including some of those mentioned by Orwell in 'Decline'.⁵⁵ Importantly, here the supposedly 'closed

⁵¹ When F. Tennyson Jesse's novel *A Pin to See the Peepshow* was reviewed by the *Times Literary Supplement*, the facing page included an advert for Hodge & Co's publications, including the volume on the trial of Sidney Fox with a preface by Jesse, a small but significant indication of both Jesse's profile as an author at this period, and of the potential for readers, like authors, to move between factual and fictional accounts. See 'A Pin to See the Peepshow', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 October 1934, 692.

⁵² Shani D'Cruze, 'The damned place was haunted': The Gothic, Middlebrow Culture and Inter-War "Notable Trials", *Literature and History*, 15.1 (2006), 37–58 (39).

⁵³ Gladys Mitchell, *Death at the Opera* (1936; London: Vintage, 2010), p. 61.

⁵⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (1930; London: New English Library, 2003), p. 262.

⁵⁵ Wimsey reads up on 'Palmer, Pritchard, Maybrick, Seddon, Armstrong, Madeleine Smith – the great practitioners in arsenic'. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 262. Orwell mentions each of these except for Pritchard and Smith. In fact, only the latter four used arsenic in their crimes. Dr William Palmer, the

world' of detective fiction, grants access to the extra-textual world, the historical world; an invented crime is compared to a real crime. This can be seen as an attempt on Sayers's part to reinforce the realism of the novel, a strategy which, as I will show, undermines the stereotype of detective fiction as detached from real-life crime. More broadly, it presumes that the readership of the detective novel will be familiar with the Hodge series, as well as serving as a reminder of what (usually) lies beyond the boundaries of such novels: the trial and the punishment of the criminal. Wimsey is trying to prevent Harriet Vane, whom he is convinced has been wrongly accused, from becoming a 'famous case'.

Although writers with a professional connection to the law, such as Atlay, continued to contribute prefaces over the course of the *Notable Trials* series' existence, others from a specifically literary background, such as Jesse, or the Scottish novelist and essayist Winifred Duke, brought a different sensibility to their accounts. Jesse's introduction to a new edition of the *Trial of Madeleine Smith*, published in 1927, and which I discuss in Chapter 1, considered Smith's social circumstances and personality in much greater detail than did A. Duncan Smith's original 1905 introductory essay on the case. While cases ostensibly needed to present some interesting legal peculiarity in order to be worthy of inclusion in the series – the 'Not Proven' verdict in the Madeleine Smith case, for instance – the predominant focus of the series on individuals being tried for capital crimes meant that novelistic techniques of characterisation would often be brought into play, and this is evidenced by the explicit and implicit comparison between court cases and literature in Atlay's preface and the Hodge & Co catalogue. Indeed, the accused were not the only 'personalities' under potential scrutiny. Barristers in such cases were essentially arguing for the lives of their clients. A number of KCs in the interwar years achieved what amounted to celebrity status, publishing their autobiographies, or volumes of reminiscences about their 'greatest cases', and the *Notable Trials* both refer to and compound existing public perceptions of barristers' reputations.⁵⁶ Describing the trial of Edith

so-called 'Rugeley poisoner', was executed in 1856 for the strychnine poisoning of John Cook, but was also believed to have killed several members of his own family. Edward Pritchard, also a doctor, was executed in 1865, having poisoned his wife and mother-in-law with antimony and aconite. Florence Maybrick's trial, is described above; it is widely argued that her husband's death, from arsenic poisoning, was accidental. Frederick Seddon poisoned his lodger, Eliza Barrow, after first arranging for her to sign over her assets to him; he was hanged in 1911. Herbert Armstrong, a solicitor, was hanged for the murder of his wife in 1922.

⁵⁶ For example, Edward Marjoribanks's *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, first published by Gollancz in 1929, was reprinted in abridged form by Penguin in 1950. Marshall Hall's noted

Thompson and Frederick Bywaters, for example, Filson Young noted that, acting in Thompson's defence, Sir Henry Curtis-Bennett had little to draw on other than his 'emotional eloquence',⁵⁷ a characteristic for which he became noted. In this analysis, an eloquent defence barrister could potentially compensate for the weakness of the evidence in a case. The introductions, then, provide a degree of context that the transcript itself cannot always supply, as well as alerting the general reader to any unusual legal aspects of the case. Constructing a coherent, chronological narrative from the transcript itself can be challenging, and therefore, the introductions provide the reader with an interpretation of the raw evidence, one which often, but not always, echoes the decision eventually made by the jury.

Fiction of the period illustrates and at times critiques the importance of these different sources of information to the public understanding of crime. Mitchell's *Death at the Opera* introduces, as one of its suspects, an individual who has previously been accused, and then cleared, of the murder of his wife. Although he has been acquitted, Cutler, living under the name Helm, is nevertheless viewed with deep suspicion by his neighbours. The first readers of this novel may have identified similarities here with the 1931 William Wallace case, which Sayers wrote about, and to which I will return in Chapter 3. Mitchell, however, not only refers to the case through her depiction of Helm, but also satirises newspaper crime reporting and its consumers; one of the acquitted man's neighbours comments, 'I don't read the Sunday papers for nothing. Got a regular gallery of murderers, I have, in the back of me head, and although he was let off with a caution, I reckon he's a murderer as sure as eggs is eggs.'⁵⁸ This opinion is framed, not least by the colloquial language in which it is expressed, as naive, but Mitchell's first readers might also have been given pause to reflect on how they too formulate judgements. Further, Helm's supposed crimes are extradiegetic (that is, they take place beyond, and are not discovered within, the temporal and spatial boundaries of the central

successes included his defence of Ronald Light, accused of the so-called 'Green Bicycle Murder', in 1919, and of Harold Greenwood, accused of poisoning his wife, in 1920. Ian Burney and Neil Pemberton see the interwar years as the heyday, also, of the 'celebrity pathologist', noting the importance in particular of Sir Bernard Spilsbury, whose career spanned over forty years and who gave evidence in several of the cases to be discussed in this book: 'Spilsbury spoke in easily accessible language about the ultimate decipherability of the chaos that had initially confronted him.' 'The Rise and Fall of Celebrity Pathology', *British Medical Journal*, 341 (2010), 1319–1321 (1320).

⁵⁷ Filson Young, 'Introduction', in Filson Young (ed.), *Trial of Frederick Bywaters and Edith Thompson* (Edinburgh and London: William Hodge, 1923), pp. xiii–xxxi (p. xx).

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Death at the Opera*, pp. 203–4.

narrative), and Mitchell thus indicates that the ‘closed world’ of this novel might in fact be open to challenges from beyond its borders. In Sayers’s *Strong Poison*, Harriet Vane’s research for her latest novel includes buying arsenic and signing for it with a false name as well as reading up on famous poisonings, including ‘the Madeline Smith case, the Seddon case and the Armstrong case’,⁵⁹ and this is all used in evidence against her in her trial for the murder of her lover. Her interest in real-life crime, and the confusion, on the law’s part, of true and invented crimes, almost has fatal consequences for Harriet, but, as I have indicated, Wimsey’s research into the annals of criminal history is what saves her. There is, it is implied, a proper and an improper way of using one’s knowledge of criminal history; Wimsey, and by extension, Sayers, succeed where Harriet fell short.⁶⁰

Creating the Crime Canon II: Essayists and Campaigners

Volumes such as Atlay’s *Famous Trials of the Century* and the *Notable Trials* series claimed, then, to be educating and entertaining their readers, and distanced themselves from both newspaper journalism on the one hand and fiction on the other. Authors do on occasion acknowledge, as Hodge did, that an interest in crime and criminality might be deemed prurient, but concerns of this sort tend to be dismissed in favour of the educative stance. As Mark Seltzer puts it in his consideration of contemporary true crime writing, ‘Graphic horror quickly yields to research’.⁶¹ An anecdote recounted by the widely respected Scottish crime writer William Roughead is pertinent here. Roughead was a qualified solicitor whose career as an author began prior to the First World War with a number of prefaces for the *Notable Scottish Trials* series. Writing in 1939, Roughead remembered being visited in Edinburgh some years earlier by the American criminologist Edmund Pearson. Pearson, according to Roughead, had ‘an insatiable appetite for all that [Edinburgh] could boast of criminous sites and

⁵⁹ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 30. See also n. 55 above.

⁶⁰ In Francis Iles’s *Before the Fact* (1932), Lina learns that her good-for-nothing but charming husband Johnnie has borrowed books about criminal history from their neighbour, the crime novelist Isobel Sedbusk, and that he has managed to persuade Isobel to tell him about a commonly available but undetectable poison. This all confirms Lina’s suspicion that her husband is planning to kill her, a plan to which she apparently submits at the climax of the novel. Not surprisingly, this ending had to be changed in the film adaptation of the novel, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* (1941). As well as being a twisted re-write of aspects of his friend Sayers’s *Strong Poison*, Iles’s novel also contains, in Isobel Sedbusk, a nod to the ideas of F. Tennyson Jesse. See Chapter 2 n. 28.

⁶¹ Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 37.

sanguinary memories', and Roughead made special note of one part of their tour:

I recall in particular, when at his express desire I conducted him to Tweeddale Court – an insalubrious alley, once the scene of the famous Begbie murder – how he made me lurk, as the assassin, at the foot of the hidden stair, and leap out upon him, as the bank porter passing through the dark and narrow close, with the bundle of banknotes that were the price of his life.

Pearson enjoyed it all as a boy would a game.⁶²

Whether the historical nature of this crime excuses Pearson's and Roughead's playacting is debatable, though as I will show in Chapter 1, claiming respectability was often easier for an author if historical, rather than contemporary, crimes were at stake. Roughead's tone certainly aims to divert the reader away from recriminating Pearson for his behaviour; Pearson's criminological credentials license his actions, which thus reinforce, rather than undermine, his status as a serious commentator, indicating as they do that he is willing to go beyond simply reading written accounts of crimes in his pursuit of the truth. A version of this tactic is used by crime writers including F. Tennyson Jesse, who often makes a point of mentioning in her essays the fact that she has interviewed witnesses or visited the sites of crimes. While Pearson's enthusiasm might strike a present-day reader as dubious, going beyond documentary evidence situates the author as an investigator, rather than simply a commentator, or even as a vicarious witness viewing the scene of the crime and presenting their observations for the reader, safe in his or her armchair.

Where contemporary, rather than historical, cases were concerned, the authors' investigations could indeed have a serious import, especially in the period prior to the existence of the Courts of Criminal Appeal (these were established in 1907 in England and 1926 in Scotland). Later in his essay, Roughead recalls the 'boyish glee' with which another 'dear old friend', H. B. Irving (the son of the actor Sir Henry Irving), would 'harken' to his 'tales of horror'.⁶³ Irving, a barrister, was one of the founders of

⁶² William Roughead, 'Enjoyment of Murder', in *Neck or Nothing* (London: Cassell, 1939), pp. 3–30 (pp. 3–4). William Begbie was murdered in November 1806 when taking £5000 of his employer's money to the bank. Fourteen years later, James Moffat was arrested and found guilty of the crime, though he died before the death sentence could be carried out. Given Pearson's prominence, it is notable that in a letter to H. G. Wells that is undated, but probably from the late 1920s or early 1930s, Pearson identifies F. Tennyson Jesse and Dorothy L. Sayers as the two authors he had particularly hoped to meet on a trip to England, and notes that Marie Belloc Lowndes attempted to act as an intermediary on his behalf. Qtd in Joanna Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn: A Biography of F. Tennyson Jesse* (London: André Deutsch, 1984), p. 156.

⁶³ Roughead, 'Enjoyment', p. 4.

'Our Society', a secretive organisation better known as the Crimes Club, inaugurated in 1903 to provide a forum for the discussion of prominent criminal cases. Other early members included Atlay, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and John Churton Collins, who in 1904 became Professor of English at the University of Birmingham. Roughead, Doyle and Collins all took an active part in campaigns to overturn miscarriages of justice in the early years of the twentieth century. Doyle campaigned to achieve a pardon for George Edalji, a solicitor who was imprisoned in 1903 after being found guilty of a series of mutilations of animals in and around the village of Great Wyrley in Staffordshire.⁶⁴ Doyle had begun, and soon abandoned, a series of essays on puzzling crimes of the 1860s – three of these 'Strange Studies from Life' appeared in the *Strand Magazine* in early 1901 – but he continued to voice his views on contemporary miscarriages of justice, with the case of Oscar Slater, imprisoned for the murder of Helen Lambie in 1908 and eventually released in 1927, being another notable example, one in which Roughead also took a keen interest.⁶⁵

Doyle's campaigning was largely done from his desk, but in his memoirs, another Crimes Club member, Samuel Ingleby Oddie, who over the course of his legal career rose to the role of HM Coroner for Central London, recalled a more active investigation undertaken by Collins. He accompanied Collins, who wished to look into the circumstances of the death of Mary Money. Her body was found in a railway tunnel at Merstham in Surrey, in September 1905. Oddie's description of Collins's

⁶⁴ Edalji approached Doyle when he was released under police supervision in 1906, asking for assistance in obtaining a pardon, and, after meeting him in early 1907, Doyle became convinced of his innocence. Following calls from Doyle, Collins and others for the case to be re-examined, a Home Office Committee was set up to investigate. Edalji did receive a pardon, although he was not compensated for the time he had spent in prison, and was able to resume his legal practice. Doyle wrote a number of articles on the case, which were reprinted in pamphlet form. See Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Cases of Edalji and Slater* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009).

⁶⁵ See Doyle, 'Strange Studies from Life: I The Holocaust of Manor Place', *Strand Magazine*, 21.123 (March 1901), 252–58; 'Strange Studies from Life: II The Love Affair of George Vincent Parker', *Strand Magazine*, 21.124 (April 1901), 363–70; 'Strange Studies from Life: III The Debatable Case of Mrs Emsley', *Strand Magazine*, 21.125 (May 1901), 483–89. Some details of the cases, including the names of those involved, were changed. Roger Lancelyn Green suggests that Doyle was never happy with the series, and that 'when he received letters of complaint from the relatives of those involved was glad that he had done no more than the first three'. 'Introduction' in Roger Lancelyn Green (ed.), *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 9–146 (p. 115). On Slater, see Doyle, *The Cases of Edalji and Slater* and William Roughead, 'Oscar Slater: 1909–1928' in *Famous Trials I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1941), pp. 51–110. Roughead's original *Notable Trials* essay on the case, and his contact with the doctor who viewed the body, were mentioned at the Appeal Hearing (p. 89). Slater was convicted of the murder of the elderly Lambie on what was widely felt to be highly flawed identification evidence, and his was the first case to be considered by the newly formed Court of Criminal Appeal for Scotland.

behaviour is framed as comic: as their train travels through the tunnel in question, Collins attempts to establish the distance between the compartment door and the tunnel roof with his umbrella, resulting in the destruction of the umbrella and the loss of his hat, so that '[h]atless and with [the] bedraggled relic of his old umbrella, he [waited] for a return train, sublimely unconscious of the singularity of his appearance'.⁶⁶ But this field trip, together with interviews with the victim's close acquaintances, fed directly into an article that Collins wrote calling for the case to be reinvestigated. The inquest had ended in an open verdict, but Collins was convinced that this was a murder. His analysis of the case explains why he reached this conclusion, and includes a vehement critique of the police investigation and of the treatment of this and other crimes by 'sensational newspapers'.⁶⁷

This type of active intervention, not simply retelling a narrative, but attempting to bring new evidence to light or calling for the reconsideration of the existing evidence, is echoed in other kinds of public involvement that criminal cases could provoke, particularly petitions for mercy in capital cases. More broadly, when in disagreement with the verdict of the court, commentators could choose to offer alternative interpretations in either factual or fictional form. 'Classic' cases are not only those which involve particularly heinous crimes, but also those which allow room for this type of debate because doubts are cast, from whatever quarter, on the verdict reached by the court, or indeed because the case, for whatever reason, never comes to trial. In the interwar period, as illustrated by the case of Edith Thompson, questions of how responsibility was attributed in

⁶⁶ Samuel Ingleby Oddie, *Inquest* (London: Hutchinson, 1941), p. 56.

⁶⁷ 'The Merstham Tunnel Mystery and Its Lessons', *The National Review* 274, December 1905, 656–71 (657). Collins believed that Mary Money was murdered by a man she had secretly arranged to meet that evening (it was never established why she was on the train from which she met her death). The position of her body when it was discovered indicated that she had fallen or been pushed backwards from the carriage; Collins's experiment with his umbrella showed that the carriage door could not have been opened more than eight inches while the train was in the tunnel, evidence, he felt, that she was pushed. When her body was found, a scarf was inside her mouth, but this was immediately removed by a policeman rather than being left for forensic investigation. Collins felt that more effort should have been put into finding out where Mary Money ate her last meal, speculating that the protracted and time-consuming process of giving statements to the police and evidence to an inquest and in court dissuaded potential witnesses from coming forward. Collins returned to the case in the wake of the discovery of another body in a train tunnel the following year, in 'The Merstham and Crick Tunnel Mysteries', *The National Review*, 47, March 1906, 145–59. Collins himself died under somewhat mysterious circumstances in 1908, though the inquest reached a verdict of accidental death. See 'Obituary: Professor Churton Collins', *The Times*, 16 September 1908, 11, and 'The Late Professor Churton Collins: Inquest and Verdict', *The Times*, 18 September 1908, 11.

murder cases also come under scrutiny. This meant considering not just whether there might be flaws in the police work leading up to the trial or in how the evidence was presented to the jury, but whether the parameters of the law itself might require reconsideration. This type of critique opens up potentially very troubling questions about society's ability to regulate itself. Many of the texts I will be examining here attempt to maintain respect for the law as an institution while acknowledging that the criminal justice system sometimes fails. In both its factual and fictional manifestations crime writing can expose and attempt to compensate for these failings.

In the Introduction to her 1924 criminological study *Murder and Its Motives*, F. Tennyson Jesse declared, 'It has been observed, with some truth, that everyone loves a good murder.'⁶⁸ Noting that such an interest is sometimes condemned as "morbid", she affirms that 'To the true student of the way of humanity nothing is morbid, as long as due balance and proportion be kept in the studying of it.'⁶⁹ The use of the word 'student' gives the reader licence to read on in the knowledge that, in the author's view, what they will gain is a wider understanding of humanity rather than merely exposure to nasty details. Underpinning these comments is a question that has relevance for all the varied works to be considered here: what is the appropriate way to represent murder? And further, a question that frequently came to mind when I was reading some of the frankly distressing material that forms the basis of this study: what is to be gained from contemplating crimes which often seem completely resistant to revealing anything much about 'humanity', except the depths to which some individuals are prepared to sink? There is no definitive answer to either of these questions, of course, but in what follows I hope to begin to uncover why they were such a dominant preoccupation for authors in interwar Britain.

⁶⁸ F. Tennyson Jesse, *Murder and Its Motives* (London: William Heinemann, 1924), p. 7.

⁶⁹ Jesse, *Murder*, p. 7.