

CRIME AS AN ALIBI

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THE bus conductor knew where the prison was, of course. 'I suppose you'll be a visitor', he remarked, with the beginning of a smile. 'I see them every day, lots of them—visitors, I mean. I reckon there'd be a good deal less nonsense in the papers if the reporters had my job. Crime doesn't just mean blokes behind bars: it's mothers and brothers and wives. We're all of us in it one way or another, I reckon.'

The bus conductor was right. The frowning walls of a Wandsworth can be society's final alibi: the publicly condemned, out of sight, out of mind unless there's a riot or an execution, are hostages to many of our miseries and reflect much more than the crimes they have committed. This is not to deny their responsibility nor to condone the violence that, since the war and especially among young criminals, has become so grievous a social problem. And sentimentality is in this context the worst of counsellors. Yet the isolation of crime, of which the very structure of a prison is the symbol, can mask its further meaning. To arrest the wrongdoer, to demand his exclusion from society, satisfies the natural need of society to be protected from its aggressors. And punishment must remain a sanction to vindicate the claims of law. Yet for a Christian conscience the crimes of the member are the affair of the whole body. 'All mankind is in Christ one man, and the unity of Christians is one Man', St Augustine reminds us, and the shared life of the Body does not cease when the members rebel.

But who are criminals? In one sense every one of us. A few years ago the Catholic boys in a Borstal took exception to the revised version of a popular mission hymn, which (perhaps due to its author's exigencies in handling rhyme) used to run:

Jesu! my Lord, behold at length the time

When I resolve at last to turn away from crime.

The new text, more intelligibly, speaks of

'the day

When I resolve from sin to turn away'.

Perhaps the Borstal boys were right, and a community in crime,

in the sense of our capacity to sin, is certainly an important link between 'them' and 'us'. But prison sentences are not awarded for moral guilt, and if moral guilt were punished by imprisonment one may suppose that most of us would have long sentences to serve. It is an irrelevance, certainly, to say that criminals may often be morally less culpable than many of the respectable. But the context, for the Christian, must always be larger than that which the courts can alone recognize, and our attitude to crime must in the end be deeply affected by our attitude to man as made by God, which is to say as made to live among men.

Of recent years a great deal has been done to provide the evidence for a sociology of crime. Elaborate studies of the criminal population in terms of psychology, environment and social function, have made it possible to analyse the factors that seem to make for crime. And in the case of juvenile offenders such research should do much to assist the preventive work in which lies the principal hope for the future. Among the aspects of contemporary life in Britain, the development of the Welfare State is of first importance in its effect on social behaviour. The implications of full employment and a comprehensive system of free education and social services are as yet scarcely realized, but it is clear that utopian hopes of universal welfare, once the grosser aspects of poverty, ignorance and disease were done away, are still far from being fulfilled. Indeed, the irony is that with the increasing benevolence of the State there seems to be an increasing irresponsibility, especially in a want of respect for authority and an increase in violence. The lack of discipline among boys in their last years at school and in the period before their call-up for conscription is not essentially new, but its social consequences are more grave than ever before.¹

It is easy to say that crime on its recent scale is a post-war

1 *The Trial of Craig and Bentley* in the 'Notable British Trials Series' (Hodge, 1952) provides some sad evidence. Both boys were of respectable families, both were virtually illiterate and both showed a callousness and determination in crime which, while fortunately rare in the tragedy of its results, is yet characteristic enough of many boys sentenced to Borstal. As Craig's counsel put it at the trial, 'Christopher Craig has become a symbol of wayward youth; the nation's uneasiness and anxiety about the state of their youth have become focused upon him'. Unfortunately the special circumstances of this trial for murder unleashed a wave of sensational and ill-informed generalizations about juvenile crime, and as usual the popular press, under the guise of moral indignation, pandered to the morbid curiosity which revels in the effect of a crime but cares nothing about its true causes.

phenomenon, and indeed the swollen figures of the years 1946-1949 have now notably receded. And the usual catalogue of such factors as broken homes, the decline in religion and moral standards, the inadequacy of police recruitment, the influence of horror comics and gangster films can be cited with reason. But behind these disparate items lies a deeper malady which the statistician and the sociologist can scarcely discover or describe. It can be called 'public opinion', but that at once suggests the outraged protests at particular enormities: the mood of the Sunday papers, in fact. Crime is symptomatic of society as a whole: it is not just a malignant growth without cause or consequence, but rather an extreme expression of the life of the community or rather of that community's organic weaknesses.

This may seem a pessimistic diagnosis, but it is the failure to relate crime to its true cause—to make of crime an alibi, in fact, by which indignation at the criminal's wickedness can mask the general mood that makes it possible—it is this failure which lies at the root of most 'enquiries'. As with so much else besides, it might be said that we get the crime we deserve, for 'crime' is the public and discernible expression of a flaw in society itself and ultimately that means original sin and its effects as stimulated in a society that has increasingly abandoned the moral sanctions which govern men's obedience to law.

There is, it has already been suggested, one aspect of contemporary life which has a special importance here. Universal conscription is as yet so new in English life that its effects can scarcely be measured. But, whatever military justification there may be for conscription in peace time (and on this matter there are divergencies of opinion even among the military experts themselves), there can be no question of its consequences on the social life of the country. There are many who maintain that conscription is in fact an important solvent of class distinctions, that almost all conscripts are improved physically by their two years' service, that in any case the abandonment of conscription would upset the carefully-balanced economy of the country and would mean an end of full employment.

But on the other side of the account there are undoubtedly features of service life which encourage the weak to turn to the easy resorts of 'scrounging' and that attitude of indifference to 'public' property which, translated into civilian terms, can mean

something more sinister. And it can scarcely be supposed that, for instance, the techniques of commando training are not, for some, a training for violence later on. The question here is not to discuss the moral legitimacy of conscription but merely to suggest that the price of a necessity (if it be such) of this sort can produce some uncomfortable results, if only in a small minority. And there are problems of great difficulty involved in the uncertainty of the seemingly pointless years between leaving school and the call-up as well as in the readjustment of the National Serviceman to civilian life at the age of twenty or so. Once more, a realistic inspection of the causes of crime cannot afford to ignore such questions as these, produced as they inevitably are by the lamentable state of uneasy peace which now seems to be our permanent lot.²

In the end society's attitude to crime must depend on its attitude to itself. For the recognition that disease is only intelligible in terms of the organism that is affected must mean more than outraged protest and unspecified complaint. It means, in fact, seeing the very dilemma of our present condition for what it is: existing as we seem to be on the edge of a disaster beyond all imagining, we can scarcely be surprised if some of the neuroses such a condition creates should develop into crime. There has always been crime, it is true, and sinful nature will not be wholly healed this side of eternity. But Catholics, in particular, knowing as they should what are the limits of human perfectibility, aware of what a corporate responsibility must mean, have a special responsibility. They should interest themselves much more actively in the welfare of prisoners, especially on their return to the life of the community. Perhaps all the individual can do is to help to build up the Body of Christ in the place where he is, in the circumstances he finds. This may not seem a large contribution to the healing of society as a whole, but its effects

2 *Crime and the Services*, by John Spencer (Routledge, 28s.) is a most valuable sociological study, both as to method and as to the conclusions drawn. Dr Spencer's primary concern is with the influence that Service life has on criminal behaviour, and his case-histories are for the most part of ex-Service convicts interviewed in prisons and Borstals. But much of what he says has its relevance to the more general problem of the influence of service in the Armed Forces on potential criminals. Such matters as the habit of forming gangs, the effect of desertion and the difficulty of resuming social contacts in the local community when the period of conscription is over, are important determinants of social behaviour. Dr Spencer's study is of the greatest importance, and, as Dr Hermann Mannheim points out in his introduction, should draw attention to a social grouping which, after the family and the school, is becoming dominant in the national life.

can reach very far. One member of Christ who has been helped to return to a life of Christian peace, to that 'tranquility of order' which owes nothing at last to the material circumstances which the world thinks indispensable for joy—that one member can do much to bring others into the community he has come to love. And the Gospels are a sufficient warning of the folly of judging success by statistics.

THE HART

from the French of Jean de la Ceppède

The hart that's roused by hunters on the wild heath
 Flees to the river, plunges and gains the shore.
 So Jesus, the Jews' quarry, dips in death
 And comes to the other bank to die no more.

The hart's a foe to serpents, they aver,
 Bites, beats them and devours. Jesus destroys
 The coiling Serpent, Death's provisioner,
 And Death itself, and all that it employs

He has devoured, digested, made his own
 As food is turned to increase of blood and bone;
 For he is Life, he lives indeed. To him

As to the hart that leaps in the morning light
 The prophets have trumpeted, have sung delight,
 And we in the same mood his triumph hymn.

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