

# *Belfast or Bust – Ruminations of a Non-criminologist*

## Postcard from the British Society of Criminology Conference

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When the immediate aftermath of a British Society of Criminology conference entitled 'Criminology and Conflict Resolution' is a cease-fire in the Northern Irish Province, you might think the conference has been a success beyond wildest expectations. It was certainly beyond my expectations. And it was beyond the expectations of those other hardy souls who, only a week before the conference commenced, were staring at the television's horrific images of burnings and bombings and lootings and shootings. It was a mere week before the conference that madness and mayhem had returned to the streets of Londonderry and Belfast in the form of the silly season (for which read 'marching season'). That time of year when macho senselessness coloured orange minced and strut provocatively before macho senselessness coloured green. And then all Hell broke loose.

I can see myself now, turning on the BBC in my delightful B&B in Portree on the Isle of Skye. I caught a glimpse of Australia beating England in cricket (again), and thought to myself, ah, all's right with the world. But I was then jolted by the restatement of the main news items: Northern Ireland in turbulence, and British Airways on strike. My first thought: Oh God! My second: is the conference still going ahead? My third thought: can I get there anyway? As things transpired, the riots stopped, the strike abated, and the Guinness (to say nothing of the Murphys and Caffreys) was as delicious as ever. And yet the overriding memory of Belfast, for many of us, will be the endless drone of the surveillance helicopters hovering overhead or thereabouts. The unhealthy buzz droning on, and on, and on.

Given the number of delegates attending (around 400), and the number of papers presented (around 200), the organisers are to be applauded that the conference went so smoothly. After the initial confusion, whilst I lamented not having obtained a Masters in cartography, it soon proved relatively simple to negotiate the campus buildings and lecture rooms of Queens University. Although movement was made easy, greeting was not. Hopefully the next BSC conference will ensure that name tags include given names, and not just surnames and titles, epithets which inflict ridiculous formality on what was otherwise (and should always be) a very relaxed affair.

The Plenaries fizzed somewhat, as I find they invariably do. Not everyone wants to sit in a large hall listening to a paper on a topic about which he or she may know little and care even less — harsh but honest. It places untold pressure on the 'big name' to deliver. And unfortunately plenary papers are so often read, and not often read well. Of the papers presented in Belfast, only Michael Tonry (his paper, *Minority Crime and Imprisonment Patterns in Europe: Implications for European Integration*) was controversial, and was thus subjected to a sustained adversarial assault. The others were read adequately. Not surprisingly, because we all have our individual passions, it was the Workshops or 'interest' papers which drew genuine debate.

The Interest Group papers were the usual mix of research in embryo, research in progress, completed research, and sometimes papers accepted for publication. This provided potentially stimulating variety.

The most disappointing aspect of the conference was the presentation of so many of the papers. Long a believer that 'Presentation is All' (or very nearly), I had its veracity confirmed again and again. If someone has something important to say, why don't they take a bit of trouble in the saying. The programme would promise that the next paper was to be fascinating, and not just because of its catchy title, or its subject, or even the expertise of the presenter. But then the writer began to speak. Whatever the intelligence, whatever the research, whatever the focus, whatever the foresight, it was all lost in a garbled jumble. So we were subjected either to poorly presented and inappropriate overheads, or just meaty material which even a ravenous carnivore would have found totally unappetising. On the whole the academics out-presented the non-academics. The good presenters were not infrequently old hands at the exercise, but there were too many old hands who proved less than invigorating. The good ones sometimes had the advantage of an intrinsically interesting paper. But there were occasions when presentation sapped initial interest. Should the papers be published, no doubt they will read as scholarly and stimulating.

Fortunately there were notable exceptions with respect to presentation. A highlight for me was the splendid lunch-time paper by Geoffrey Pearson (of Goldsmith's College University of London): *Tomb Robbers: A Transhistorical Criminology of Crimes Against the Dead; Egypt Ancient and Modern*. With a title like that, it wasn't surprising a few of us forsook the dubious delights of Chicken Surprise at lunch that day. Geoff obviously decided on becoming an academic only because he found that spotlights brought on migraines, or because grease-paint induced allergies. Here was a born actor who performed, and as a consequence had his transfixed audience attentive to every nuance of every fascinating detail. It was a presentation to be savoured.

Criminology conferences usually cover familiar general ground: policing, prisons, violence, drugs, sentencing, juveniles and the aged, firearms. I made an early decision to attend a number of the sessions in which the focus was, for want of a better word, the media — popular culture is all the rage. And so I heard papers where television, cinema, the Internet, newspapers, and poster advertising all played an important role as the impulse for the research undertaken. On the whole my choice was rewarded. When I veered away from that path, some other sessions proved to be less than satisfying. You can't win them all.

One session which positively sparkled was 'Crime, Media and the Constitution of Gender'.

- The first paper (*Constituting Gender: Male Fantasies and the Commodification of Women through the Internet*) analysed and enlarged upon major research conducted by Stubbs and Cunneen (Sydney) on the topic of the victimisation of Filipino women in Australia, developing the theme to encompass the global commodification of Filipino women via the spurious marvels of the Internet. Of a multitude of compelling issues, one in particular stood out in the mind of this reporter. And that was the extraordinary way Filipino women are represented. The great God, Internet, offers a feast of sites extolling the virtues of the most beautiful, compliant women on earth, the very essence of femininity, women to be preferred to their Australian/American counterparts who have been seduced by the great Satan, Feminism. Filipino women are the ultimate fulfilment of male fantasy, so proclaim the blurbs. The blurbs are the ultimate in commodification, more like. And what about the way spousal homicides were reported by the media, and then received by the courts as cases of a middle-aged Australian male 'victim' of a sexually manipulative predatory Filipino (teenage) woman. One feels inclined

to remind the courts that it was the woman who was killed, not infrequently by a male with a history of domestic violence. A provocative paper, expertly crafted and presented.

- The second paper (*The Construction of Gender in Reality Crime TV*), was delightfully introduced by Juric and Cavender (Arizona State). With reality television attracting big audiences, the researchers noted the claims of the producers that women were being given a voice as never before. But if the study revealed anything, it was that such 'entertainments' merely reinforced the dominant cultural depictions of femininity, and of women as victims. Again the focus was on the representation of these women, and 'reality TV' was exposed as something of a fraud.

The liveliest of debates ensued, with the audience swapping stories from 'The Bill', 'America's Most Wanted' and the like, as well as trading details of disturbing findings on the Web.

Another session with more than the potential for oomph was entitled 'Cinema and Crime'.

- Millbank (Sydney) in a paper called *Looking for Trouble: Cinematic Representations of Crime and Sexuality*, deftly presented her research into cinematic depictions of (fictional and non-fictional) violence which highlight the anti-social nature of the crime, and are in fact frequently homophobic in impetus. Touching on 'Basic Instinct' as but one example, she left not a (Sharon) stone unturned. Moving away from cinema, and focusing on the newspaper reporting of the celebrated 'lesbian vampire killer' case (Tracey Wiggington), we were again treated to an analysis of an extravagant picture of a killer fantasised by reporters in a way which bore scant regard for facts or logic. The parallels were appallingly obvious — the popular media sees a lesbian who kills as the epitome of Evil. Again, a paper expertly articulated and modulated, so as to draw her audience in.
- The second paper *True Lies: Changing Images of Crime in Postwar Cinema* was presented by Allen (London School of Economics). The project was generously funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and the research as yet merely investigated crime films in post-war British cinema, and was thus seen by some as not much more than descriptive. The research noted no increase in the number of crime films, but a clear increase in the graphic representation of violence. The style of crime fighter was also analysed, and the changes in depiction noted, the fighter no longer a saintly figure, but increasingly one who adopts criminal methods to counter crime. We look forward to the analysis of the possible effects of these transfigurations.

The audience then eagerly shared memories of their favourite film killings.

One of the most confronting papers presented was that by researchers Ridley and Hamer (University of Teeside) entitled *Zero Tolerance? Impact of the Anti-Domestic Violence Campaign in Cleveland*. The visual media campaign aimed 'to inform, challenge and educate the public as to the nature, extent and cause of violence against women and children'. The detailed investigation into the impact of the particular campaign utilised surveys, interviews and focus groups, both prior to and during the launching of the poster blitz. We were shown overheads of the posters — the most startlingly original yet subtle imaginable — and heard countless stories (and statistics) of the responses. Rather than the usual 'in-your-face' representations of women with black eyes, split lips and bandages, the posters sought to draw the viewer in, and present a shocking punch-line. So one showed a grandmother and granddaughter peacefully at play, and the message below read 'At 3 or 93, women can be raped'. The campaign was apparently *so* subtle it essentially escaped the

notice of its audience, or produced disturbingly negative responses. Those of us attending the session were left horrified. The only positive outcome was that overall, respondents in the study applauded the need for a campaign, whilst seriously questioning the utility of *this* campaign.

Considering the unsophisticated audience which had failed to appreciate that campaign, I wondered whether an altogether different strategy might not now be considered. And so I asked the researchers whether they might not focus on a leading popular figure, someone like Bryan Robson, former captain of England and now manager of (local) Middlesbrough Football Club. Robson could be pictured and quoted condemning the evils of domestic violence, or some such ploy. Apparently something similar had been tried in an anti-drugs campaign, with the England striker Andy Cole, then a star at Newcastle United, the leading light. Tragically, there was a charge that he used cocaine, and though the player was cleared, the campaign, all one million pounds worth, was ruined. And so the researchers assured me that Yes, the football star approach had been considered. And yet I remain unconvinced, and not entirely disheartened. If one thinks of the recent anti-homophobia campaign in NSW, which features, amongst other celebrities, the hosts of Channel 9's 'Footy Show', one begins to see all sorts of possibilities perhaps never fully explored. It is an area which cries out for research, and one in which I hope to play my part. For the time being all I can say is: Watch this space.

Unquestionably the most extraordinary presentation of the conference was that by a South African delegate who baldly stated that the crime wave in South Africa was entirely the fault of 'the Blacks', and what her country desperately needed was, amongst other things, a re-introduction of the death penalty. Other delegates, initially left speechless, soon warmed to the crucifixion which followed.

In only one session I attended did the Chair take the trouble to examine the apparently disparate themes in the papers in that session, and try to draw the themes together, or stimulate discussion by flagging contrasts. Mostly the Chair either was not in attendance, or else merely introduced the names of the writers and the title of their papers. It is a difficult problem to solve, but perhaps future conferences might offer some advice to those acting as Chair. An involved Chair adds considerably to the success of a session.

Away from the constant grind of the conference papers, delegates were treated to a fine array of 'entertainments'. If you so desired you could gawk at the inmates of the Maze Prison, or at the freak show along the Falls and Shankill Roads, or even proclaim your true colours in a tour of the Headquarters of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. These visits were viewed by some as a fascinating opportunity, by most as an exercise in appalling taste. The Giant's Causeway visit held far greater attraction.

The Conference Dinner was an extraordinary affair. Waltzing into grandiose City Hall, with Union Jacks and images of Empire festooned everywhere, I felt suddenly pleased that my jacket was green. The night was spoiled somewhat by the conduct of a bunch of yob-bos (English this time, not Antipodean). The guest speaker was none other than Beatrix Campbell, never one shy to say what's what. Her speech was full on, and anyone not lamenting the demise of Margaret Thatcher loved it. But it had been delayed until after all the food and drink had been consumed, and it was perhaps just a trifle long. An entire table of conference delegates (obviously Thatcherites!) talked and giggled and acted like complete prats through the entire speech. The looks from the other delegates were worthy of their own criminological study.

This was not the first occasion on which the conduct of one's fellow delegates left something to be desired. On the first night of the conference, a long drinks session was organised in the Staff Common Room following dinner. After a couple of hours of serious

boozing, socialising and networking for the delegates, the organisers then introduced the evening's entertainment which consisted of Chieftains-like musicians, and a (multi-award winning) group of women performing Irish Dancing. They were stunning, but why they hadn't appeared much earlier was anyone's guess, because the vast majority of the audience were either too pissed, or too engrossed in their conversations to care. A highlight was when the dancers dragged some delegates onto the floor to sample the simplicity of Irish Dancing. Amongst a terrified and exhausted group, Sydney Law School's own Ania Wilczynski shone. Michael Flatley look out.

Your reporter certainly drank more than his fair share whilst in Belfast. Unfortunately I only sampled three pubs, including the famous ornate 'Crown' with its quaint 'snugs', and the cavernous 'Empire', where the locals watching a football match on a big screen raucously cheered whenever Newcastle United scored against their Dutch opponents. Well, with a name like the Empire you would expect the customers to support the English team. And yes, everything you have heard is true: Guinness only tastes *that* good on the west side of the Irish Sea.

And I must not forget the coffee. From bitter experience I have learned that whenever one crosses the English Channel from the Continent, one orders tea. One never drinks coffee. What masquerades as coffee throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland should be sued for misleading advertising. One hopes there will be exceptions: so when our B&B proprietor produced plungers at breakfast, some brave souls ventured into the unknown and ordered coffee. The look on their faces upon realising it was Instant was something to behold. But salvation was found at an excellent Italian cafe only 5 minutes from Queens campus. Word spread quickly and the service slowed because of it. Nothing worse than having to gulp down a macchiato and rush off to the next presentation. Particularly when the street is being patrolled by battle-dressed machine-gun-toting British soldiers who might be curious why you are running.

Speaking of British soldiers, their presence became apparent whenever one left the confines of the Queens University campus. Amongst the last of the delegates to vacate the Conference Dinner at City Hall, and keen to sample the delights of The Crown before closing, we walked straight into a patrol of heavily armoured army vehicles in a square otherwise deserted. The drink which arrived shortly after never tasted so good. And as I curled into bed in my B&B and drew the curtains, there were armoured vehicles cruising slowly up the street, pausing inquisitively outside the B&B, guns always to the ready.

We finally left Belfast, a good time having been had by all. The locals were as friendly as could be, smiles wide and true, eyes sparkling, and voices gravel-coated and musical. But we left Belfast to the incessant buzzing of the helicopters, the armoured patrols, and a killing. A teenage girl was murdered. Nothing out-of-the-ordinary, except the way the newspapers reported it: 'Horrific Killing of Catholic Girl'. We also left Belfast with a lingering sense of unease. But within thirty hours of my departure the IRA had called a cease-fire.

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