

EXTRACTS FROM Ronald R. Thomas, "The Fingerprint of the Foreigner: Colonizing the Criminal Body in 1890s Detective Fiction and Criminal Anthropology." *ELH*, vol. 61 no. 3, 1994, p. 655-683. Project MUSE, [doi:10.1353/elh.1994.0028](https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.1994.0028).

In December of 1892, Arthur Conan Doyle began publishing *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, the second in his great series of detective stories that took the reading public of England by storm during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Among the first of *The Memoirs* to appear in *The Strand Magazine* were "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box" and "The Adventure of the Yellow Face." True to form, both cases required Holmes to identify someone: in the first, a presumed murder victim and in the second a presumed blackmailer. [...] Like the flood of scientific writing on criminology that appeared in England during the 1890s, these fictions of criminality link questions of *personal* identity and physiology with questions of *national* identity and security in ways that redefine the relation of an individual's body with the body politic. **[End Page 655]**

This essay asks the question of how a designated figure of social authority — the literary detective — gains the power to discover "the truth" by acquiring the right to tell someone else's story against his or her will, and how the emergence of the immensely popular genre of detective fiction may be related to specific national needs and interests. [...] It might be argued that the elevation of detective fiction to the pitch of sensational popularity it enjoyed in 1890s England signals the emergence of a narrative of authoritarian containment to compete with and discipline the dominant nineteenth-century narrative of self-determination represented best by the period's fascination with autobiography. The work the literary detective performs is an act of narrative usurpation in which he converts stories told by subjects about themselves into alibis proffered by suspects. The force of this narrative of social intervention as a monitoring and disciplining agency is demonstrated in the confessions Holmes extorts from the suspects in these cases, confessions that make clear that the most private domestic scandals also often bear the imprint of the most public national policies. [...] Holmes establishes himself as the source of truth about the body and the identity of culprit and victim alike [...] As he unravels the mystery and makes his accusation, he speaks for them as he speaks for the nation.

Whatever else Sherlock Holmes may have claimed to be, he should be understood as the literary personification of an elaborate cultural apparatus by which persons were given their true and legitimate identities by someone else. Holmes is referred to by Watson in the very first of *The Adventures* as "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has ever seen"; and his methods are presented to us as unassailable because they are machine-like in their scientific objectivity, uncontaminated by the detective's emotional involvement or cultural bias.² Watson's first encounter with Holmes takes place in the master detective's chemical laboratory, a place he often frequents during his investigations, lending an air of scientific precision and exactness to his work. Watson, having just returned to England to nurse a wound he suffered in the colonial campaign in Afghanistan, may be read as representing the British imperial policy in need of rehabilitation by **[End Page 656]** Holmes's self-proclaimed science of detection. In that first encounter, Holmes not only surmises the fact that Watson is a veteran of the

Afghanistan conflict, he also correctly recognizes that a perfect stranger they see on the street is a retired Marine sergeant, further demonstrating to Watson his remarkable powers of identification. The detective then informs the doctor that with his specialized knowledge, he can accurately infer the whole history of a man by observing such things as his fingernails, his facial expression, and the callosities of his forefinger and thumb. In the tales that Watson proceeds to pen about the master detective, Holmes will indeed read the history of individuals as representatives of the nation and will then rewrite their relationship to it. In fact, Holmes's emergence as an authoritative cultural hero in the 1880s and 1890s corresponds to a transformation of Britain's national identity during the same period. Notably, during the first few years of the 1890s, Britain's identity as a nation — in its own eyes and the world's — was being radically redefined with respect to its vast global empire. Once an embattled and suspect pursuit, a "New Imperialism" became equated once again with morality and patriotism in England, rising to the status of a national cult also referred to as the "Pax Britannica."

After the death of General Gordon at Khartoum in 1885 had been transformed in the popular imagination into a glorious martyrdom, the gradual silencing of the Liberal critique of imperialism was virtually secured in England. The policies of empire seemed to have weathered the storm of mid-century popular indifference, colonial uprisings, and left-wing criticism. By the time of the elections of 1895, a Conservative-Unionist coalition swept to a decisive victory, bringing with it the triumph of this New Imperialism and the silencing of the conscience of the old imperialism which had been personified in Gladstone, who would die in the year following Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Importantly, the advent of the New Imperialism did not really represent a new imperial policy, so much as it did a new popular attitude toward that policy. Granted, the new competition for international power from rising states like Germany caused some stiffening of economic and military aggression in British imperial pursuits during the 1890s, especially in the "scramble for Africa" that followed the Berlin Conference convened by Bismarck in 1884 to partition the dark continent. As a consequence, however, by the time of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, the historian James Morris claims, "The *idea* of Empire had reached a climax," and the celebration of sixty years of Victoria's reign was as **[End Page 657]** much an international celebration of the *idea* of the New Imperialism as it was a tribute to the venerable queen. ³

My focus is on the domestic rather than the international acceptance of this phenomenon, a development that I will link directly to the powers and popularity of literary figures like Sherlock Holmes and to the prestige of scientific authorities like Havelock Ellis and Francis Galton. I will argue that together their work helped to transform reluctant approval, indifference, and direct criticism for imperial policies into general reverence, enthusiasm, and even hysteria in the British popular imagination. Certainly there were other factors contributing to this development, and one may look (among other places) on almost any page of magazines like *The Strand* for popular explanations. The widely-enjoyed profits of empire back home and the general economic and military success that attended British expansionism abroad during this period are evident in virtually every article about military conquest and every adventure story dealing with exploration that appeared in *The Strand* during these critical years. One such series that ran concurrently with *The Memoirs*

of *Sherlock Holmes* was called *Shafts from an Eastern Quiver*, tales of British adventurers who took part in strategic military and scientific projects and narrowly escaped from the clutches of devious and dangerous oriental tribesmen. Still another series provided first-person accounts by British military men from around the Empire, relating the tales of bravery that earned them the coveted Victoria's Cross. Appropriately enough, the installment from this series that appeared in the first volume of *The Strand* tells the harrowing story of the very battle in Afghanistan in which Dr. Watson was purportedly wounded, forcing his return to England and his meeting up with Sherlock Holmes.

But the triumph of the New Imperialism was also enabled by more subtle domestic forces than these dramatic and exotic mixtures of fact and fiction. The newly conceived *national* identity enjoyed by England abroad in these essays and stories was made palatable and popular by a vigilant policing of the *personal* identity of the average British citizen back home. I will examine three of the agents of that policing in the early 1890s from very different discursive fields with the aim of exposing the links between the disciplinary power of a popular form of escapist literature, the new academic discipline of criminal anthropology, and the military discipline practiced in the "new" British imperialism. The first such agent, as I have already suggested, is Britain's increasing enthrallment with detective fiction, **[End Page 658]** a genre raised to its most popular status and perhaps its most accomplished form in Doyle's *Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, both of which volumes first appeared as individual stories in the newly established *Strand Magazine* between 1891 and 1893.⁴ The second is Britain's involvement in the emerging science of criminal anthropology through Havelock Ellis's landmark work *The Criminal*, first published in 1890. The third contribution I will consider is Sir Francis Galton's successful advocacy of a new method for archiving criminal records detailed in his book, *Finger-Prints*, a volume that was introduced in 1892. In addition to their almost simultaneous publication, these three texts — the first a form of popular literary entertainment, the second a work of theoretical science, and the third a practical technique for law enforcement — have a number of things in common. All three are concerned with criminality — how to detect it and how to arrest it. Moreover, in every case, criminality is often associated with, and even defined by, the identifiable foreignness of the suspect's body. Criminal deviance became increasingly understood as an issue of national security, and, at the same time, criminal identity became inextricably linked with physiology and nationality. The authors of these texts are all scientists by training and practice, and therefore all are interested at some level in offering incontrovertible, empirical evidence for their conclusions. In all of them, however, science conveniently comes to serve the interests of politics.

Most importantly, central to each of these texts is a question about *essential* personal identity. Ellis's book asks, Who is the criminal? What are his distinguishing characteristics? How do we identify him? Galton's aim in studying fingerprints is, in his words, "to fix the human personality, to give to each human being an identity, an individuality which can be depended upon with certainty."⁵ And, of course, the Sherlock Holmes stories invariably seek to do both of these things in a fictional setting — to identify the criminal body by tearing away its disguise, and to "fix" the identity of the suspect with the certainty associated with material evidence. Not only was Great Britain's authority for pursuing the

New Imperialism abroad dependent upon the authority it wielded at home in works like these, but the detection and policing of criminal identity in England was deeply implicated with the suppression of the foreign nationalities commanded throughout the Empire as well. The revival of enthusiasm for British colonial policies in the 1890s was made possible by the successful colonization of the minds of English citizens, achieved in **[End Page 659]** part through the concerted effects of this literature — scientific, technical, and literary — which, through an elaborate technology of physiological identification, conferred the authority to determine or “fix” someone’s identity on to someone else.

In their effort to respond to a problem about personal identity, all of these texts tell a story of detection or discovery. In considering them together, we tell a detective story as well. Our discovery begins with the very fact with which theirs ends: in detective fiction and in these nonfictional treatises alike, the property rights to someone’s story are transferred to the official or unofficial agent of society who is empowered to see and identify the body of the criminal, speaking for the whole society in assigning a story to that figure. As an anthropologist, Ellis offers us a system by which we can read the criminal body, recognizing the physiology of the hand, the cranium, the ear, and the hair, for example, as characteristic of a criminal type. Galton also invokes his scientific authority to provide a system by which the print of the finger, properly read, will “benefit society by detecting rogues” and criminals, and at the same time will enable the acquisition of an accessible record of the “true identity” of honest men and frauds alike (G, 149). Holmes, too, describes and enacts a technique by which seemingly insignificant data can be transformed to reveal the secret story of a criminal. But he practices that technique on his friends as well as his foes, often bewildering Dr. Watson himself with his knowledge of his companion’s most private affairs. Our problem is to determine how this particular historical moment demanded and produced these particular techniques for appropriating the authority to define people’s identities in several fields at the same time — specifically, to consider how these appropriations by a professional authority of the criminals’ and the innocents’ accounts of themselves accorded with the national political agenda of promoting the New Imperialism.

Less than three years after Sherlock Holmes made his first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* and explained his theory of detection as a precise science to Dr. Watson, Havelock Ellis published England’s first major contribution to the science of criminal anthropology.⁶ Ellis claims to have written *The Criminal* to “present to the English reader a critical summary of the results of the science now commonly called criminal anthropology” (E, xix). A specifically *English* reader is constantly addressed throughout the text, most emphatically in Ellis’s prefaces and introduction, which argue that **[End Page 660]** Britain has generally failed to keep up with this emerging field of scientific inquiry so often identified with the continent. “In these matters we in England have of recent years fallen far behind; no book, scarcely a solitary magazine article, dealing with this matter has appeared among us.”⁷ Ellis is clearly making an effort, on the one hand, to defend the value of an objective scientific study of the criminal, and, on the other, to provoke the production of a specifically *English* literature in the field. He pursues both goals by making a blatantly nationalistic appeal, conflating scientific justification with patriotic duty. “The day when criminal anthropology needed to justify itself has gone by,” he affirms, “and it

may well be hoped that this is the last occasion on which it will be necessary to point out that Great Britain has fallen short in furnishing her quota to the scientific study of this problem” (E, xxxii). Ellis’s conviction that England must contribute to the literature in this field during this critical time, accords perfectly with the necessity of reformulating the identity of imperialism into its “new” form. For, as his book will show, the criminal figure inside the gates is rather like the colonial figure outside them. Both require a distinctively English response to properly advance research in the field and to ensure the safety and integrity of the English body politic at the same time.

The “quota” of literature Ellis called for was furnished in part during the 1890s by his own book. *The Criminal* went through some three successful editions over the course of the nineties. But we might argue that another medical doctor, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, contributed as much to this literature as anyone during the same decade, by inventing the quintessentially English detective hero, Sherlock Holmes.⁸ Not surprisingly, in the first two Holmes narratives Doyle penned (*A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*), the criminal is determined by the detective to be a foreigner by the bodily traces that the suspect leaves at the scene of the crime (a blood stain and a footprint, respectively). In what was supposed to be the final Holmes story (“The Final Problem”), Holmes encounters the absolute criminal type in Moriarity, whom he describes both as a foreigner and as a physiological anomaly: Moriarity is “the Napoleon of crime” in part because of the “criminal strain [that] ran in his blood,” manifested in his stooped posture and in his face, which “protrudes forward” and is “forever oscillating from side to side in a curiously reptilian fashion” (316, 318). Holmes’s antagonists are not always foreigners, but they almost always have been unduly influenced [**End Page 661**] by the exotic or, like Moriarity, share those “hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind” commonly associated in these texts with foreign bodies (316).

The project of developing a semiotics of the criminal body that would reveal the secret motives and intentions of the criminal mind is revealed in both Ellis and Doyle alike to be a reasonable, but highly technical process, a science based in the material world of empirical evidence. As such, it is a technique that can only be mastered by the trained eye of the professional scientist/detective.⁹ The common assumption shared by both investigators is (first) that the criminal is indeed scientifically describable and recognizable, and (second) that the degree of skill necessary to successfully make him visible is not to be oversimplified or minimized. It requires the expertise of a professional. “We cannot deal wisely with the social factor of crime, nor estimate the vast importance of social influences in the production or prevention of crime,” Ellis proclaims at the end of his book’s introduction, “unless we know something of the biology of crime, of the criminal’s anatomical, physiological, and psychological nature” (E, 24–25). In fact, by emphasizing the significance of the body of the criminal over his circumstances, Ellis’s and Doyle’s works, along with those of Galton and others, offer narratives of scientific justification for many of the racial, national, and gender prejudices that formed the political justification for the New Imperialism.

Significantly, when Ellis begins his book by classifying various kinds of criminals into categories, the very first “variety” he cites is the “political criminal,” who, he claims, is

nothing more than “the victim of an attempt by a more or less despotic Government to preserve its own stability” (E, 1). The author’s consciousness of the potential political utility of criminological discourse is suggestive here, and is accompanied by a corresponding defensiveness on his part. To even use the word “criminal” politically is an error, Ellis argues; to do so is a mere “euphemism to express the suppression of a small minority by a majority”:

Consequently the “political criminal” of our time or place may be the hero, martyr, saint, of another land or age. The political criminal is, as Lombroso calls him, ‘the true precursor of the progressive movement of humanity.’... From any scientific point of view the use of the word crime to express a difference of national feeling or of political opinion, is an abuse of language. Such a conception may be necessary to ensure the supremacy of **[End Page 662]** a Government, just as the conception of heresy is necessary to ensure the supremacy of a Church.... A criminality which is regulated partly by chronology and partly by longitude, does not easily admit of scientific discussion

(E, 1-2).

At the outset of Ellis’s study, the conception of the criminal as determined by political interests, subject to the very unscientific influences of historical conditions and circumstances, is defined as outside his purview and even as contradictory to his thesis. This crucial notation by Ellis is made to set the limits of his “scientific discussion,” he assures us. His concerns are explicitly *not* with the criminal politically defined, but with the criminal scientifically understood.

In fact, however, his book will over and over again show us otherwise. It does so most obviously and directly when Ellis points out the contradictory findings by scientists in different political settings. It does so more subtly and insidiously in his own synthesis of these findings, when he appropriates many of their racial and ethnic stereotypes in his scientific rendering of the body of the “born criminal.” When the physiology of the criminal is fully delineated by Ellis, we find it consistently resembling the bodies of the “primitive” inhabitants of the colonies, a turn that suggests the presence of the very political interests Ellis had categorically disowned at the outset. The trick is that his conclusions have presumably been reached through the scientific collection of objective data rather than through politically interested motivations. Ellis’s analysis of the typical criminal cranium serves as a case in point: “The presence of a median occipital fossa has been specially noted,” Ellis reports, “in connection with hypertrophy of the vermis of the cerebellum, as among the lower apes, in the human foetus between the third and fourth months, and in some lower races” (E, 48). The careful, technical description of the anatomical marks of the criminal are invariably followed by an example in this way, which consistently introduces the “lower races” as the most recognizable cases in point. The signs of criminality are interpreted as signs of underdevelopment which are in turn associated first with children, and then with the less than human: the partially formed foetus, the lower apes, and the “lower races.” Through the most precise of scientific explanations, that is, the native inhabitant of many of the colonies is not only made into the equivalent of a criminal, but into something that is not quite or not completely human. The criminal suspect, like the colonial subject, is placed a little bit lower than the

English on the evolutionary **[End Page 663]** chart and on the political hierarchy as well. He is not a political criminal, but a biological one.

As Ellis proceeds in his description of the criminal body, moving downward from head to toe, he continues to draw politically convenient conclusions from presumably pure anatomical data. The characteristic dental arrangement of the criminal, he observes, is also present “among the Australian aborigines,” where “the upper teeth fit accurately upon the edges of the lower. As this is the case also among the higher apes,” Ellis concludes, again eliding the boundaries between the criminal, the animal, and the colonial body, “it may fairly be considered an atavistic character” (E, 64). “Even nonscientific observers have noted the frequency among criminals of projecting or of long voluminous ears,” he claims in describing the size of the “Darwinian tubercle” and the precise angle of the ear’s structure in criminals (E, 70). In Ellis’s frequent shifts between anthropological and juridical analysis, the criminal is repeatedly defined not only as the racially other, but as the historically other as well, belonging to an earlier moment in time, somehow out of place in the modern world. “The projecting ear has usually been considered an atavistic character, and with considerable reason, as it is found in many apes, in some of the lower races, and it corresponds to the usual disposition of the ear in the foetus” (E, 74). Ellis cites the anatomist Frigerio to support this popular conception with more scientific evidence:

From the examination of several hundred subjects, he concluded that the auriculo-temporal angle... undergoes a gradual progression from below 90 degrees in the normal person, above 90 degrees among criminals and the insane, up to above 100 degrees among apes. He found the large angle very marked in homicides, less so in thieves. The longest ear Frigerio has ever seen in man or woman was in a woman convicted of complicity in the murder of her husband; the left ear was 78 mm., the right 81 mm. (the normal being 50–60 mm.) in length. (E, 73)

The commonplace observations of the non-scientific are thus revealed to have scientific justification, and the common thief is placed on an anatomical continuum with the murderer, the insane, and the inhuman.

There are dozens of comparable examples from Ellis’s careful anatomy of the criminal in which he substantiates a commonly held (and racially biased) popular opinion with intricate physiological data. “In general,” Ellis concludes at one point, this time citing **[End Page 664]** Lombroso as an authority, “born criminals have projecting ears, thick hair, a thin beard, projecting front eminences, enormous jaws, a square and projecting chin, large cheek-bones, and frequent gesticulation. It is, in short, a type resembling the Mongolian, or sometimes the Negroid” (E, 90–91). “Gynecomasty” (or the possession of large breasts in men), he goes on to say as he proceeds down the anatomy, is “associated with atrophy of the genital organs, and a general tendency to feminism; this is, however, by no means constant” (99). “It is noteworthy that in all true negroes (in whom virile development is otherwise marked) there is a considerable development of the male breast, so that Johnston has frequently asked himself, ‘Is it a man or a woman?’” (E, 99). Here, significantly, Ellis is quoting Sir H. H. Johnston in his then-recently published book

on *British Central Africa*, revealing once again how deeply the political and the criminal are intertwined in his thinking and suggesting the linkages between the origins of criminology and the buttressing of imperial ideology based on racial difference (E, 398). Moreover, another transgressive element has been introduced into the equation in this passage: gender. Not only is the criminal child-like (and therefore racially other), but feminine, or at least sexually ambiguous (and therefore, again, resembles the racially other).

If we have not yet got the point that the criminal body is the non-European, non-white, often imperfectly-male adult, and a figure for the object of British imperialism, Ellis makes it quite explicit in a summarizing remark toward the end of his analysis: “Perhaps the most general statement to be made is that criminals present a far larger proportion of anatomical abnormalities than the ordinary European population. Now this is precisely the characteristic of the anatomy of the lower human races: they present a far larger proportion of anatomical abnormalities than the ordinary European population” (E, 258). In these passages, the criminal body is defined as a foreign body in virtually every respect: as such, it is sexually indeterminate, developmentally indeterminate, even humanly indeterminate, conditions continually referred to as a form of evolutionary underdevelopment or primitiveness. The criminal, like the colonial subject, is presented by Ellis as an historical anachronism, a fragment of the prehistoric past that has mysteriously found its way into the modern world. We should not find it surprising that there would be racist or sexist assumptions behind these anthropological observations or, even more necessarily, that such assumptions would be deployed to undergird the ideology of the New Imperialism. What is **[End Page 665]** striking, however, is how easily these assumptions are instantly transferred back upon the otherwise “ordinary” and normal caucasian European body to define it as criminal. The inevitable implication Ellis draws when he begins to speak of the proper treatment of the criminal, therefore, is a political one: it is as much a duty to develop such a figure to its full human potential, to bring it into harmony with the present moment — to civilize it, in other words — as it would be to tame a wild animal or to nurture a child. This, of course, was precisely the popular basis that had traditionally been appealed to in order to morally justify the imperial domination of one race by another in England, for bearing what was popularly known as the white man’s burden. But just as the New Imperialism emphasized historical necessity over moral obligation, the ethical aspects of this disciplinary imperative became obscured and replaced by a more pressing historical imperative that provided the rationale for “progressive” prison reform and for pursuing what became favorably referred to as “social imperialism” both at home and abroad. ¹⁰

Ellis’s denials of the linkage between his concern with criminal types and political interests reveal themselves increasingly to be acts of repression as his argument unfolds. While he maintains an absolute categorical distinction between the political criminal and all other kinds, for example, he admits that there is a mysterious “borderland” between them (E, 4), and that “the lines that separate these from each other... are often faint and imperceptible” (E, 21). The powerful attraction of this borderland between the scientific and the political is an equally present force in Francis Galton’s theories about criminal identification and in his practical application of these theories in *Finger-Prints* (1892). Largely as a result of Galton’s efforts, Scotland Yard would establish the first fingerprint

file in Europe in 1901, revolutionizing the system for registering criminals and establishing the identity of suspects throughout the nation. Galton described the fingerprint as “the most important of all anthropological data,” not because it enabled the observer to sort out persons into categories as Ellis did, but because it enabled the observer to sort out each person into a category occupied by that person alone (G, 1–2). According to Galton, the grand significance of this data rested on its power to confer a unique identity upon every human subject and to provide a method to prove that uniqueness beyond the shadow of a doubt: “The broad fact remains,” Galton proclaims, “that a complete accordance between two prints of a single finger, and vastly more so between the prints of two or more **[End Page 666]** fingers, affords evidence requiring no corroboration, that the persons from whom they were made are the same” (G, 112–13).

But Galton soon begins to equivocate on the absolute uniqueness of each fingerprint. Although the “aim” of this “new method” of identification was to enable the reading of the physiological signature of every human being, “to give to each human being an identity,” Galton could not resist the temptation to read much more than individual uniqueness in this imprint of the body (G, 169). He believed that the same mark could also confer an identity upon an entire race. Despite his admission at the outset of his book that he could find no data to confirm what he called his “great expectations” that fingerprints could be used to determine racial difference (26), Galton remains convinced it was possible to do so anyway:

The number of instances is of course too small for statistical deductions, but they served to make it clear that no very marked characteristic distinguished the races. The impressions from Negroes betray the general clumsiness of their fingers, but their patterns are not, so far as I can find, different from those of others, they are not simpler as judged either by their contours or by the number of origins, embranchments, islands, and enclosures contained in them.... Still, whether it be from pure fancy on my part, or from the way in which they were printed, or from some real peculiarity, the general aspect of the Negro print strikes me as characteristic. The width of the ridges seem more uniform, their intervals more regular, and their courses more parallel than with us. In short, they give an idea of greater simplicity, due to causes I have not yet succeeded in submitting to measurement.

(G, 195–96)

Though he could measure no visible signs of racial difference in fingerprints, Galton was assured they were there, floating somewhere among the islands and enclosures they sketched out. This great, though unrealized, expectation acts as a kind of motif for the entire book, framing Galton’s graphic descriptions of the distinctive visual shapes and patterns imprinted on the surface of each person’s fingers.

When Galton makes his case for the value of deploying this technique as a method of identification, for example, he speaks first of the need for detecting otherwise unrecognizable impostors and frauds in “civilized lands,” criminals who were pretending to be someone they were not (G, 149). He then immediately makes an equation between such deviously disguised characters and entire populations from the colonies whose

individual identities also remain **[End Page 667]** undetectable to the European eye:

In India and in many of our colonies the absence of satisfactory means for identifying persons of other races is seriously felt. The natives are mostly unable to sign; their features are not readily distinguishable by Europeans; and in many cases they are characterised by a strange amount of litigiousness, wiliness, and untruthfulness.

(G, 149)

Not only are all colonial “natives” physically indistinguishable from one another (at least, in the eyes of their European colonizers), they are all also indistinguishable from those who consistently engage in criminal activity. Indians tend to be naturally dishonest and wily, and, like criminals, are prone to elude or exploit the law. They are “characterised” by these traits Galton, asserts without demonstration or apology.

The same system that was designed to detect criminals at home, Galton argued, may be deployed with equal effect to identify all colonials abroad. “Whatever difficulty may be felt in the identification of Hindoos,” Galton goes on to say, “is experienced in at least an equal degree in that of the Chinese residents in our Colonies and Settlements, who to European eyes are still more alike than Hindoos” (G, 152). Galton remedies this “difficulty in identification” by appropriating the discourse of exploration and cartography to analyze the fingerprint and identify the suspect. As we have seen, he speaks of some skin lines as “islands,” others he calls “ridges” or “embranchments” — a rhetorical strategy that is perfectly consistent with Ellis’s elaborate “mapping” of the criminal body. Much as a map maker might, Galton treats his field of inquiry as an unknown, alien territory to be charted, occupied, identified, and tamed.¹¹ In his analysis of fingerprints, Galton asserts, “We shall see that they form patterns, considerable in size and of a curious variety of shape, whose boundaries can be firmly outlined, and which are little worlds unto themselves” (G, 2). These “boundaries,” which define the territory (or “worlds”) of the interchangeably “colonial” and “criminal” subject also define the world — both domestic and foreign — that the criminologist seeks to control, and they do so as deliberately and as carefully as the boundaries of trade and power that defined the worlds the New Imperialism sought to dominate. The identities of “the residents in our Colonies and Settlements” are repeatedly equated with criminal mysteries in Galton’s descriptions, mysteries as indecipherable and threatening as the wilderness in which they live. By the same token, and with the same logic and technique, the **[End Page 668]** elusive and deceitful criminal back home is rendered in his fingerprint as a “little world” that can be mapped out, identified, and conquered.

The extent to which scientific theorization about domestic law enforcement and ideological strategies for imperial domination were mutually implicated is demonstrated in the historical circumstances surrounding Galton’s and Ellis’s work alike. The intricacy of these interconnections may be seen in the background of Edward Henry, the Acting Police Commissioner of London and the head of the Criminal Investigation Department at the time when Scotland Yard instituted its fingerprint department. Henry was the same man who had at one time served as Inspector General of the police of Nepal and, before that, as the Inspector General of the province of Bengal. Indeed, it was during his service as a civil

servant in India that Henry refined a practical system for organizing and implementing the theories that Galton and others had developed, officially instituting in India a registry of criminal identification based on fingerprints to supplant the more cumbersome and less precise anthropometric system of identification invented and popularized by the French theorist and police administrator, Alphonse Bertillon.¹² And Henry did so five years before fingerprinting was officially instituted in England, where, once more, he served as the moving force behind the adoption of the system, largely because he had so effectively used it in India.¹³

In fact, the British had first employed fingerprinting as a method of identifying criminals some thirty years earlier, and they had done so in India. In 1858, immediately after the eruption of the Indian Mutiny against British rule, Sir William Herschel used fingerprinting to register the Indian natives under his governance and to reduce the frequency of impostors and double agents. He employed a primitive version of the more elaborate system that Henry eventually instituted in Indian prison records and criminal investigations in 1897. The irony is that Herschel himself got the idea for this practice from commonplace customs in Chinese and Bengali culture, where a print of the thumb was sometimes used to seal letters and documents with the mark of the author as a sign of authenticity. This personal expression of good faith was then appropriated by imperial administrators as the form of biological monitoring and control that was first observed by Galton in one of his visits to India. The important point to be noted here is that across several discursive fields, the theory and practice of criminology and the history of imperialism are **[End Page 669]** consistently linked with one another in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Just as the theory of evolution was taken over by Ellis and other criminal anthropologists to endorse politically and racially charged conclusions, native custom and scientific theory were taken over by figures like Galton to mark individuals biologically and to forcefully confer a suspect identity upon them. Then, those same procedures were redeployed in the police system back home to protect “ordinary” citizens from the criminal kind that Ellis had already associated anatomically with the foreign body.

The Sherlock Holmes stories will often make the same interpretive turn we have seen operating in this scientific literature — using scientific investigation to obscure the very political issue the investigation then implicitly substantiates. Sometimes this transformation takes place in rather obvious ways; for example, when a dark imperial crime from the past is visited upon the present back home in England.

[...]

The irony, of course, is that at this very moment, the “New Woman” is making inroads into the labor market and the political arena in England as well, challenging the nineteenth-century masculinization of the British economy and its body politic. Ellis even remarked on this development in *The Criminal*, linking it to the increase in female criminality in England. “In England,” he says, “which has taken the lead in enlarging the sphere of women’s work, the level of feminine criminality has for half a century been rising.... It is significant that Marro found among his women criminals, in marked contrast to the men, a very large proportion (35 out of 41) who possessed some more or less honourable

occupation; a large proportion of the women also were possessed of some property” (E, 235). For both Ellis and Holmes, criminal activity in women is consistent with their involvement in the masculine world of professional trade, with their taking on of even “an honourable occupation,” and with their recently achieved legal right to possess property. As Cynthia Eagle Russett has demonstrated in *Sexual Science*, Victorian scientific theory consistently offered “proofs” for finding **[End Page 674]** women physiologically fit for only certain kinds of labor, a theory of “specialization” that essentially denied them access to the developing industrial economies of England and Europe and kept them at home.¹⁷ Indeed, over the course of the nineteenth century women who engaged in trade and enterprise “were increasingly considered as freaks of nature” who were defying the natural configurations of their own bodies.¹⁸ Some of the principles undergirding the New Imperialism may well be seen as an attack upon the New Woman in England as much as they were a defense against the primitive savages of the recalcitrant colonies. The literary and scientific discourses that inspired fear of the one also cast suspicion on the other.

[...]

In his study of *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, E. J. Hobsbawm argues not only that the identity of “the nation” as we now understand it is a relatively recent invention, but that the last decade of the nineteenth-century in England was a crucial period in the history of the concept of the nation as a political entity and of nationalism as an ideological force.²⁴ These developments were related both to the implications of a broader, less unified electorate within England and to developments in the Empire, where other nationalist aspirations were being fueled and gaining a force of their own. In both contexts, the application of scientific notions of race and evolution were effective in legitimating the power of the British nation as a bureaucratic state — at once reinforcing notions of the true Englishman and justifying the pursuit of imperial ambitions among less civilized peoples. Thus, in a period when the middle class **[End Page 679]** saw itself as menaced by subversive elements from the outside and inside alike, national identity became increasingly exclusivistic, defensive, and conservative, revising the earlier nineteenth-century concept of the nation as the spirit of the people to a more modern conception of the nation as a state apparatus. The detective fiction of the 1890s, like the new theories of criminal anthropology and the innovations in the practices of criminal justice, may be regarded as an effective popular agent in forging this new identity of the nation as apparatus. All three fields of discourse proclaimed the authority of a professional figure — the detective, the anthropologist, or the criminologist — to read in the body the scientifically predetermined identity of the person, a skill that was developed at the very moment when Great Britain needed to secure its identity as the predestined ruler of a great global Empire.

Ronald R. Thomas
Trinity College

Acknowledgment

This essay was researched during my residency at Harvard University as an Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellow in the Humanities during 1991–92. I would like to express my appreciation to the Mellon Foundation and to Harvard University for encouraging and enabling this work.

Footnotes

1. Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Yellow Face," in *The Complete Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Bramhall House, 1975), 200. All quotations from the Holmes stories for this essay are taken from this edition, which prints the stories in facsimile of the original *Strand Magazine* texts as they appeared between 1891 and 1893.

2. Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia" ([note 1](#)), 1.

3. James Morris, *Pax Britannica* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), 26.

4. Reginald Pound refers to *The Strand* as "a national institution" during this period, becoming almost instantly, "as much a symbol of immutable British order as Bank Holidays and the Changing of the Guard" (9). See Pound, *Mirror of the Century, The Strand Magazine 1891-1950* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1966).

5. Francis Galton, *Finger-Prints* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1892), 169; hereafter cited in text and abbreviated, G. As if to demonstrate the point, Galton's title page for the first edition includes a set of fingerprints printed under the title, identified by hand and finger with the legend "Finger Prints of the Author."

6. Havelock Ellis, *The Criminal* (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1973) ; hereafter cited in text and abbreviated, E. The first edition was published in London in 1890, a third edition in 1900 with a new preface by Ellis, and a fourth in 1910 with still another preface. For this essay, I quote from the Patterson Smith edition, which reprints the edition of 1914. From the first edition onward, however, we may read the continuity between the discourse of "truth production" in Ellis and Galton. Ellis both quotes from Galton in the text of *The Criminal* and uses as the book's frontispiece one of Galton's composite photographs of several criminals to produce a single image of the criminal type.

7. Ellis, Preface to *The Criminal*, 1st ed. (London: Walter Scott, 1890), xix.

8. In *Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth-Century Discourse* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1992), Marie-Christine Leps argues that Sherlock Holmes represents a contradiction to much criminological discourse for the period because Doyle describes his as an eccentric and marginalized figure, at odds with legal institutions, who denies "the possibility of institutions producing true knowledge of the criminal" (196-97). But in Holmes's frequent allusions to other scientific authorities (like Bertillon) and, indeed, to his own publications in learned journals, the detective frequently associates himself with the institutions producing this knowledge. By designating himself an expert, he reinforces what we might call the professionalization of truth upon which those institutions were founded even if he takes the pose of a lone, idiosyncratic voice crying in the wilderness of true knowledge about the criminal. Moreover, as D. A. Miller argues in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), institutional discipline commonly "enlists" the "consciousness of its subjects in the work of supervision," and it does so most effectively through an "entanglement between the nature of the novel and the nature of the police" that "disavows" this very collusion (2, 18). Holmes may be the most popular and productive agent and subject of this disavowed entanglement.

9. See Pasquale Accardo, *Diagnosis and Detection: The Medical Iconography of Sherlock Holmes* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1987).

10. See Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991) for an analysis of "social imperialism."

11. Galton did not invent all of this terminology, but borrowed some of it from Johann Purkinje, the Professor of Physiology and Pathology from Prague, who had first noticed the markings and patterns of

fingers in pathological examinations. For additional historical details see B. C. Bridges, *Practical Fingerprinting* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1942), 12–18; and Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), 106–11.

12. See Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 342–89. Sekula contrasts the archival approaches of Bertillon and Galton as opposing “the compulsive systematizer” with the “compulsive quantifier.” “While Bertillon was concerned primarily with the triumph of social order over social disorder,” he argues, “Galton was concerned primarily with the triumph of established rank over the forces of social leveling and decline” (G, 365). The other important difference between them relative to my argument is that Galton believed his method to provide at once a more efficient and a more literal and unmediated representation of the body in comparison with Bertillon's more elaborate and cumbersome system of measurements and descriptions.

13. For a summary of the development of forensic practice in the nineteenth century see Jurgen Thorwald, *The Century of the Detective* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964). My discussion of the history of fingerprinting in England is indebted to Thorwald's and Bridges's work (note 11), and also to Eco's and Sebeok's collection of essays.

14. In an earlier essay I have interpreted Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* as centrally concerned with rewriting that scandalous episode in British imperial history, the Sepoy Rebellion -- rewritings that may be understood as collaborating with the implicit politics of early criminal anthropology. The present article extends my argument there by looking closely at Doyle, Ellis, and Galton as practitioners of distinctive professional discourses, all of which linked the personal, the domestic, and the political in order to serve specific ideological requirements regarding race and gender in the age of the New Imperialism. See Ronald R. Thomas, “Minding the Body Politic: The Romance of Science and the Revision of History in Victorian Detective Fiction,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 19 (1991): 233–54.

15. “A Chapter on Ears,” *The Strand Magazine* (October 1893): 388.

16. Derek Longhurst has argued that women in the Holmes canon are often rendered as both the agents and victims of criminality based upon a certain conception of natural gender difference. As women are understood in these texts to be essentially passive, whenever they become active they are generally represented as violating both the natural and the social orders to which they belong. See Longhurst, “Sherlock Holmes: Adventures of an English Gentleman 1887–1894,” *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure*, ed. Derek Longhurst (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 51–66.

17. See Cynthia Eagle Russett, “The Physiological Division of Labor,” in *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 130–54.

18. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (New York: Random House, 1987), 200.

19. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War*. Quoted in Pierre Nordon, *Conan Doyle: A Biography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 51.

20. The other case in which Holmes famously fails is “A Scandal in Bohemia,” the very first of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and the first to appear in the pages of *The Strand*. Significantly, just as “The Yellow Face” involves the great detective's failure to recognize an instance of racial passing, “A Scandal” involves his failure to recognize an instance of gender passing. In the earlier case, Irene Adler deceives Holmes by appearing at his door in the guise of a young man and forces the detective to expose his own disguise.

21. Audrey Jaffe demonstrates how in “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” Sherlock Holmes inhabits a contradiction with respect to class analogous to the contradiction that I argue he inhabits with respect to race and gender in these tales: “The story raises the possibility that the gentleman and the beggar are the same only to repudiate it... Its ostensibly democratizing identification of the two figures, like that of Victorian popular ideology in general, is in fact the expression of anxiety about such potential transformation.” See Jaffe, “Detecting the Beggar: Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Mayhew, and ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip,’” *Representations* 31 (Summer 1990): 107.

22. As Leps argues in *Apprehending the Criminal*, the value of the notion of the criminal type was that “it could be applied to other social groups and justify their repression on scientific grounds.” Leps goes on to show how nineteenth-century criminologists “were quick to recognize the working classes in general and women of all classes as physically, intellectually, and morally close to the criminal type. Their failure to reach the higher evolutionary stage of the cultured male elite was ascribed partly to physical constitution and partly to hereditary influences -- and their attempts to acquire economic or political rights were identified as obvious manifestations of a latent criminality which, left unchecked, would bring the end of civilization” ([note 8], 61–62).

23. Lawrence Frank argues in a similar vein that the Holmes stories seemed to endorse the historicizing perspective of nineteenth-century science, but actually subverted it by suggesting the fictive nature of the scientist's and the detective's accounts of the past (“Reading the Gravel Page: Lyell, Darwin, and Conan Doyle,” *Nineteenth Century Literature* [1989]: 365).

24. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 80–90, 101–9.