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UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT PEOPLE POLICE, POLICE DOCTORS, AND VIOLENT MURDER, 1930S - 1980S

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25 February 1946. “Poor Mary” (a.k.a. Mary of Hendon) lies murdered in a field, her petticoats in disarray. Trainee detectives pile out of a car and begin to search for traces of her attacker. They timidly prod Mary’s body, collect evidence from underneath her fingernails, and photograph the crime scene. Eventually, they make a cast of the footprint of her assumed killer.

“Poor Mary of Hendon” appeared in a documentary. In it, we see the emblematic representation of the female corpse. There was nothing decorous in the way “Poor Mary’s” body had been arranged: her legs are splayed, her sexed-body exposed. She is the prototypical cultural corpse: female, young, attractive. And the detectives were proud students of the Hendon School for Detectives, which sounds like something Alexander McCall Smith might have made up, if he ever chose to relocate from Botswana to Greater London.

But, when it opened in 1934, the Hendon School for Detectives was a serious business. Here is a clip from the Pathé documentary, which was called “Science Fights Crime” (Pathé ID: 1374.29), in which “Poor Mary of Hendon” appeared. As the film shows, “Mary of Hendon” was a life-sized manikin. She was heralded as “the world’s most murdered model” and the policemen were undergoing training in the latest scientific methods of dealing with interpersonal violence. This short documentary was intended to publicise a new, and more “scientific” approach to violent death.

This was no ordinary documentary. It was presented by Sir Harold Scott, the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police between 1945 and 1953. He was clearly keen to show off the latest ways of dealing with violence, that seemed to be on the increase in Britain at the time. In the full-documentary, police are taken through their paces. They are shown how to pick out violent men in identification parades and how to defend themselves against knife attacks. As Scott tells viewers, “eye, brain, and muscle coordination are part of Scotland Yard’s master-plan to tackle the crime wave”.

What was the Hendon School for Detectives? It had opened eleven years before this Pathé film (1934) as the crime detection laboratory of the Metropolitan Police College. Every year it put 300 men through a ten-week C.I.D. course. Its aim was to produce “an ace detective everyday”.

Scott was progressive. Unlike his predecessors, who had tended to be military men with experience in the empire, London’s “Top Cop” (as Scott was known) was appointed from the civil service. He was also media savvy, profoundly aware of the public’s increased concern about violence. To the horror of senior police officers, he held press conferences. Not only did he appoint a Public Information Officer, but also, he actively cultivated relationships with newspaper editors.

It was totally in character, therefore, for Scott to appear in a Pathé documentary. He recognized that many Britons were profoundly anxious about a postwar “wave” of violence. They were not being irrational. After all, a similar spike in violent crime had occurred after the First World War and, in 1946, austerity, rationing, and social disruption were widely perceived to be inciting this kind of violent, criminal activity. “Poor Mary of



Hendon” may have been nothing more than a murdered manikin, but in the year before this documentary was broadcast, 218 murders had been reported to the police (it was an annual figure that would not be superseded until the 1970s).

“Poor Mary of Hendon”, I will be arguing, is an important lens through which to reflect on violence in the immediate post-war period. In this paper, I approach the subject of death – violent death – from the point of view of police and police doctors (or police surgeons, as they used to be called) – in other words, those called “first at the scene” when murder occurs. I will be focussing on texts not usually read in the debates about the social construction of violence: that is, police textbooks, memos, photographs, reports, and films like the one starring “Poor Mary of Hendon”. They are an important part of the social history of violence and the way it has been understood in postwar Britain.

As we all know, in the history of violence, there has been a huge amount of scholarship about the ubiquitous representation of women-as-victims in art, film, and fiction. There is also an abundant literature on murder itself, as well as the spectacle of evil during court trials.

But a different story appears when we look at policing accounts of the murdered corpse. The history I want to tell draws on the very productive discussion by Ian Hacking about “making up people” or what he calls “dynamic nominalism” in which “our classifications and our classes conspire to emerge hand-in-hand, each egging the other on”. While he is primarily concerned with what he calls the “philosophical and abstract” processes of “making up people”, I want to get “down and dirty” about the ways police and CID create categories of corpses (in my case, female ones).

It is important for my story that until the late nineteenth century, police were actually given relatively few concrete instructions on how to “read” the murdered person’s body. One of the first textbook in Britain for police practitioners was Howard Vincent’s A Police Code and Manual of Criminal Law (1881) and the first systematic manual in English was not published until Hans Gross’ Criminal Investigation came out in 1906. Gross provided the first set of systematic guidelines to policemen, including instructing them on their correct emotional comportment when visiting a scene or murderous violence. Even texts addressing police doctors were sparse, with earlier texts emphasised nothing more specific than the need for careful observation as opposed to set out specific practices, procedures, or drills. Thus, William Guy’s Principles of Forensic Medicine (1844) merely noted that doctors called to murder scenes should use ordinary powers of observation, not only because they were “one of the first witnesses” of the corpse, but also because they were “in most cases by far the best educated and most intelligent witness”. They were supposed to rely on “judgment and foresight”, as opposed to following guidelines laid down by others. These ways of “reading” scenes of violence change, as we shall see, from the twentieth century, specifically from the 1930s.

So what do we find when looking at police at the scene of violent murder in the mid-C20th? Shifts in their forensic gaze provides, I believe, further insights on violence and culture in the postwar years.

What I will be arguing is that four types of violence dominate in police and CID representations of the female corpse:

- 1) representation (“Poor Mary of Hendon’s” splayed body),
- 2) materialisation (the production and social life of the material female corpse),
- 3) somatisation (woman’s body as giving-up its secrets), and
- 4) de-corporalisation (erasure).

In the process (which is broadly chronological), the worlds of the female corpse were dramatically diminished. She moves from representing the world, to being agentic in a particular social context, to her bodily parts and fluids being reduced to their separate corporeal components, and finally to de-corporalisation or erasure.



As the female corpse diminishes at each step, the worlds of other people (including that of the perpetrator) swell in proportion. Crucial in these processes are police, CID, and police doctors, all of whom collaborate in the “unmaking of people”.

I will look at these in turn.

My first theme is representation (Poor Mary of Hendon’s splayed body). Two things are important here. The first is that all trainee murder investigation officers at this time were men – indeed, there was considerable hostility to even the idea that women in the police would be exposed to such sordid scenes. Their jobs were to answer telephones, monitor prostitution, and deal with female delinquents, not deal with bloody violence.

For male CID officers, the archetypal victim of murderous violence was not the man beaten to death after a drunken brawl (the most common scenario). Rather, murder was represented through the figure of a woman raped-and- murdered by a stranger (in fact, an extremely rare occurrence). In other words, although a great many more men than women were murdered in this period, the typical image of a victim of violence was that of a violated woman. It was no coincidence then, that the new CID trainees at the Hendon School for Detectives were taught to deal with death using a female manikin. Even before murder, the violent death was gendered – it was “engendered in representation”. The murdered corpse was sexualised and, as such, must be a female corpse. Sex, death, and violence were intricately linked.

Despite the female gendering of murder victims, she nevertheless was intended to stand-in for the universal. In other words, her body represents “everyman” [sic]. The police were taught “common” practices of evidence collection (these were universally-applicable, gender-neutral practices, such as searching for evidence under fingernails; observing lesions, bruising, and ligature-marks, and so on) – but they were taught this through representations of the female body, after which they were required to inquire into what this universal-body “lacks” – that is, the sexed specificities of female genitalia – the examination for evidence of sexual violation.

This “lack” in the universal corpse was important. The meaning of violence was “read” from the gender of the violated person: the murdered woman was always assumed to be a raped woman. Even when there was no evidence of sexual violation, it was always assumed to have occurred. Obviously, this was the case when there was evidence of genital lesions and/or semen. But even in the absence of material traces, the murder of a woman was sexualised, even if only in the imaginary of the perpetrator: for example, his murderous rage was interpreted as the result of fantasy of rape, or sadism, or (later) of oedipal lusts which had been deflected onto the stranger-woman.

“Poor Mary of Hendon” was placed not just in a field, but with her legs open and petticoats disturbed in a field. Policemen were taught to think immediately of questions about the victim’s chastity and sexuality. In fact, medical jurisprudence textbooks were obsessed with the “signs” of virginity and the appearance of hymens. They were taught to make distinctions in their reports and in courtrooms between “torn” hymens (true, virginal victims) and evidence that a woman was (their term) “well used” (with implication of promiscuity or prostitution). This “making up” of the murdered woman had major implications in terms of justice. It made little difference that the dead body presented evidence of another person’s violent rampage: she could still be guilty of an affront herself (a moral one) – which made a crucial difference in convictions and sentencing. The focus on the sexual aspects of the murdered women reflects anxieties about female sexuality – a fear that persisted (and, indeed, was magnified) after the “death of the maiden”.

Representational practices also extended to the “crime scene” as a constructed space. This, again, was an expansive cosmos, with a fairly standard staging – that is, the corpse resides in the centre, and “evidence” could be found in ever-wider concentric circles around “it”. As historian Ian Burney has put it, the crime scene was “a distinct analytic space, bounded conceptually and operationally by explicit rules of practice”. This way of staging the female corpse mirrored representational artistic practices, with, of course, one notable difference: police and CID representations were not intended to be aesthetically pleasing. They refused to allow witnesses to repress knowledge of the reality of flesh and bones and fluids. They were resolutely “real” and relentlessly materialist. Forensic photography was particularly important in this regard. In early forensic instruction manuals, there was not even any attempt to anonymise the bodies: eyes were not covered; the specificities of the individual were laid



bare, including sexual organs.

It is no coincidence, too, that these exposed bodies were generally raced “other”. In the photography of murdered corpses, there was a disproportionate focus on non-white bodies – often taken in imperial outposts. This is especially the case in photographs of raped-and-murdered women, nearly all of whom were raced non-white. This was the ugly death.

This is closely related to my second theme: materialisation, or the production of the social life of the material female corpse. The function of police and CID officers was to make her violent death into a meaningful event, in which there were social participants. These included the victim, perpetrator, families, and friends, as well as themselves as evidence-collectors.

This later “participant” was getting increasing attention from the mid-C20th. In the context of the new, “scientific” police milieu being introduced by Metropolitan Police Commissioner Harold Scott in the immediate post-war period, insentient corpses were pitted against all-too-sentient policemen. Emotional regimes attached to murder investigations came increasingly to the fore. In part, this was because of a new emphasis being placed on the professionalisation of the job (including unionisation) and the need to raise the status, and also attractiveness, of policing. Emotion-rich practices of viewing the murdered corpse moved centre-stage. After all, as one CID officer complained, “death figures quite largely in our lives” and outside the cities and boroughs, the duty of certifying death was not given to a permanent Coroner but fell “on the man on the beat”. Yet, as another complained in 1955, instructions on how to conduct a “thorough viewing of the body and its surroundings” was not “adequately laid down”.

The Hendon School for Detectives was one response to this concern for police feelings. It did not go uncontested. There was considerable unease about which emotional regime was appropriate when faced with extreme violence. Just before the School opened, the Police Review published a cautious article setting out the different views. On the one hand, it supported giving officers a “practical acquaintance with and an understanding of the scientific approach to viewing the dead body. On the other hand, they noted the importance of practical know-how, including “intuitive” familiarity. The Police Review believed that it was not wise to sideline officers of the “old school” with their “untiring persistence, dogged tenacity, and infinite patience”.

What was at stake in these debates was competing visions of police masculinity: the “dogged”, muscular variety as opposed to the scientific, objective ones lauded by Commissioner Scott. An attempt to reconcile these two visions was undertaken by Frederick Oughton in his book Murder Investigation. He noted that “not every police officer is temperamentally suited to the investigation of murder”. Most definitely, an officer should not have an “excitable temperament” and, indeed, might even be seen as “apparently slow-minded”, someone who “takes his time”. In general, he concluded (reconciling the two contrasting viewpoints) policemen involved in murder investigations should have a “particularly phlegmatic temperament to which is allied a taste for scientific research”.

“Objectivity” in the face of violence was gendered. Police and CID officers had to be able to transcend their own biases and physicality, unlike the female victims whose subjectivity resided entirely in their physicality or the typical equation of woman-as-body or nature.

In this second approach, then, the world of the female corpse who nevertheless represented “everyman” was narrowed from the universal to a specific social world including the individual dead body within an environmental and social context. The corpse has a social life. The police were required to place that corpse within agentic relationships. They had to give “Poor Mary of Hendon” a life-story. This narrative was not supposed to elicit an empathetic response – quite the opposite: the forensic gaze was gendered objective – the policeman or CID officer was required to stoically set the corpse within a context of signs – the footprints; the fabric in a tree; the skin under her nails. The body points to something else – the perpetrator. As Martin Innes noted in his analysis of contemporary murder scenes,

Detectives assemble an account of the incident from an array of often contested and conflicting information sources. The ways in which the act is defined and explained, and thus the meaning it is



attributed, do not inhere within the act itself, but are socially produced.

They “make up the body”. The aim of officers was to start from a multiplicity of meaning, and to eventually arrive at the one “true” narrative.

Crucially, the victim was posited as an agent: she had acted in a way that led to her fate. Even in the most sadistic murder, part of the responsibility rested with her. No matter how “excessive” his violence, she was given agency.

The social life of the female corpse also included bereaved relatives and friends, all of whom were also considered to be potential perpetrators of violence. Thus, one Detective-Superintendent advised police that

Near relatives, particularly the husband or wife of the victim, may have to be regarded as suspects, and whilst they are bound to be sentimentally affected, the interrogator must not let sentiment interfere. By the proper approach he can, without appearing to be unsympathetic, obtain sufficient information to eliminate them from the inquiry, and this should be done as quickly as possible. But what appears to be deep emotion may be assumed for the purpose of evading proper interrogation.

In other words, violence was ubiquitous and the violent person may not “look like” a monster – he may be a she, a bereaved lover, a respectable neighbour.

My third theme is somatisation: what the women’s dead body “reveals” – in other words, the secrets the corpse “gives up” to the police. Increasingly, the collection of evidence was standardised, and emphasis was placed on specialisation. Police surgeons were taught to divide the material corpse into its component parts: fibres, skin, hair, blood, semen. The whole, material corpse needed to be re-coded and translated into something else – in other words, the dead body was relocated away from its social context, to become pure soma. Increasingly, the “bits and pieces” themselves became active witnesses – technoscientific witnesses to violent crime – that offered up indisputable “truths”, unlike human witnesses. These material traces also encouraged discrete and singular interpretation of violence, rather than the social one discussed in my second point. (Again, we have gone from the universal, to the social, and now to the singular).

The process of somatisation also appropriated the dead body, making it part of a different authority: that of, police science. These practices of de-individualising began the process of erasure. After all, the signs that were being “read” were taken from other “signs” – this wound means that: a particular wound was recognised because of its resemblance to thousands of other wounds. The detective’s job was “arrêt de mort” through samples and collection of evidence, turning material soma into “evidence”.

Of course, as anyone who has read detective fiction knows, science has a long history of involvement in murder. But in terms of medical jurisprudence, there have been major shifts in what was considered the relevant “evidence”. Early nineteenth century texts on murder, placed extraordinary emphasis on poison. Although stabbing, bludgeoning, and shooting were the main ways of killing a person, these were regarded as straightforward compared with chemical means of procuring the corpse. This was why Metropolitan Police Commissioner Harold Scott was appearing in that documentary: he was heralding in a period where police and CID used ultraviolet rays, infrared photography, and fingerprinting.

On the one hand, the idea of policemen using these scientific technologies and techniques was relatively new. In Britain, the Hendon School for Detectives was at the vanguard of teaching these practices to officers.

On the other hand, it was increasingly recognised that technologies were becoming more and more intricate and so independent forensic labs had to be established. In Britain, the first Forensic Science Laboratory was established by Lord Trenchard in 1934: this was the Hendon Lab. The co-opting of science for solving crime gather pace in the 1940s. Commissioner Scott admitted that

it took time for detective officers to realize fully the ways in which the Laboratory could help them, and feeling it was important to establish close contact between the C.I.D. and the Laboratory. I took an early opportunity of moving it to Scotland Yard, where it was more easily accessible.... As the resources of the



Laboratory have become more widely known, the calls upon it have steadily increased.

This created major tensions between the police and the labs, or between competing authorities: criminal and scientific. For example, at the opening of the Bristol Forensic Science Laboratory in 1946, the Home Secretary emphasised the need for “the closest cooperation between the Police and the scientific experts”. To make it work for the laboratory scientists, though, the rank-and-file of police also had to be “specially trained and properly instructed in the fundamentals of science as applied to criminal investigation”. This was important since “the discovery and preservation of objects and traces found at the scene of a crime depend in the main upon the Detective or, especially in the county Forces, the uniformed Constable who is first on the scene of the crime or happens to be responsible for the investigation”. They did not need to be trained in laboratory work, but it was

“essential... that they should understand the importance of minute traces, know what to look for and where to search for objects which may be significant, what they should do and should not do in looking for traces and the handling, packing, labelling and forwarding for laboratory examination of any materials they may find and consider worth preserving”.

In other words, in the mid-century period, there was agreement that police needed a knowledge of forensic science if they were to objectively describe, interpret, and give meaning to the dead body. This was a long way from the disdain and unease with scientific methods of older generation of police (who believed in “intuition”). In this new regime of dealing with murdered corpses, the fundamental premise was that “truth” was discoverable inside the body. In the words of “a recently-retired Detective Superintendent” writing in The Police Review in 1955,

In the vast majority of murders, the identity of the body provides the solution to the crime.... the body holds clues in [sic] the nature of the injuries inflicted, and because the murderer has been in contact with it, it may bear traces peculiar to him. In other words, a murder can never be “clueless” unless the body is destroyed.

However, mutual antagonism between police and forensic scientists grew, coming to crisis point from the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1979, for example, when the Chief Constable dared to suggest to police doctors in London that it might be “a very useful exercise” to visit the Forensic Science Laboratory, the response was distinctly lukewarm: “the general feeling”, according to the report on the exchange, was that “they would make the visit and the matter was left with them”. The jealous guarding of boundaries was evident in 1985 when a suggestion was made to allow police doctors to make use of technologies such as ultra-violet light, tests for acid phosphatase, and direct microscopy. Laboratory scientists were outraged. Police surgeons simply did not have the “particular expertise”, exclaimed one scientist. The winners in this fight of expertise were the scientists (who we now have to blame for the endless TV adaptations of CSI!).

The final theme is de-corporalisation or erasure. This happened in two ways. First, there was no room in police and CID discourses around violence for the victim’s pain. Here, I am not alluding to Elaine Scarry’s argument about pain being resistant to language. Rather, it is simply that the discourse left no space for the consideration of her emotions: self-defence cuts to the hand were not intended to conjure up terrifying desperation but a particular type of knife; the branch used to violate a rape-murder victim was nothing more than a named shrub that could be found in the immediate environment. This is not to say all emotions were erased. I have already mentioned the increased attention paid to the emotions of the policeman at the scene. Equally important: the emotions of perpetrators were increasingly invoked: his manic fury, or calculated cruelty. Indeed, her pain was not even (to use the phrase employed in the yellow press) “unspeakable”. In police texts, I have only found one exception to this – and even that article acknowledged the victim’s suffering only to immediately declare it irrelevant. This exception was published in The Police Review in 1955 and, significantly, was entitled “Murder Without Tears”. The author wrote that “On occasion, but not very often, some attention is given to the pain and suffering of the victims of crime and those closely associated with them”. However, he immediately followed this statement by insisting that “Much more often, especially if murder is involved, the interest is concentrated on the criminal”. By objectifying and delocating the violence, its sting – its horror – is removed.

Even in those cases where the victim’s emotions might be imagined to be most prominent – rape-murder or



sadistic-murder, for example – the focus was still on his (the perpetrator's) feelings. Excesses of violence were categorised under concepts such as perversion, sadism, psychopathy – that is, his identity. In this way, her pain became subordinated to his power.

Importantly, in cases of sadistic rape-murder, attention was only paid to the perpetrator's "excesses". The whole debate was conducted in terms not of the rape- murder itself (construed as "normal" violence) but about at what point it became "excessive", and therefore "sadistic" violence. In other words, the sadist was made up as a person with a "perversion of excess and not of deviation from gender norms". As one commentator explained, sadistic rape-murder was an "exaggeration of the rudimentary animal or savage impulse to conquer the woman in connection with sexual union". In this, police and CID drew explicitly on the work of forensic psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, quoting him as arguing that sadism was nothing more than "an excessive and monstrous pathological intensification of phenomena... which accompany the psychical vita sexualis, particularly in males". In police texts, Krafft-Ebing was quoted as explaining that

In the intercourse of the sexes, the active or aggressive role belongs to man; woman remains passive, defensive. It affords a man great pleasure to win a woman, to conquer her.... Under normal conditions a man meets obstacles which it is his part to overcome, and for which nature has given him an aggressive character. This aggressive character, however, under pathological conditions, may likewise be excessively developed, and express itself in an impulse to seduce absolutely the object of desire, even to destroy or kill it.

Or, in another commentary, in sadistic sexual acts, the normal, heteromasculine cauldron of passion overheated, exploded, causing "real injury, wound, or death".

Second, and a related point, the erasure involved a move from her body to the perpetrator's body, mind, or personality. This can be summarised in a couple of sentences: the focus on the perpetrator shifted from an attention to his degeneracy (a la, Lombroso), to that of "moral insanity" (the likes of Pritchard), to the murderous perversions of the late C19th (Krafft-Ebing), to the attention to "personality" from the 1970s. In broad terms, these shifts represented a move from insanity and degeneration towards questions of motivation and personality in other words, of "everyman" (a final erasure: the gendered female "everyman" with whom I started this talk disappears and in her place is the gendered-man, the true universal).

In conclusion. In this talk, I have focused on attempts by the police and CID to "read" the bodies of women who had been subjected to extreme violence. The belief that they (with the help of forensic scientists) could generate objective truth from assessing and measuring physical markers changed dramatically over time, but a crucial moment in Britain was in the immediate post-war years where forensic assessments of the physiological body reiterated its constructed rather than intrinsic nature. Commissioner Scott was part of the modernisation of the police force – new bureaucracies and technological and scientific methods were introduced – in addition to the professionalisation and unionization of the police force. Ian Hacking's notion of "making up people" is helpful here. The police texts I have looked at engage in four ways of "making" the female corpse: 1) representation ("Poor Mary of Hendon's" splayed body); 2) materialisation (the production and social life of the material female corpse); 3) somatisation (woman's body as giving-up its secrets); and 4) de-corporalisation (erasure). As Hacking wittily put it in relation to suicides, "Even the unmaking of people has been made up". "Poor Mary of Hendon" may have been the "the world's most murdered model", but it was relevant that she was a female manikin; her body represented as akin to nature rather than culture; her splayed body a privileged site of gender. The forensic management of violence that I have explored here is only one story of the meanings given to violence and the ways those meanings have changed over time. They underwent another dramatic revolution from the mid-1980s with the DNA crime scene and the emergence of uniformed Crime Scene Investigators. But that history is for another time.