

BOOK REVIEW

Judith Rowbotham¹

Andrew Davies, *City of Gangs. Glasgow and the Rise of the British Gangster*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2013, 450pp. Paperback, £9.99, ISBN: 078-1-444-763751

Andy Davies could be said to be the leading exponent on the history of gangs and their social and criminal history. His past work in the area is still widely used and cited by students and more senior scholars, such as his first articles 'Youth gangs, masculinity and violence in Victorian Manchester and Salford', appearing in the *Journal of Social History* back in 1998, and "'These viragoes are no less cruel than the lads": young women, gangs and violence in late Victorian Manchester and Salford', in the *British Journal of Criminology* in 1999, and more recently, books like his widely-approved *Gangs of Manchester* in 2009.² However, *City of Gangs* represents a new departure for this academic – and one that poses a challenge to other academic writers in an area such as crime history, where there is a long-established popular appetite for information and ideas. Traditionally, that appetite has been fed by 'true crime' publications, a genre regularly despised and denigrated by 'proper' scholars and researchers. Yet – here is Andrew Davies, Senior Lecturer in History at the respected Liverpool University, contributing to that genre!! I have identified this book as falling within this genre partly because its physical appearance and production values so identify it; and partly because the reviews available on, for instance, Amazon for the work are very clearly reading it in that light. Also, I do not think that the author himself would be unhappy with such a designation. This is not a monograph in disguise, and sadly lacking in footnotes. It is, quite unashamedly, a work of popular history, intended to appeal to a general reader who may be interested in aspects of our historical past but who is not a trained historian. It

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² Andrew Davies, 'Youth gangs, masculinity and violence in late Victorian Manchester and Salford'. *Journal of Social History*, 32(2,), 1998, 349-69; Andrew Davies, "'These viragoes are no less cruel than the lads": young women, gangs and violence in late Victorian Manchester and Salford'. *British Journal of Criminology*, 39(1,), 1999, 72-89; Andrew Davies, *The Gangs of Manchester*, Preston: Milo Books, 2009.

expects an intelligent reader (but then, I would argue that this holds true for all the best examples of true crime writing, such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*); but not a historically-educated one, necessarily.

Does this mean that I am in possession of negatively critical attitudes towards the work or its author for making a choice to present some 15 years of hard-done research via this *milieu*, instead of in a monograph with a high profile academic publisher like Cambridge or Oxford University Press? No – far from it. I think it is a model of what can be done – and that it does present a challenge to scholars in disciplines like law, criminology, media studies and, of course, history to consider whether they might not, usefully, do likewise. Am I surprised? Again – I am not. This author has 'form' in using research to reach out to popular audiences. His 2009 publication on the gangs of Manchester was used as the basis for a play, *Angels with Manky Faces* in 2009 and 2010.³ Of course, Andy Davies is not the first academic to have made the choice of writing up their research in a popular history format, but it is still comparatively rare, and – especially after having read this book – I think that is a shame. I think there is a great deal of research being undertaken which could valuably adopt an approach similar to the one used here. This would not prevent specialist articles on aspects of the work, but it would ensure the widest possible audience for the research. This is worth considering in an era when not only is it good to disseminate research outside the academic community in an accessible fashion, but also when there is a need to educate the general public about the realities of crime and how this can be combated, both formally by the criminal justice process and informally, by a range of community initiatives.

Of course, for the academic or student hoping to use it to mine the footnotes to direct further research, a popular history of this nature is not going to be a quick reference text. It is possible, if you know the field and read it properly and thoroughly, to deduce the sources, especially given the very comprehensive Notes on Sources provided at the end. So, if the lazy academic reader finds the book of little use, it is

³ I suspect also that the successful dramatisation of the book may have been a contributing factor in convincing the writers of the BBC2 series *Peaky Blinders*, focusing on the interwar Birmingham gangs, of the dramatic potential of the subject, though of course Dr Christopher Upton, of Newman University, Birmingham, was the actual historical consultant on that production.

more a comment on them than on the book itself, and the research which underpins it.

What it is, unequivocally, is a gripping and academically sound production, with its key themes and arguments presented in a way that does credit to both the author's innate scholarship and his ability to present his subject appealingly and readably. Davies shows an appreciation of the reality that media presentations of a political, cultural or social phenomenon – and gangs fall within all of these categories – shape contemporary understandings of what is the 'reality' of a topic. That is why, for instance, he draws on contemporary newsprint as well as the influential 1935 narrative, *No Mean City*, with its discussion of gangs and gang cultures written from the perspective of a contemporary who was personally acquainted with their reality. For any academic acquainted with Davies' previous work, the careful contextualisation of the background to the Glasgow gangs – the discussion of the poverty of individual backgrounds (both actual and metaphorical), along with environmental factors like poor housing and overcrowding in slums, lack of employment opportunities and the acknowledgement of the reality of youthful male aggression as a factor in easy criminality – is clearly influenced by his previous scholarship. But while avoiding falling into the sensationalism of so much of the contemporary reportage of the phenomenon, this still remains a very exciting and intriguing work, which does not shy away from including an amount of gruesome detail of a type likely to satisfy the traditional true crime reader. But it still remains a balanced, and ultimately, a sober (and sobering) read.

One reason is that Davies' balances the usual players, in the shape of the gangs, and individual gang members, and the police along with other personnel in the criminal justice process, with other players who, sadly, often receive rather less attention. Fortunately, Davies is not just a twentieth century historian: he cut his teeth on nineteenth century research and so was able, when doing his research, to notice the contribution made by twentieth century philanthropy and an enduring muscular Christianity. He points to the positive impacts of the more informal, community-based remedies for gang involvement practised by local clergy, for instance. In so doing, he locates the interwar Glasgow gangs in the wider city context, not just in their immediate deprived environs. Overall, this is a thoroughly enjoyable book, and one

that is thoroughly creditable to the author. I hope he will continue to publish articles and chapters in scholarly journals and texts – but also, continue to write accessible histories of this nature. He could end up giving True Crime narratives, and popular history generally, a much needed credibility boost in terms of public perceptions of what they contribute to the field of crime history.