What the Boy Jones and Poachers Have in Common: Defining the Criminal and Politicising Crime in Victorian Britain

Defining criminality in Victorian Britain was a complex procedure. The prevailing narrative throughout the century developed to be the idea off the criminal “other,” of sections of society that were inherently criminal by nature. Class was key in this; the working class were often demonised, seen a full of idle, immoral people in whose nature it was to commit crimes. However counter this this prevailing narrative was a curious trend of using politics to present a decriminalised version of someone. The case of Edward Jones and his multiple break-ins to Buckingham Palace, and the issue of poaching, are both good examples of both of these trends. The difference between them lies in who was active in the process of simultaneously politicising and decriminalising their actions.

Many of the reports regarding Jones’ crimes played into the idea of the working class as a criminal class, contributing to the larger formation of a criminal other. The criminalisation of the working class, including children, was not new in the 19th century[[1]](#footnote-1) but it was certainly widespread. Habitual working-class criminals were seen as behaving the way they did out of a “lack of moral fibre,” and this belief is certainly evident in the reporting of Jones’ case. In Jones’ first to appearances in *The Times* the attitude towards him was fairly lenient; especially in the reporting of the trial the language is quite jovial and there is the general feeling that this was a one-off, youthful mistake.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, in subsequent reports after his second and third break-ins, the tone shifts dramatically. Where he had previously been referred to as simply a “lad,”[[3]](#footnote-3) he was now an “urchin”[[4]](#footnote-4) and a “delinquent.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Here the authors of the pieces are painting a well-known image for their audience of the young criminal destined for further crimes on account of his class. Publications like *The Times* used Jones’ case to further the idea that criminality was inherent in the lower classes however it was not alone in doing this. Even those papers run by more radically minded such as *The Morning Chronicle* partook in this, publishing from the same correspondent as *The Times* that labels him an “urchin” and conveys him as greedy by choosing to say he was “feasting” in the palace kitchen.[[6]](#footnote-6) This suggests that the idea of an inherent criminality that was linked to class was not just confined to the more conservatively minded; it could be seen even amongst those who might otherwise advocate for the poorer people in society. We can see this again later in the century in James Greenwood’s *The Seven Curses of London* which, while advocating for more efficient charity and for the rich to pay their fair share towards it, makes an explicit distinction between those who are “worthy” and those who are “pests” and are naturally disinclined to work.[[7]](#footnote-7) In all of these publications, from the reports of Jones’ crime to the work of Greenwood later in the century is the idea that some people are inherently criminal and that these people were necessarily working class.

The unfavourable reporting of Jones’ apparently “repulsive”[[8]](#footnote-8) appearance speaks to another way in which Victorian society defined the criminal; the physical body. As well as the idea of criminality coming from class, there developed the idea that, amongst other physical attributes, unpleasant appearance could indicate criminal nature. This idea can be seen in numerous forms of media across the century. Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* – coincidentally published the same year of Jones’ first break-in – features the unsightly looking child criminal the Artful Dodger; *The Illustrated Police News,* founded in 1868 contains in all its issues a wealth of unflattering drawings of criminals; and Havelock Ellis in his work *The Criminal,* first published in 1890, gives further authority to the idea by quoting Homer.[[9]](#footnote-9) The association of ugliness with criminality did not stand alone – it was very much tied in with class as Dickens’ work and the reports on Jones attest to. Ugliness was another mechanism by which Victorian society created criminal type and suggested that this criminality came from within. The sudden introduction of unfavourable descriptions of the boy’s appearance after his repeat offenses suggests that this outward manifestation of criminality was a potent ideal in Victorian society.

It is likely that Jones’ apparent lack of a motive beyond curiosity contributed to the use of his case to further shore up the prevailing ideas about what made a criminal. As we shall see in the case of the more satirical publications, the lack of maliciousness or any other sort of agenda made Jones’ story particularly pliable. In the case of the traditional style newspapers his lack of a particular motive effectively served of proof of his inner moral failings.

While many clearly disapproved of Jones’ excursions, he was not without his fans. Those who spoke favourably of Jones were mostly confined to satirical magazines and presented him as not a criminal or of the criminal type by politicising his crime and using him as a mouthpiece for criticism of the upper classes – including the royal family itself. The noted pliability in his story served this venture well, plus his crime had the added bonus of his having entered into a space usually off-limits to the general public. His initial claim that he had been in the palace for a year just added to this. The specifics of his crime made him the perfect marionette for satirical publications to use to voice their criticisms and, crucially, present him as not a criminal at all.

Common themes seen in *The Satirist, Punch,* and *Figaro in London* are the closeness of Melbourne and Victoria, the Duchess of Kent’s relationship with John Conroy, and the generally unwholesome characters at court. For example, after Jones’ first break-in, *The Satirist* recounts the tale of Jones having lived in the palace for months and published what they claimed to be the missing part of his testimony.[[10]](#footnote-10) In it they relay what he saw and the relatively short piece manages to make digs at the queen, the queen’s mother, Melbourne, Conroy, and Victoria’s uncle Leopold.[[11]](#footnote-11) They use a deliberately childlike and innocent tone to convey Jones as an objective viewer, able to report what he sees in the palace without a political agenda. Overall their portrayal of him is favourable. They do not deny his class, as seen in the misspellings to suggest a certain accent, however, they refer to him only as “boy,” utilising none of the derogatory language previously seen and they present him as a trustworthy witness who retold his tale in a “plain” manner.[[12]](#footnote-12) The writers use the fictitious account to suggest an obviousness in their criticisms – even a working class child can make these observations. In this depiction Jones is not portrayed as a criminal in the way that has been previously seen; the politicisation of his case has contributed to this different way of portraying him.

Even though it only appeared in 1841, the year of Jones’ last intrusion into the palace, *Punch* takes up the case too and write about him as late as 1856.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this instance it is the treatment of the boy by government – he was kidnapped multiple times and removed from the country[[14]](#footnote-14) – that is used as a vehicle for satire. In an article from 1841 the magazine emphasises his youth and low class through poor spelling but attempt to curry sympathy for him by casting his removal from England as an overreaction to his innocent “pursuit of knowledge.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In doing this they subtly suggest that those in the palace may have something to hide and, once again, Jones becomes an unwitting political hero – and puppet – for the satirical magazines, rather than a criminal.

Although he may well not have seen himself as a criminal, the politicisation of Jones’ actions and the move away from the archetypal working class criminal delinquent in these articles is that it was carried out by the writers, not by Jones himself or his community. Though they may well have been advocates for the poor,[[16]](#footnote-16) these writers tended to be from a small portion of the middle-class[[17]](#footnote-17) and writing for like-minded middle-class readers. The use of Jones’ case was not – bar one brief allusion to the poor state of prisons[[18]](#footnote-18) – used to advocate for the working class but rather to voice middle-class criticisms of politics and upper-class behaviour. His class is still key here, though. He is the perfect image to use for these criticisms because, by way of his class, he doesn’t have a stake in what he’s criticising. His low standing in his society gives the character of the “Boy Jones” used by these magazines an air of honesty far removed from the traditional criminal depicted in *The Times* and other publications.

The mechanisms of criminalising the working class and of politicisation as a way of denying the criminality of actions are something that can be seen in the case poaching as well. Poachers were seen by some as professional criminals, people who simply refused to do an honest day’s work and so resorted to crime.[[19]](#footnote-19) Another view was that poachers were those who had fallen prey to the “temptation” of preservations.[[20]](#footnote-20) Poaching was undoubtedly a working class activity these views continued to contribute to the criminalisation of the working class, painting them as lazy and lacking the moral integrity not to commit crime.

However, in the 19th century poaching also became an ever more politicised act, especially after the passing of new game laws in the first half of the century, which over time became a very class-orientated issue.[[21]](#footnote-21) This lead to the belief amongst many poachers and some journalists that poaching was not a crime at all; in the same way that politicisation was used to ignore and deny the criminality of Jones, so it was with poaching. Notably, however, this process was carried about by the poachers and their communities as well as – and to a greater extent than – by reporters.

Poachers and their communities politicised – and in their eyes decriminalised[[22]](#footnote-22) – the act of poaching not by ignoring class differences and conflict but by emphasising them. The two major justifications behind poaching came from new laws passed in the 19th century: the game laws of 1831, and the poor law of 1834. Firstly, poaching was not a crime, according to them, because it was simply an extension of a traditional way of life[[23]](#footnote-23) onto which the new game laws were encroaching. The act in and of itself for some became a form of political rebellion against the land owners and communities would partake in further destruction of the property of those who prosecuted poachers too heavily.[[24]](#footnote-24) In defending their actions in this way, the poachers and their communities presents themselves not as criminals, but as fighters against an unjust law. Another link made to class and class conflict made by the poachers to decriminalise themselves and politicise their actions was to that of poverty. The 1834 poor law was founded on the same idea of working-class idleness and lack of moral integrity that can be seen in the development of the criminal “type.” The workhouses established under the law were much feared and so poverty became, in the eyes of the poachers, a valid reason for their actions; the famous poacher Jack Hawker said it was poverty that “made” him poach.[[25]](#footnote-25)

*Punch* seems to exhibit understanding of both these arguments; a cartoon from 1844 shows a visibly poor man about to be beheaded with a sword labelled “According to Law” while a hare on a podium and members of the landed class look down at him with disdain*.*[[26]](#footnote-26)Here we can see *Punch* showing their support for those prosecuted under the laws, suggesting the immorality of laws that seem to favour animals and property over human life. In this image the poor, working class poacher becomes a martyr to the cause, unjustly punished while in the background families head towards a workhouse. This image illustrates both approaches to the politicisation and subsequent decriminalisation of poachers and their actions, emphasising the game laws, and the issue of poverty and the fear of the workhouse.

As we saw in the Jones case, politicising an act can be a way of denying its criminality even when by all other accounts it fell right into the mould of standard crime created in the 19th century: perpetrated by the working class and blameable on a lack of moral integrity. In both these cases class is at the centre of these counter views however, a distinct difference lies in the agency of those who committed the crime in creating these narratives. In Jones’ case the decriminalisation of his actions is a mechanism for conveying the political opinions of the middle class; he himself had no part in this and in fact, in using his case in this way the writers very much warp the reality of it. In contrast, poachers and their communities partook in creating the narrative of poaching as a political act, not a crime. When magazines like *Punch* took up the cause it was a working class cause they were putting their weight behind.

The examples of Edward Jones and of poaching show two forces at work in the 19th century; those creating the narrative of working class criminality, and those who valorised working criminals, simultaneously politicising and decriminalising their acts. These were by no means equal forces, of course. Those who worked at periodicals such as *The Satirist* or *Punch* were very much espousing minority views and poachers who consciously saw themselves as being political were in the minority also.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, they nonetheless illustrate a contrast in how criminality is perceived and defined in the 19th century.

Bibliography

Bondeson, Jan. *Queen Victoria’s Stalker: The Strange Story of the Boy Jones* (Kent State University Press, 2011)

Emsley, Clive. *Crime and Society in England 1750-1900,* (London: Longman, 1987)

Ellis, Havelock. *The* Criminal (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1916)

Greenwood, James. *The Seven Curses of London* (London: 1869) Last accessed 9/29/16 <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/seven23.htm>

Huggett, Frank. *Victorian England as Seen by Punch* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978)

Jones, D. J. V. “The Poacher: A Study in Victorian Crime and Protest,” *The Historical Journal* 22 (1979)

Osborne, Harvey. and Winstanley, Michael. “Rural and Urban Poaching in Victorian England,” *Rural History* 17 (2006)

Sanders, Michael. “Politics,” in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

1. Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England 1750-1900,* (London: Longman, 1987) 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Westminster Sessions, Friday, Dec. 28.,” *The Times*, December 29, 1838, 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Third Appearance of the Boy Jones at Buckingham Palace,” *The Times*, March 17, 1841, 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The Late Intrusion into Buckingham Palace,” *The Times,* December 5, 1840, 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Third Appearance of the Boy Jones” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London* (London: 1869) Last accessed 9/29/16 http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/seven23.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Apprehension of a Stranger in Her Majesty’s Dressing Room,” *The Times,* December 4, 1840, 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Havelock Ellis, *The* Criminal (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1916) 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Suppressed Evidence of the Palace Spy,” *The Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times,* December 23, 1838, 405 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Suppressed evidence” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “The Boy Jones Again,” *Punch*, July 26, 1856, 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jan Bondeson, “The Mysterious Disappearance of the Boy Jones” in *Queen Victoria’s Stalker: The Strange Story of the Boy Jones,* Jan Bondeson (Kent State University Press, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “The Boy Jones’ Log: Picked up at Sea,” *Punch*, August 7, 1841, 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Frank Huggett, *Victorian England as Seen by Punch* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978) 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Michael Sanders, “Politics,” in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 240 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Young Jones’s Last Visit to Buckingham Palace,” *The Satirist; or the Censor of the Times,* March 21, 1841, 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Emsley, *Crime and* *Society,* 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. D. J. V. Jones, “The Poacher: A Study in Victorian Crime and Protest,” *The Historical Journal* 22 (1979): 833 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid.,* 827 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Emsley, *Crime and Society,* 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jones, “The Poacher,” 838 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jones, “The Poacher,” 829 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Harvey Osborne and Michael Winstanley, “Rural and Urban Poaching in Victorian England,” *Rural History* 17 (2006): 188 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Huggett, *Victorian England,* 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jones, “The Poacher,” 826 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)