

# Chapter 8

## Liquid Crime History

- Digital entrepreneurs and the industrial production of ‘ruined lives’<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Recent exhibitions at art galleries across Europe have raised some interesting questions about modernity and the celebration of decay caused by the passing of time. The works featured under the title of “Ruin Lust” depict fallen structures, relics, buildings and monuments (John Constable’s ‘*Hadleigh Castle*’, or William Turner’s ‘*Temple of Poseidon at Sunium*’ for example). The works have aroused interest amongst visitors, art critics and cultural theorists (as well as members of the viewing public). There is also much to interest social scientists, historians, and digital theorists as this essay goes on to prove. There is a clear community of interest that joins the viewers of ‘ruin lust’ with many criminologists who are seeking to understand how and why some people suffer ‘ruined’ lives, and who want to do something about it. This essay argues that a significant strand of criminological inquiry shares a similar and long-standing interest in ruins (of lives rather than buildings) and makes three main points. First, it asserts that one strand within criminological research and practice has always contained a latent and unacknowledged romanticism which seeks to investigate, understand and ‘repair’ ruined lives through a more sophisticated analysis of how and why life-chances are damaged or restricted.<sup>2</sup> In other words, this strand of criminology is fundamentally concerned with lives that appear to be ruined but which can be rescued. The second assertion is that crime historians are similarly affected, in fact, the essay argues that they are perhaps even more prone than criminologists to the ‘redemption impulse’ which seeks to recover ruined lives. Third, it argues that the new forms of crime history which utilize digital resources have changed the character of biographical research to the extent that it has taken on a ‘liquid’ character; and this essay suggests that the availability of digital data on the

internet (which is quite staggering) offers a hyper-extension of criminology's reach towards uncovering and recovering the lives of the dispossessed and powerless.

### **Ruin Lust**

Humans revere, cherish, and are fascinated by ruins. This is a fascination that Woodward (2001) believes originated in nostalgic contemplations on the fall of Ancient Rome:

'When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future. To statesmen, ruins predict the fall of Empires, and to philosophers the futility of mortal man's aspirations. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of an individual ego in the flow of Time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into question the purpose of their art. Why struggle with a brush or chisel to create the beauty of wholeness when far greater works have been destroyed by Time?' (Woodward 2001:2-3).

In eighteenth-century England, Classical virtues were lauded, and the Imperial Roman Empire became an aspirational model for the emerging British Empire. By the late nineteenth century London had reached the same size, population, stature, and visual splendor as the glory that once was Rome. But Rome had fallen, and therefore there was the possibility that London and the rest of the British Empire could suffer the same fate: 'Imperial imaginaries create particular topographies, temporalities, scopic regimes, and modes of representation. Their scopic regimes include...imperial ruin gazing – that is, scenes in which the imperial subject contemplates the metropole of a mighty empire in ruins while thinking about the future of his own empire' (Hell 2010: 170). Accordingly, the melancholy contemplation of ancient glories now turned to rubble, began to seep into nineteenth-century political dialogue and artistic production. The early nineteenth-century Romantic movement is particularly associated with painted depictions of ruined churches, classical facades, and elegiac landscapes. The ruins were emblematic of human virtues, vices, regrets and decline. Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" musing on the fall of the empire created by the Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses II typifies the poetic response to hubris and loss:

'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away." (Shelley, 1826:100).

Engravings and paintings of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries persisted with themes of loss, destruction and decay through their depiction of ruined buildings and monuments: Gustave Dore's *The New Zealander*; Picasso's *Guernica* or the war paintings of Nash for example (Boym 2001:11-12; Dillon 2014; Nead 2005: 212-5). Whilst it seems conceivable that 'the semantic instability of the ruin owes much to the fact that it bespeaks a potential vacuity of meaning' (Hell and Schonle 2010: 6), it seems equally likely that ruins are actually the *perfect* canvas upon which meanings can be ascribed. The paintings of ruined buildings were understood by nineteenth-century viewers as metaphors of hubris, just as more modern depictions of derelict buildings are 'read' by modern viewers as metaphors for unemployment, recession, poverty, disillusionment, and the failures of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism

As photography came to rival painting in the twentieth century, decaying urban environments, and particularly decommissioned institutions, have featured strongly. Brinkley and Eastman (2008) photographed closed-down diners, drive-ins, shops and other parts of 'Vanishing America'; Hinkley and James (2011) did something similar when travelling the iconic highway Route 66; Romany (2010) provided a more poetic interpretation of former factories, theatres, and other institutions in the US; whilst Magraine (2012) continued the theme for similar institutions across Europe. Payne (2009) produced an interesting volume of photographs of decommissioned US 'State Mental Hospitals'; and Moore (2010) composed an eloquent photographic essay on the abandoned factories and houses of Detroit (a city which declared itself bankrupt in 2014), continuing a theme started by the celebrated American photographer David Lyons. *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan* (originally published in 1969, but reprinted 2005) was Lyon's attempt to document the large-scale demolition of part of New York in 1967. He photographed buildings which would soon be laid-low, and also the people living in that area who would soon be moved out. Both buildings and the residents had seen better days, but all retained dignity in the photographs: 'I liked the buildings. I liked being alone in them. I liked the dirt. I liked the danger. And I liked that I was the last person to see them ... The buildings, all doomed, spoke to me. I was there to save them, to be

witness, to pass onto the future, forever, what they looked like, at their best, alone in the light' (Lyon 2014: 134).

However, the strongest theme within modern ruin-lust is that of decaying carceral institutions. There are now numerous photographic collections of prisons across the world. Bolze and Delarue (2013) includes photographs of Lyon's three gaols through their various historical incarnations; the cells of Holmesburg Prison, Philadelphia, with their peeling paint and faded graffiti are depicted by Roma, and Szarkowski (2005); Finger (2010) produced an illustrated history of Queensland's St Helena Colonial Prison; and O'Sullivan (2009) did the same for Dublin's Kilmainham Prison. There are many others. Almost no decommissioned prison that has been turned into a hotel or a museum lacks an official 'biography' (complete with photos).

The photographs of former carceral institutions allow us a glimpse into a hidden world, and they allow us to wallow in nostalgia in a similar way that eighteenth century paintings of ruined churches or Roman temples do. The buildings also seemed to show, if not resilience, a quality of survivability that raised them to the heroic. Like Lyons, Dillon (2011) saw the buildings as heroic and resilient: 'The ruined building is a remnant of, and portal into, the past; its decay is a concrete reminder of the passage of time. And yet by definition it survives, after a fashion...' The remains of these buildings are poignant not merely because they have lost their place in the social and physical landscape, but also because they have now been stripped of their authority, context and purpose. The factories do not contain workers; the prisons have no prisoners; the asylum no inmates. The ruined buildings seem to echo the ruined lives of the people who once dwelt or worked in them, and even contain the feint remnants of their thoughts etched in graffiti on the walls, and we have been as interested in the people who inhabited these carceral institutions; and wonder whether they too survived the harsh conditions they experienced?

### **'Ruined' people**

Since the 1970s photographers have started to focus on prisoners, inmates, and other people who lived or who were once kept in those now-crumbling carceral institutions. For example, David Lyons, after photographing buildings and structures in the 1960s then started to photograph prisoners in six American penal institutions, published as *Conversations with the Dead* in 1971. In *The Seventh Dog* (2014) he talked about the people featured in those photographs.

'Charlie Lowe, who I knew from Ellis, had been a child prisoner in Gatesville. That was the prison where Texas used to send the kids before they were old enough to be sent to the TDC [Texas Department of Corrections]. Notorious for its brutality to the child prisoners, Gatesville was closed by the state in 1980. Charlie, who was seventeen years old, hatched an escape plan from Gatesville with four of his abused teenage buddies. After they created a commotion, the over-six-foot-tall guard entered the dorm and Charlie hit him over the head with a baseball bat. In Charlie's version, the guard kept getting back up so Charlie kept hitting him. In one of Charlie's partner's versions, Charlie lost it and kept hitting the guard until his eye popped out. Charlie got life, and his buddies got fifty, forty, thirty, and twenty years each, showing that Texas juries know how to deduct by ten' (Lyon 2014: 133).

Lyons work between 1971 and 2014 provided a glimpse of prison life (which had rarely been revealed to the public gaze). Modern prison photography continues to pull back the curtain to reveal the realities of incarceration; and appears to seek to fulfill three further aims: to *visualize* those who have been hidden or ignored; to *humanize* those who have been demonized; and to *critique* social structures or social policy. Writing about the photographs of serving prisoners in three European gaols, Visser said that:

'They were quite ordinary people really, perhaps a bit more introvert than the average. 'The look in their eyes is mostly melancholy or reserved ... The question is what to make of the knowledge that these are prisoners, if all we know about them are names and dates. What does this project tell us about the way society looks at "others"? The photos show vulnerable, lonely men and women, thrown into relief by their chosen backgrounds ... Is it too far fetched to argue that *Portraits in Prisons* shows Foucault's criticism is still relevant? That the neat, spotlessly clean lines of prison cells and the exercise yards are so many poignant illustrations of a doomed system?' (Visser, quoted in Gariglio 2007).

Prison(er) photography therefore fits into a longer visual tradition of portraying the lower sections of society that has existed since at least the eighteenth-century (Shesgreen 2002; Hitchcock 2004). Drawings and paintings of debtors, paupers, vagrants, drunks, and 'lunatics' by William Hogarth, Thomas Rowlinson, and Theodore Gericault joined the woodcuts and public broadsides which depicted the hangings at Tyburn (Bates 2014; Crone 2012) in order to reveal (and also parody, to use as illustrations of immorality, or to satirize social policy) the lives of the poor. Readers seeking more knowledge about the condemned could also buy the Ordinary

(the chaplain) of Newgate's accounts, which recounted tales of the poor unfortunates who were condemned to be executed (see Gatrell 1996). The accounts outlined the twists of fate and moral failings that had brought the prisoner to the shadow of the gallows and could be seen to be the first popular set of accounts of the lives of convicted criminals. These biographies and broadsides provided a visual and literary foundation for nineteenth century social investigation to build upon.

Although attempting to be more systematic in their approach, devising categories, and so on, social investigators such as Henry Mayhew were also keen to visualise the people and lives they were examining. Between 1851 and 1861, Mayhew carried out an investigation into the lives of London's working classes (including a volume on a selected group of individuals who labored at the margins of society that the Victorians came to call the 'criminal classes'). In *London Labour and the London Poor*, Mayhew drew pen portraits of the 'soiled doves', fallen angels, street-sellers, beggars, vagrants, flower-girls, and tramps that he met in London. However, what made Mayhew interesting is that he interviewed over a hundred Londoners and gave his readers an idea of the lives of working people – and what circumstances in their lives had brought them to their particular social situation. He even showed a remarkable degree of sympathy for those who found themselves in dire straits because of their infirmity or some kind of malevolent misfortune (Quennell 1951). His work, of course, also helped to create the preconditions for the emergence of the criminal classes (Chesney 1970; Godfrey, Lawrence and Williams 2007). One could see Mayhew's work as useful in explaining the lives of poor laboring Londoners, or assisting in the creation of a set of myths about a core of criminals preying on respectable society. Either way, it was his in-depth approach to the personal histories of the people he interviewed that began to create an interest in the reasons why some people had ended up in trouble with the police and the courts, a theme which was taken up by criminologists in the late nineteenth-century.

### The New Romantics

The origins of scientific criminology, emerging in the decades after Mayhew was producing his four-volume study, was steeped in notions of degeneracy. Lombroso's theories, which became popular in the 1870s and 1880s, legitimated the control, surveillance, and control of habitual criminals and the 'weak-minded'. This punitive approach directed but did not completely dominate early criminological theory. Many

people working in the nineteenth century criminal justice system were infused with Christian notions of reformation and rehabilitation. Police Court Missionaries were sent by the Methodist church to aid defendants in the magistrates courts; Reformatories and Industrial Schools were established for children who had been criminalized, or who were vulnerable, were usually run or funded by churches and faith communities; and penal reformers were often involved in religious organisations (Vanstone 2004). Of course religious-inspired theories, laden with heavy moral overtones, could be equally or even more punitive and damaging, but they did at least allow for the possibility of reformation (usually focused on straightening out wayward youth). Many modern criminologists, although they tend to be more secular as a group, have adopted a similar approach. The work of Tony Parker (1994), for example, is emblematic of an intention to produce a better future for people who have had a bad start in life; the work of Shadd Maruna (2001), Fergus McNeil (2010) and Stephen Farrall (2002), and all of the other desistence experts, all attempt to explain rather than condemn the actions of offenders. They all place considerable emphasis on the possibility of reform; of good coming from bad; of lives being ‘remade’. Other social scientists have played an active part in the criminal justice system as Parole Board members (criminologist Anne Worrall), discharged prisoner aid society leaders (crime historian Graeme Dunstall), as magistrates (criminologist Rod Morgan), and in other roles (albeit working through an imperfect system) that make a difference to defendants’ and prisoners’ lives. This is evidence of a strong strand of rehabilitative hope that has run through criminology for the last 150 years: a redemptive impulse which encourages some criminologists to recover the good in lives which are troubled, or ‘ruined’.

This essay argues that historians of crime perhaps are perhaps even more susceptible to this tendency to want to ‘repair lives’, but why? After all they cannot influence the lives they study – those people are beyond help. The lives they study can, however, be interpreted and reinterpreted in order to reveal details which show another side to those deemed criminal, vagrant or weak. The historian holds the power to bring a perspective to the lives they study which rescues them from the ‘enormous condescension of posterity’ (Thompson 1963: 12). Recently many historians have adopted a life-course cradle-to-grave approach to the study of criminality which has significantly increased the ability to understand and reinterpret the lives (rather than episodes of criminality within a person’s life) of people whose biographies would

otherwise be neglected, forgotten, or ignored. This approach is holistic and takes in all of the features of a person's life, not just their criminal careers, and does so from the time they were born till the time they died. For example a study of drug addiction in 1920s to 1960s America used long qualitative interviews to chart how people fell into addiction and how they survived the process despite the adverse impact drug use had on their family lives and employment prospects (Courtwright and Des Jarlais 1989). The researchers could well have illustrated their interviews with photographs from Asnin's photographic essay on the decline of 'Uncle Charlie' from familiar family member to multiple-addicted shell of a man (Asnin 2012): 'Uncle Charlie says he never had a friend. That no one listened then, and no one listens now. After thirty years of photographing him, I am the last guy standing, the only constant in Charlie's life. My uncle was born into dysfunction ... but he survived. Through it all, he survived (Asnin 2012: 401). Like Uncle Charlie, the people interviewed by Courtwright and Des Jarlais are survivors. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart's work with Lucy Frost (1997) has examined the lives of transported convicts, many of whom survived their experiences in the penal colony, and went on to thrive in their new homes (see <http://foundersandsurvivors.org>). Godfrey, Cox and Farrall's *Criminal Lives* (2007) charted every significant event in the lives of habitual offenders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They showed how persistent offenders in northwest England survived the criminal justice system and turned their lives around. The whole-life, or biographical, or life-course approach (for it has many terms, see Godfrey 2011, 2015) really forces historians to see periods of offending as unusual and secondary in the lives of most offenders. It emphasizes the humanity of the subject under study – the criminal – and encourages a sympathetic and empathetic response. This does not make the biographical method better history than other forms of enquiry (see Richardson and Godfrey 2003; Godfrey and Richardson 2004), and, indeed, it can actually lead a researcher to downplay or ignore the experiences of some offenders who do not desist from crime, but it does indulge the desire to repair the lives of historic offenders.

### **How do crime historians repair lives?**

There are now quite a large number of researchers using whole-life biographical methods (Williams 2014; Chamberlain 2012; Turner 2009; Cox *et al* 2014; and projects such as the Leverhulme Trust funded *Aftercare*). Using data collected from

various sources, it is possible to re-construct a chronological series of events which occurred in one person's life (marriage, birth of children, death of relatives, and so on), and their work-careers and their various changes of addresses (which charted changes in employment status, or type, as well as the addresses at which people resided throughout their lives), and also a full offending history, with details of punishment, and so on.<sup>3</sup> This information enables calculation, for individual offenders, of the progress of their criminal careers, their periods of incarceration, their employment careers, life events such as marriage, death of parents, and other significant life events. It shows the interplay between criminal episodes and other parts of life, and also shows that criminal careers were often much shorter than was assumed by the public and the media. It also facilitates an assessment of the impact of wars, and significant changes in the local and national economy (which, of course, affected people across England and Wales, but which may have impacted differentially on ex-offenders). Critically, therefore, it illustrates how socio-economic policies impacted upon individual lives. The biographical methodology also produces interesting and compelling life-stories of people who were subject to the criminal justice system in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries which can engage the academic but also non-professional audiences (Cox *et al* 2015). The following three examples illustrate the kinds of stories that emerge with this methodology:

\* Ellen Whaling was born in 1838 in County Tipperary, Ireland. When she was a teenager she was possibly (the records are imperfect) imprisoned in Cheshire for concealing the birth and subsequently the death of her baby. As inmate No.1042, aged twenty-three, she entered Prestwich County Lunatic Asylum in Cheshire, a single woman with no children. When she was released twelve years later she was convicted for a string of assaults and drunkenness. These minor crimes resulted in short periods of imprisonment in Knutsford House of Correction, but when she was convicted on an indictable offence (robbery of 10 shillings from the person of Robert Allmark) she was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude at Knutsford Sessions. On reception at Millbank Prison she was described as having a sallow complexion, grey hair, blue eyes, 5ft ½ inch, spare build, with a long face. She had lost the roof of her mouth which caused an impediment in her speech. There were two vaccination marks on her right arm, a scar on left leg from a dog bite, small cut mark on left eyebrow, several teeth deficient. She had palpitations of the heart, and had suffered from syphilis for

fifteen years (which explains the condition of her mouth). She did, however, have a healthy heart and a sound mind, so was adjudged to be of fair health. In 1881 she was released from penal servitude on licence, and for the next two years she worked as a domestic servant when she could find work, and she was periodically convicted of indecency and drunkenness in Chester, Manchester and Liverpool. She was probably sleeping rough at times, and was certainly roaming around the north west of England with poor prospects. In July 1883 she was convicted at Liverpool Sessions of stealing a purse at Widnes and given five years penal servitude followed by another five years of police supervision<sup>4</sup>. In 1886 she was again released on licence to a Discharged Prisoners Aid Society, but was quickly back before the courts (this time for uttering counterfeit coins, for which she received two months' gaol). In 1891, aged fifty, she was back in Prestwich County Lunatic Asylum, where she remained until she died. She had endured a difficult start to her life, and a sad end.

\* William John Stinton moved out of his widowed mother's house in St Pancras, London, to establish a new home with his wife Hannah Eliza. Aged 27 in 1868 Eliza gave birth to their son, John, and Samuel followed two years later. In 1874 another son was born to the couple, and William became a house painter. The family lived in Grebe Street, St Pancras, and, if the regular birth of children is an indication, they seemed happy. Something must have gone badly wrong with the relationship by 1879 because John was charged with the murder of his wife. Eventually tried at the Old Bailey for manslaughter, he was convicted and sentenced to ten years penal servitude. Over the next few years the petitions he made to the Secretary of State from prison threw a little light on the turbulent relationship between William and Hannah. He alleged that his wife had been a drinker, very provocative towards him, and made other remarks that indicated that there had been a long history of arguments between the couple. His grounds for mitigation of his sentence were refused. He then wrote a series of letters pleading for his eleven year old son, who was now in a Dr. Barnado's Home, not to face emigration to Canada. After some time the Wanderers' Home agreed that they would look after the boy until William was released from prison. That happened on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1887 when he was licensed to the St Giles Christian Mission in Holborn. Before release, however, the prison Medical Officer had noted that William had a blue line on his gums indicating that he was suffering from lead poisoning (possibly from the lead in the house-paint he used). The disease must have

taken a grip, for two years later he was a blind inmate of Camberwell House Asylum. He died in the asylum aged fifty-three, and never had the chance to be re-united with his son.<sup>5</sup> His was a story of three ruined lives.

It is not just tales of misery, madness and recidivism that interests crime historians, however. Indeed it is the recovery of good lives from the ruins of a poor start in life that has come to consume a certain section of the crime history community. For researchers who want to investigate the mechanisms that encouraged rehabilitation, the life histories of people such as Mary Haydock are very important:

\* Mary Haydock from Bury, Lancashire, ran away from her life as a domestic servant in the late eighteenth-century. Dressed as a boy she stole a horse, but was quickly caught and indicted for trial in August 1791. She was sentenced to seven years' transportation, and was carried to Australia on the *Royal Admiral* in October 1792. She married Thomas Reibey, a free settler to Sydney; and the couple were granted farm land on the Hawkesbury River, where he and Mary lived and farmed following their marriage. The Reibeys established a business on the river, which was so successful that it allowed them to buy up several farms on the Hawkesbury River, where they traded in coal, cedar, furs and skins. Indeed, as the company expanded, and they took on partner, the business traded internationally. When Thomas died in 1811, Mary became sole-carer for the children and manager of various business enterprises. Her businesses thrived, and she acquired considerable wealth, which she was happy to spend on philanthropic works, investing in charities and supporting religious enterprises. Mary recovered her name to such an extent, that she became a well-known Sydney resident and is now celebrated as an early Australian citizen on the twenty-dollar bill. Convict iconography is not depicted on the bank-note, but she remains an example of a life which could easily have been ruined by her court-imposed sentence. Many transported people did not cope well in their new lands, and again ended up in trouble or became destitute (see Godfrey & Cox 2008). However, Mary's recovery from an unfortunate start in life illustrates that, for some at least, reform was a possibility.

Biographies like Mary's are vital to criminologists investigating onset into, and desistence from, a life of offending. They provide evidence to support theories of desistence which emphasise the importance of forming a meaningful relationship,

gaining some financial capital (usually through employment), and finding a purpose in life. Since Mary's life features all of those factors, and since, unlike many other ex-convicts, she manages not to commit any further offending, her story lends some credence to these theories (supported by further historical work using biographical research methods Godfrey *et al* 2007, 2010).

The ability to survey the whole life-course allows historians to explain why the lives of individuals may have taken particular directions. The focus for crime historians has been to examine why some people ended up in court, and what happened to them after punishment. The lives of the poor can then be contextualized; their 'moral failings' and hereditary weaknesses' revealed as prejudicial labels for people with low financial and social capital who were unable to respond to the inequalities of the prevailing socio-economic system. Biographical methods can transform how lives are seen, and therefore how evidence for changing social policy can be formed and promoted. Is this not what crime historians have always attempted to do; indeed has this theoretical and methodological approach been the dominant drive for 'history from below' for the past forty years or so? In the 1970s and 1980s, historians such as Douglas Hay, E. P. Thompson and Raphael Samuel all brought a human focus to the huge economic and legal changes that swept through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society. Studies published in the last fifteen years, for example, by Shore (1999), Davies (2009), Rogers (2014), Brown (2003) and many other social and crime historians, all seem to have continued this tradition. The analysis of the whole life-course of individuals and the representation of those lives in ways which humanize the poor and disadvantaged and make visible the challenges which shaped their lives, is, in essence, an attempt to retrospectively 'rescue' lives.<sup>6</sup> With the possibility of many more biographies of the poor and vulnerable becoming available, it is likely that biographical research methodologies and the tradition of producing human-focused work will continue to inform crime history to a considerable extent; and to enable the redemptive impulse to be used to rescue thousands of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century lives.<sup>7</sup>

### Ruin-fatigue

Commercial organisations such as Ancestry and Find My Past have published enormous amounts of personal data on criminals, prisoners, paupers, workhouse inhabitants, victims of crime, and so on, dating (mainly) from the nineteenth century

onwards. Additionally the Old Bailey Online website contains details of all trials carried out at London's Central Criminal Court between 1674 and 1913, nearly two hundred thousand criminal trials, or to put it another way, details of over a million defendants, victims, and witnesses, all available for free public perusal. The Old Bailey data is currently being added together with biographical data from records of transported convicts (in the Founders and Survivors database); from the records of licensed British convicts (1853-1914); and from other extant un-digitised record sets, to form The Digital Panopticon ([www.digitalpanopticon.com](http://www.digitalpanopticon.com)). This is a huge amount of biographical data and detail about prisoners and ex-convicts that will be available from 2017. Each of the biographies constructed by Godfrey *et al* (2007, 2010) using digital resources taken from existing disparate websites and from archived criminal records, took about a day each to prepare (sometimes longer). Since then the large-scale digitization of criminal records, and their availability on a number of websites, has altered the research landscape considerably. The liquidity of digitally-enabled biographical research methods means that thousands of life-stories can be put together from easily available online resources in a fraction of that time. Many tens, even hundreds, of life-histories could be accessed and constructed in a single day using the Digital Panopticon website. This is biographical research on an industrial scale. That this data 'recovers' and pieces-together the lives of the most dispossessed and criminalized in society is remarkable. We will know more about eighteenth and nineteenth-century prisoners than we do about prisoners serving time today.

Online digitized data has the power to transform crime historical research – liquefying historical research. The scale of digital data, and the speed with which it can be accessed, have engendered new forms of crime history which have the capacity to shift the theory and practice of history with a rapidity hitherto not encountered. Whereas traditional forms of historical enquiry use data for academic research, liquid crime history is also very much concerned with the production of data for the general public. This democratization of data allows all viewers to interpret the data for themselves, and re-interpret what the academic experts have posited. However, the speed and scale of these more liquid forms of criminological and historical enquiry raise some interesting ethical questions for those historians who have used the biographical method to analyse, recast, and 'rescue' ruined lives. For example, the paintings of ruined buildings hanging in art galleries provoke contemplation of entropy, decay, fading glories, mortality and a whole host of

concepts which no doubt intrigue the viewer. How would viewers perceive an art gallery which had thousands (maybe tens of thousands) of similar images on its walls? Surely they would be overwhelming in the same way as thousands of digitally-rendered biographies would be? Do the websites which reveal which reveal a wealth of biographical data on thousands of ‘ruined-lives’ risk engendering ‘ruin-fatigue’? Might compassion and understanding dry up when confronted with this avalanche of misery? Will web-surfers flick through digitalized life after digitized life until they find cases which suit their theoretical position; will researchers and students search for cases which are interesting, or pathetic, or funny, rather than those which are typical (or atypical)? How will the new digital entrepreneurs protect the interests of those offenders and ex-offenders who appear on the websites (or the rights of their descendants, see Richardson and Godfrey 2003)? What safeguards are there against overfamiliarity breeding contempt? Can the liquidity and speed of the new ways of accessing biographical data digitally be used to produce ethical and progressive research? These are all issues that the new digital entrepreneurs will have to consider.

## **Conclusion**

Troubled lives are a mainstay of modern popular culture. The media are replete with stories of people who have fallen from grace and also with tales of dysfunctional families. Historians take the high road but travel in the same direction, as this article has shown. Even if we want to use digital online evidence of people’s poor start in lives to explain onset into criminality; or show that poor life situations can prolong criminal careers, we can not guarantee that the data we use is not also used for prurient entertainment. The more that we democratize our data by placing it online, the greater risk there is that people will access many hundreds of ‘ruined lives’ without understanding the social and political context which has shaped those lives – and which explains why and how people found themselves in terrible situations. Indeed, website visitors might just ignore some stories, those of ex-offenders that viewers find beyond the pale for example (it is all very well to sympathise with minor offenders who suffered disproportionately harsh punishments, but some may have little sympathy for those imprisoned for sexual offences, or offences against children). For those who remade their lives after serving sentences for rape, for example, sympathy and empathy may be hard to find. The explanatory essays that accompany some websites certainly help to reduce that risk, as does the use of online data in

teaching modules, in academic articles, and in genealogical research. Biographical methodologies encourage more rounded and nuanced appreciations of people's lives; and the new liquid forms of digital history provide and utilize a huge amount of data for academics, journalists, and genealogists to popularize more empathetic portrayals of the poor and vulnerable. The thousands of digital online biographies risk ruin-fatigue, but because they are rich in detail they should demonstrate that categories such as 'the criminal classes', 'the underclass', and the 'criminal families' belie a considerable amount of differentiated experience. From the huge number of digital lives, the individual will emerge. Ultimately the new liquid forms of historical enquiry will reveal that the lives of offenders and ex-offenders were as full of joy as misery; as much rehabilitation as recidivism; and that they were also full of family relationships, employment, social life, and so on. It will show that criminality was not embedded within the whole life-times of most offenders, nor within criminal families, or was due to 'criminal genes' in some way. The more opportunities that can be provided for academics, museum curators and website designers to use biographical data, the greater the chance of undermining easy assumptions about the lives of the poor, and the less chance of ruin-fatigue. Historians are finding more and more routes to public-engagement, and, given the public fascination with stories of ruined lives, biographical research and liquid crime history could provide a route for greater public understanding of the ways people overcome difficult circumstances to lead successful lives.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the comments of Ruth Lamont, Zoe Alker and Lucy Williams on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, many other strands that combine to form the discipline of criminology – some which are more scientific, or cultural, or administrative, and so on.

<sup>3</sup> The most important sources of further information on our sample of offenders were: census returns from 1841–1911 censuses (providing details of the residence, family status, and occupation of each person we searched for); online birth, marriage, and death indices (detailing if and when our offender was married and had children, and when he or she died); military records (mainly referring to the First World War; including service records—which, in turn, included disciplinary breaches—medal indices, and pensions details); court records (listing charges, whether or not they were found guilty, some details of the offence they had been charged with, and any sentence imposed. Importantly, these documents also recorded the antecedent criminal history of each person appearing before the courts); British Library nineteenth-century newspapers online; *The Times* digital archive; and the *Guardian* digital archive (listing trial reports, as well as commentaries about particular offenders—in a few cases—and public opinion about crime and habitual offending); TNA (national archives) records. These records included: Home Office records such as criminal registers (HO26 and HO27), which preserve details of offenders from 1805–1892; Metropolitan Police records, including habitual criminal registers (MEPO 6), which contain details of criminals as defined by sections 5 to 8 of the Prevention

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of Crimes Act 1871; and Prison Commission records such as prison registers (PCOM 6), which contain details of all prisoners held at various English prisons from 1856 onwards.

<sup>4</sup> Since the 1860s there had been attempts to keep a watchful eye over released convicts, at least for the period they were released on license. The 1869 Habitual Offender Act and the Prevention of Crime Act of 1871 extended this power by giving the sentencing Judge the power to order a set period of police supervision for persistent offenders. On release from prison, supervisees were required to report to the police, inform them every fortnight of where they were residing. If any person under supervision re-offended, consorted with thieves and prostitutes, or could not prove they were making an honest living, they could be imprisoned for up to a year. Police supervision was finally abandoned in the 1930s.

<sup>5</sup> Stintson's story is one of many ruined lives: his, his wife's and his sons, some of whom may have ended up in institutions similar to those analysed by Alker, Cox, Godfrey and Shore. They are currently tracing the lives of children institutionalized in the early to late nineteenth century for a Leverhulme Trust funded study. Upon release some of these children, many incarcerated for playing truant or committing petty thefts, were discharged to the armed forces. The fourteen and fifteen year olds released during World War One period quickly found themselves fighting for their lives on the Somme, at Ypres, and on the Western Front. Most died. More ruined lives.

<sup>6</sup> Although there is no concept of finding beauty in flawed lives or objects in the West, the Japanese aesthetic tradition of Wabi-sabi which stresses the acceptance of imperfection, asymmetry, and flawed human nature, has been an important element of Japanese and Chinese philosophy (Powell 2004). Allied to Wabi-sabi, and perhaps more analogous to the attempts of crime historians to recover ruined lives, Kintsugi is a philosophy that considers the flawed or imperfect in a way but does not attempt to hide the imperfection; indeed the repair is a visible addition (or beautification) of the flaw. It celebrates longevity and resilience by acknowledging that over the lifetime of an object, damage can occur, and it can be mended.

<sup>7</sup> There are other forms of social history which are also coming to the fore, quantitative crime history for example. It is not healthy for any one approach to become dominant, and the richer the mix of methods employed, the more likely we will produce robust and important publications in this area.