

April 2013

Book review: Haia Shpayer-Makov. *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England.*

Dagni A. Bredeesen

Eastern Illinois University, dabredesen@eiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/women_faculty



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bredeesen, Dagni A., "Book review: Haia Shpayer-Makov. *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England.*" (2013). *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*. 2.

http://thekeep.eiu.edu/women_faculty/2

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Women's Studies at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research & Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

attempt to capture the importance of the republican tradition in the Irish historical struggle throughout the twentieth century produces a cursory sweep of the first half of the century, blurring significant historical details in an abbreviated account of the IRA's origin and early history. This leaves the reader less equipped to balance the big picture of Irish republican history with the precise detailing of events, and often these precise details are the cataclysmic forces for the dissident factions Andrew Sanders has endeavored to discuss.

In the end, *Inside the IRA: Dissident Republicans and the War for Legitimacy* challenges Irish historians to seek *both* an internal analysis and an external observation to frame the pattern of Irish republican factionalization. The challenges, noted above, to Sanders's work are comfortably characteristic of the history that he bravely covers. The sweeping rigor of this book provocatively offers a frank discussion of the controversial concept of republican revisionism that is based upon the author's attentive scholarship.

Margaret Keiley-Listermann, Georgia Gwinnett College

HAIA SHPAYER-MAKOV. *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 448. £30.00 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2013.47

Having previously published on the social history of the London uniformed policeman (*The Making of a Policeman: The Social History of a Labour Force in Metropolitan London, 1829–1914*, 2002), Haia Shpayer-Makov now turns to the historical and cultural factors that produced the occupation of plainclothes police detective and then professionalized it. This new study begins by examining the conditions during the long eighteenth century that led to the establishment of the Metropolitan Police's detective branch in 1842 and extends through the long nineteenth century—the period that saw the formation of the police detective as a profession and as a literary construct—until just before the First World War. Shpayer-Makov delves into police records, court documents, newspaper reports, pseudomemoirs, and genuine autobiographies as well as fictional representations. In the process, she enlarges our understanding of this professional identity, whose impact on the British imagination was much greater and more extensive than the limited numbers of police detectives might warrant.

Ascent of the Detective is divided into two sections. Indeed, the introduction to the second section suggests that these are in some ways two different books. The first comprises three chapters that flesh out “the lives of actual detectives in historical context” (2). Chapter 1 traces the evolution in both political and social thinking that created the conditions for professionalized crime investigation; the chapter's subtitle, “Eighteenth Century—First World War,” indicates that this is a rather sweeping overview. Shpayer-Makov charts successive events and influences from the Fielding brothers' reforms, to the 1789 legislation that gave rise to seven new public offices modeled on Bow Street, to the 1829 establishment of a uniformed Metropolitan Police force under Sir Robert Peel, to the launch of a plainclothes division of police detectives in 1842, which marked “the official, if tentative start of Scotland Yard” (33). This progressive story has been laid out before. What is new is how Shpayer-Makov identifies the early and continued opposition to detectives and domestic spying, an opposition that we are only now revisiting in our concern for the surveillance state. Thus, as early as 1822, the *Select Committee on the Police of the Metropolis* observed: “It is difficult to reconcile an effective system of police, with that perfect freedom of action and exemption from interference” (26). Even when calls for not only deterrence but also detection came to predominate, the ambivalence continued. This first chapter is based on deep reading of many secondary works as well as commission reports and parliamentary debates on Metropolitan policing from the late 1820s through the nineteenth century.

The second chapter examines a different type of origin, the social origins of those who became police detectives. The typical detective was not the gentleman-scholar detective of our imagination; rather, English police forces recruited from the lowly bobbies and raised the few detectives needed through the ranks. Here, the 1878 *Departmental Commission the State, Discipline, and Organisation of the Detective Force of the Metropolitan Police* and other contemporary sources (though relatively few from the mid-Victorian period) are mined for understanding how the detective force was created. So, a public detective force was created and trained—what did they do, and how was it different from uniformed policing? That is the question tackled in the third chapter. Along with the recruitment chapter, this examination of the day-to-day, pounds-and-pence elements of the detectives' lives, which also addresses the kind of work details to which a detective might be assigned, provides a detailed social history that adds much to our knowledge.

The twentieth-century photographs of detectives in costume disguise included in section 1 might well have been placed in section 2, since the latter turns to the creation of social identity in print and the police detective's own self-fashioning. Foreigners had spies, the English had sleuths, and it took close attention to descriptions of the detectives in newspapers and fiction to insure that the police detective was ensconced in the latter category. The key difference, as Shpayer-Makov suggests, was "the ethos of service" (151). Chapter 4 posits a close, reciprocal relation between detectives and journalists based on the circulation of information: the selective release of information by police detectives to reporters and the generally positive press coverage of the plainclothes detectives' activities published in return. Of course, our awareness of this quid pro quo between detectives and the press has been reinforced by a steady diet of detective movies and novels, to the point that we take this association for granted. What makes this chapter intriguing is that this symbiosis extends in part, as Shpayer-Makov reminds us, from the parallel professionalization of both of these groups through much of the nineteenth century. Two additional chapters examine how the image of the detective changed over time. Although not a straightforward trajectory from sinister spy to distinctly British national celebrity, by the beginning of the twentieth century representations of police detectives in newspapers and fiction, as well as on the stage, were highly favorable. The final chapter returns to the detectives' own self-fashioning by considering their memoirs, many produced in the latter half of the nineteenth century and, surprisingly, indebted in tone, format, and content to what Shpayer-Makov calls the "pseudo-memoirs" (232) that became popular in the decades following the 1842 launch of the plainclothes detective force.

Overall, this is a fascinating foray through many types of print sources discussing detectives; its richness invites further specialized studies, as Shpayer-Makov helpfully notes. This literary critic found it at times confusing as a wealth of late nineteenth century sources were sometimes deployed to fill in the presumably less-documented early Victorian period. Nevertheless, the careful attention to the cultural forces at work in the creation of both the profession and the detective genre makes *Ascent of the Detective a vade mecum* to anyone embarking on further study of this subject.

Dagni Bredesen, Eastern Illinois University

PETER STANSKY and WILLIAM ABRAHAMS. *Julian Bell: From Bloomsbury to the Spanish Civil War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. Pp. 328. \$45.00 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2013.48

Some years ago, Peter Stansky and William Abrahams published their study of Julian Bell and John Cornford, *Journey to the Frontier: Two Roads to the Spanish Civil War* (1966). Now, moved by the way Michael Holroyd and Noel Annan successfully revisited their subjects, Lytton