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The scrapbooking detective: Frederick Porter Wensley and the limits of 'celebrity' and 'authority' in inter-war Britain

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Eloise Moss

The scrapbooking detective: Frederick Porter Wensley and the limits of ‘celebrity’ and ‘authority’ in inter-war Britain*

ABSTRACT: Frederick Porter Wensley was one of Scotland Yard’s ‘Big Four’ detectives, head of the Metropolitan Police Criminal Investigation Department and responsible for establishing the Flying Squad. On his retirement in 1929, he used the two bound scrapbooks of press clippings and photographs he had collated to document his personal life and career to inform his 1931 autobiography *Detective Days* and serialized press articles. Through examining the interaction of material between scrapbooks and autobiographical writings, this article explores how Wensley constructed his post-retirement persona as ‘celebrity detective’ from a canny understanding of what had made him a commercial subject for the press. It argues that Wensley recast his life to promote his own successes at the expense of a narrative of police unity, providing a vehicle for him to suggest further changes to the structure of the police force without official sanction. By juxtaposing this against tightening legislation on police communication with journalists during the inter-war period under the Official Secrets Acts, this article demonstrates how the ‘celebrity’ that Wensley sought to occupy was increasingly regarded as irreconcilable with police ability to effect ‘impartial’ regulation, anticipating the concerns raised by the 2012 Leveson Inquiry into the Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press. The article thus charts a turning point in defining the relationship between police and press.

KEYWORDS: authority; celebrity; censorship; life-writing; police; press; scrap-books

In February 1931, the *Daily Express* featured a book review of the latest ‘detective autobiography’ to be written by a former officer of the famous Criminal Investigation Department (CID) at Scotland Yard, the Metropolitan Police’s headquarters. Entitled

*I am grateful to Stefan Dickers at the Bishopsgate Institute for first drawing my attention to Wensley’s scrapbooks and for his subsequent support for this project. Emma Robinson, great-granddaughter of Frederick Porter Wensley, and her husband, David Robinson, kindly met me to discuss Wensley’s life; their insights into his character

and the creation of the scrapbooks were invaluable. Thanks to Kate Imy, Will Pooley, the journal’s editors and reviewers for their perceptive ideas and constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article. This research was undertaken with funding from my Past and Present Fellowship (2013–14) at the Institute of Historical Research.

‘A detective classic’, the review extolled to readers the character of Superintendent Frederick Porter Wensley, whose memories of famous crimes and criminals they would be buying:

It is not only that Mr Wensley tells these and many other stories with the inside knowledge that no one else possesses, but he manages – without in any way trying to do it – to stamp on every page of his book the impress of his own solid English character. ... So it is a very human detective that appears in this book.¹

Frederick Porter Wensley wanted to be famous. *Detective Days: The Record of Forty-two Years' Service in the Criminal Investigation Department*, the autobiography to which the reviewer referred, was the culmination of a life's work.² Wensley had built up a phenomenally successful police career, graduating from patrolling the beat in London's impoverished East End district to becoming head of the CID in 1924, in the process capturing some of the period's most famous murderers, burglars and confidence tricksters.³ Simultaneously, he had carefully charted this rise to prominence through the two bound scrapbooks of press cuttings and photographs he had kept on his life and police work since the early 1890s; an activity that enabled Wensley to analyse what qualities made him and his colleagues good journalistic ‘copy’.⁴ This scrapbooked material not only informed his autobiography, but also an accompanying series of pre-publication articles in the *Sunday Express* that were later recycled into numerous articles in other publications.⁵ Yet the *Express* reviewer's comment on the resulting public persona Wensley presented in his life-writing – ‘a very human detective’ – underscores a fundamental contradiction in the two roles Wensley sought to occupy. How did one become a ‘celebrity detective’? How was the

¹Bishopsgate Library and Archives (henceforth BLA), WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947), ‘A detective classic’, *Daily Express* (6 February 1931), 13.

²F. P. Wensley, *Detective Days: The Record of Forty-two Years' Service in the Criminal Investigation Department* (London, 1931).

³R. M. Morris, ‘Wensley, Frederick Porter (1865–1949)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2010); online edn, May 2012, <http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/90014> (accessed 28 March 2014).

⁴BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929); BLA, WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947).

⁵BLA, WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947), F. P. Wensley, ‘The man who caught the murderers’, *Sunday Express* (5 October 1930); ‘Mrs Thompson: a marvellous actress who failed at the vital moment’, *Sunday Express* (5 October 1930); ‘The murderers in Houndsditch and the battle of Sidney Street’, *Sunday Express* (12 October 1930); ‘Wensley reveals the Flying Squad in action’, *Sunday Express* (19 October 1930); ‘How we trapped “The Spider”’, *Sunday Express* (19 October 1930); ‘Wensley on the psychology of murder’, *Sunday Express* (26 October 1930); ‘Thorne, the smiling

assassin who attempted the perfect crime’, *Sunday Express* (26 October 1930); ‘Stinie Morrison: was the real murderer executed in America?’, *Sunday Express* (2 November 1930); ‘Duel for a life that was lost — and won’, *Sunday Express* (2 November 1930); ‘The 13th burglar was a woman’, *Sunday Express* (9 November 1930); ‘The headless body was found on Friday’, *Sunday Express* (16 November 1930); ‘An artist in blackmail’, *Sunday Express* (23 November 1930); ‘The murder in room thirteen’, *Sunday Express* (30 November 1930); ‘Wensley steps right into real melodrama’, *Sunday Express* (7 December 1930); ‘Murder caused by a woman's vanity’, *Sunday Express* (14 December 1930); ‘Wensley poses as a “mug”’, *Sunday Express* (21 December 1930); ‘Chicago thrills in London’, *Sunday Express* (4 January 1931); ‘Don't fear the burglar!’, *Sunday Express* (11 January 1931); ‘Sherlock Holmes in real life’, *Sunday Express* (18 January 1931), x–xiii, 1–5; BLA WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947), *Sunday Express* articles repeated in *Sunday Chronicle*, *Evening World*, *Bristol Evening News* and *Leicester Evening News*, 6–7, 38–47.

pursuit of 'celebrity' to be reconciled with a professional identity that was supposed to be orientated around public service, collective effort, duty and, perhaps most importantly, authority? The police have historically been supposed to operate as 'impartial' defenders of the law, whose role was implicitly to uphold 'in-' or 'super-' human moral integrity. How, then, could certain officers rub shoulders with ex-crooks by entering what Matt Houlbrook describes as a flourishing inter-war literary market for 'cashing in' on lurid tales of past crimes and the vainglorious assertion of their personal successes?⁶

Of course, it is easy to point out that writing a memoir about one's professional experiences with crime in which the police emerged invariably triumphant hardly counted as 'selling out' one's former colleagues. As Haia Shpayer-Makov and Andrew Davies have asserted, generating positive press accounts of police work was in fact an active concern for officials in police forces during the Edwardian and inter-war periods, necessary for buttressing public belief in police professionalism and rates of arrest.⁷ This was especially felt during the 1920s, when British police faced accusations of being unable to manage a growing gang culture akin to that of Chicago in urban centres like Glasgow, and were also targeted for their alleged 'third degree' tactics in successive scandals over the harsh interrogation of women suspects.⁸ *Detective Days* certainly held a number of themes in common with other inter-war police memoirs that sought to retrieve public confidence in the service. Paul Lawrence, who has made an extensive study of police memoirs published in England and France between 1870 and 1939, has shown that there was a common thread of English police authors espousing the hard work and endurance required to succeed in their chosen career, which was often portrayed as physically taxing rather than focusing on the administrative legwork involved (as stressed in French accounts).⁹ Moreover, in order to dispel the idea that the police often gained too great an intimacy with the seamier side of life in their dealings with criminals (potentially allowing them to manipulate this knowledge to their own ends), memoirs displayed a collective concern for explaining that this familiarity was necessary for police to maintain their surveillance of the 'underworld' and thereby protect the public. All these motifs appear in Wensley's work; yet *Detective Days* also notably lacks a sense of the 'fraternal' bonds and 'institutional loyalty' uniting fellow-officers that Lawrence suggests meant that few such memoirs ever criticized police efficiency.¹⁰ Exceeding his comrades' occasional anecdotes illustrating the 'freedom of discretionary action which police work inevitably entails', Wensley instead made his own skills and ingenuity dominate the narrative, and offered suggestions for

⁶M. Houlbrook, 'Fashioning an ex-crook self: citizenship and criminality in the work of Netley Lucas', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24, 1 (March 2013), 1–30.

⁷H. Shpayer-Makov, 'From menace to celebrity: the English police detective and the press, c. 1842–1914', *Historical Research*, 83, 222 (November 2010), 688–9; A. Davies, 'The Scottish Chicago? From "hooligans" to "gangsters" in inter-war Glasgow', *Cultural and Social History*, 4, 4 (December 2007), 511–27.

⁸Davies, 'Scottish Chicago', *op. cit.*; J. C. Wood, "'The third degree': press reporting, crime fiction and police powers in 1920s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 21, 4 (December 2010), 464–85.

⁹P. Lawrence, "'Scoundrels and scallywags, and some honest men...". Memoirs and the self-image of French and English policemen, c. 1870–1939' in B. S. Godfrey, C. Emsley and G. Dunstall (eds), *Comparative Histories of Crime* (Cullompton, 2003), 132.

¹⁰*ibid.*, 134–8.

far-reaching reforms to improve the organization of the police service (of which more to follow).¹¹

Historians have thus taken for granted the broadly beneficial effects of a greater dialogue between press and police in enhancing police authority, obscuring how this period witnessed a more complex debate about the appropriate *level* of press–police communication as individual officers began to use the media for personal aggrandizement. This article uses the post-retirement media career of ‘celebrity detective’ Frederick Porter Wensley as a case study for how ‘celebrity’ and ‘authority’ progressively became irreconcilable in inter-war Britain. Wensley’s ascendancy to celebrity and attempts to augment this role through his published life-writing were at variance with the ethos of Scotland Yard in a period when, with Home Office support, it introduced legislation to censure and penalize extraneous communication between press and police. Seeking both to stem the leakage of sensitive information to the press and to maintain the public appearance of a unified police force – policing as a collective, harmonious and largely anonymous machine – Scotland Yard’s new edicts did not extend to those who had left the service. But by essentially stigmatizing the ‘celebrity policeman’ as oxymoronic by the end of the inter-war period, these new restrictions forced enterprising ex-detectives like Wensley to align their interests more closely with those of journalists, newspaper editors and publishing agents than those of their former comrades. Constructing a narrative of service that portrayed the detective as ‘hero’, outwitting the most audacious criminals and often eclipsing the talents of fellow-officers in analytical skill, physical endurance and tenacity, Wensley’s memoir ironically criticized police efficiency and questioned the police force’s ability to operate without the leadership of a few exceptional officers. Indeed, the quotation with which this article began indicates the aggressive individualism that marked *Detective Days*. The *Express* reviewer’s comment that Wensley told stories ‘with the inside knowledge *that no one else possesses*’ [author’s emphasis], and had managed to ‘stamp on every page of his book the impress of his own solid English character’ fundamentally undermined the claims of others to have contributed to his success. This article shows that this tension exacerbated the deteriorating relationship between press and police during the inter-war years, as it emerged that the media’s commercial imperatives and the promise of fame could override individual officers’ allegiance to their professional identities and, by extension, their service to the state.

This article compares the agitation for tightening relations between press and police in Metropolitan Police and Home Office files, and in parliamentary debates, with the interaction of material between Wensley’s scrapbooks and his autobiography. In so doing, it explores how the antagonistic attitudes towards the press Wensley expressed in official correspondence during his career belied his harvesting of journalists’ works and favour, exposed in these books. Scrapbooking had become popularized in Britain in the early nineteenth century, with surviving examples including books by society figures such as Maria, Lady Trevelyan (d. 1852) and the mathematician Charles Babbage (d. 1871) consisting of clippings, poems and pictures on topics ranging from the wars

¹¹*ibid.*, 138.

with France to the veneration of men's facial hair.¹² During the 1880s, British newspapers widely reported that American author Mark Twain had invented and patented a 'self-pasting' scrapbook with adhesive already on the pages, which, along with the establishment of professional scrapbook-making businesses in London, suggested that the hobby was becoming a commercialized and more widespread activity.¹³ It seems hardly coincidental that this occurred at the same time as newspapers began to place a greater emphasis on visual culture in their editorial style to augment the sensationalist forms of 'new journalism' then emerging.¹⁴ Energizing a greater dialogue between text and illustration that had obvious parallels with the 'pasticcio' medley of accumulated pictures and snippets of print within the scrapbook, this development made newspapers a cheap and widely available source from which would-be scrapbookers could select suitable material. Further, as Judith Walkowitz notes, the heightened interest in the visual lent particular flavour to press articles dealing with crime and celebrity, both of which relied heavily on the imagery of their subjects to capture readers' interest.¹⁵

Wensley's habit of scrapbooking articles and photographs dealing with these themes, and the way in which he organized this material on the scrapbook page alongside cuttings relating specifically to his own endeavours, therefore connoted more than a handy method of recording his personal and professional triumphs. Instead, Wensley's scrapbooks distilled prevailing (commercially successful) attitudes towards law-makers, law-breakers and idealized forms of masculine behaviour into a format against which his own burgeoning celebrity could be measured both in terms of content and column inches. Although it was common for senior public figures like politicians to ask cuttings agencies to gather newspaper references on themselves into albums in order to monitor their public image, the evidence suggests that Wensley's scrapbooks were originated and compiled personally by him. Despite the wide range of publications represented in the books, the prevalence of press cuttings from the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Evening Standard*, *Morning Advertiser* and *East London Observer* – the last of which Wensley must have frequently encountered on sale locally when walking the beat in London's East End – initially indicate the resources of a single person.¹⁶ Further, interspersed with original photographs of crime scenes, evidence and criminals are those of Wensley and his family in their home and at the local school, St Olave's, as well as obituaries for its

¹²Bodleian Library (henceforth BL), Aleph. No. 014217995, scrapbook formed by Maria, Lady Trevelyan, c. 1818–52; BL, Aleph. No. 016193197, scrapbook of newspaper clippings formed by Charles Babbage, c. 1847.

¹³In 1886 *Reynold's Newspaper* reported on a fire in London at 'Messrs Chapman and Sons, scrapbook makers, 6 and 7 Elizabeth-place, Rivington Street, Shoreditch': see 'Fires in London,' *Reynold's Newspaper* (15 August 1886), 8; 'Mark Twain's latest boon to mankind', *Pall Mall Gazette* (13 May 1889), 7.

¹⁴J. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992), 81–120, 191–228.

¹⁵*ibid.*, 197–204.

¹⁶BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929). Frequency of newspapers as follows: *Morning Advertiser* (101 articles); *Daily Telegraph* (85 articles); *Daily Mail* (58 articles); *East London Observer* (20 articles); *Evening Standard* (20 articles). There are 144 articles from 32 other newspapers, the majority of which comprise pieces relating to Wensley's retirement from police service in 1929 (which attracted a great deal of international press attention and were most probably collected by a press cuttings agency).

headmaster, W. G. Rushbrooke, and reports on the death of Wensley's two sons during the First World War.¹⁷ The punctuation of the two books by these unique fragments of Wensley's private life and immediate familial interests at times sits jarringly amid pages dominated by crime reports. None the less, they attest that the detective was 'writing with scissors', in Ellen Gruber Garvey's evocative phrase, whereby scrapbooking was historically a method of reorganizing and recontextualizing existing information into a new, unique commentary on public and private life.¹⁸

In recent years, historians have begun to interrogate the different *types* of celebrity one could embody in the British inter-war mass media. Current scholarship reveals a commonly accepted, but (as Simon Morgan writes) highly problematic basic definition of celebrity as an individual experiencing a state of 'well-known-ness'. By having their activities, personality and image fostered and projected through the media, celebrities created an imagined sense of intimacy between themselves and onlookers for whom they acted as representatives or 'idols' in as much as appearing to exude qualities that others wished to share.¹⁹ The problem, Morgan writes, is that this definition

... leav[es] moot the questions of who is attributing celebrity status, the division between the celebrity subject's public and private (or 'veridical') persona, and the distinction between celebrity, notoriety and 'renown', the latter being localized or restricted to a particular social network and depending on personal contact, in contrast to the ubiquitous nature of celebrity whose relationship with the public is distinguished by social distance.²⁰

These questions are especially pertinent in regard to the relationship between celebrity derived from, or sought as a facet of, one's occupation, versus celebrity acquired through heredity (i.e. the royal family) or accident (upon being the social actor in a high-profile event like a crime or other crisis). Political celebrity, as Laura Beers and Julie Gottlieb note, could share the same characteristics as those experienced by contemporary Hollywood film stars in the focus of both celebrity and the press on appearance and lifestyle.²¹ However, this could backfire when these aspects obscured politicians' serious messages on issues of national importance. When attempting to pronounce on issues of social responsibility, for example, both the young Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson and fascist leader Oswald Mosely struggled to shed their association with forms of cinematic celebrity identified as more 'frivolous' – like Wilkinson's hairstyle and Mosely's society dinners.²² By attempting to adopt fashionable qualities and thereby attract a generation of newly enfranchised younger voters, inter-war politicians exemplified how the retention of authority was at times inconsistent with the

¹⁷BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929), inside and back covers, ff. 'NOP', 'QRS'.

¹⁸E. Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford, 2013), 21–2.

¹⁹S. Morgan, 'Celebrity: academic pseudo-event or a useful concept for historians?', *Cultural and Social History*, 8, 1 (March 2011), 95–114.

²⁰*ibid.*, 97.

²¹L. Beers, 'A model MP? Ellen Wilkinson, gender, politics, and celebrity culture in inter-

war Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 10, 2 (June 2013), 231; J. Gottlieb, 'The marketing of megalomania: celebrity, consumption, and the development of political technology in the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41, 1 (January 2006), 35–7.

²²Beers, 'A model MP?', *op. cit.*, 239–45; Gottlieb, 'The marketing of megalomania', *op. cit.*, 40–1.

cultivation of fame.²³ ‘Successful’ celebrity therefore meant that the subject’s collusion with the media in the ‘commodification of the self within’ (the phrase is Houlbrook’s) for the purposes of popularity and material gain should not inherently jeopardize the professional or public position by which they were originally defined.²⁴ Instead, it was conditioned by popular understandings of the imaginative distance required to maintain (particularly masculinized, institutional) forms of authority embedded in the relationship between state and citizen. Consequently, this article suggests that while Wensley’s police experience enabled him to situate himself as a commanding authorial voice in his published life-writing, his seeking after fame was necessarily at loggerheads with evolving police constructions of the public authority required to instil discipline.

Wensley’s autobiographical writing can thus be considered as a means of establishing his social credentials, and social mobility, to the reading public as a self-made middle-class man rather than acting as a celebration of his particular profession – laying claim to the ‘cultural capital’ of middle-class tenacity, practicality and initiative that had been idealized in similar published autobiographies since the Victorian period.²⁵ Overcoming or mastering one’s profession, as Robbie Gray noted, was the marker of ‘successful’ masculinity in such works, gesturing at the enduring frustrations middle-class men experienced trying to ‘make their mark on the world’ in a public sphere to which access was increasingly democratized as the century wore on.²⁶ The first section of this article examines the celebrity persona Wensley developed following his retirement from the Metropolitan Police in 1929, informed by the scrapbooked material he had collected since 1890. The article explores the characteristics he appropriated or emphasized for himself and the extent to which they constituted a dialectics of distance and intimacy with prospective readers and former colleagues. It then contrasts this in the second section with the ongoing attempts of senior police and Home Office officials (including Wensley) to consolidate a mutually beneficial, yet increasingly constrained relationship between press and police. This research thereby aims to qualify our understanding of the popular ability to identify with new forms of celebrity culture prevailing in inter-war Britain, and to historicize state efforts to stigmatize the media as a disruptive force in the politics of regulation.

SCRAPBOOKING TO STARDOM

Patrolling London’s East End, encompassing the notoriously poor borough of Whitechapel in which the ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders of 1888–9 were committed, the young Inspector Fred Wensley merited his first press reference from the *Morning Advertiser* in March 1890 in relation to his capture of two women for a robbery at a Salvation Army

²³From 1918, all men over the age of twenty-one and women over the age of thirty were enfranchised, until the 1928 Representation of the People Act introduced universal suffrage for all over twenty-one.

²⁴M. Houlbrook, ‘Commodifying the self within: ghosts, labels, and the crook life-story in

inter-war Britain’, *Journal of Modern History*, 85, 2 (June 2013), 327.

²⁵R. Gray, ‘Self-made men, self-narrated lives: male autobiographical writing and the Victorian middle-class’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 6, 2 (March 2001), 289–91.

²⁶*ibid.*, 298.

house in Hackney.²⁷ Reportedly praised by the magistrate in court for his ‘great intelligence and activity in arresting the prisoners’, whose culpability he had confirmed by eavesdropping on their conversation inconspicuously at a local coffee stall, the young policeman extracted the single short paragraph from a page of text and glued it in his scrapbook for future examination.²⁸ Wensley would go on to use this event, and the flattering quotation, to structure the opening chapter of his autobiography *Detective Days* published in 1931. Characterizing it as ‘a trivial case but it helped excite my ambitions’, the story as retold by Wensley highlighted the reward he had obtained for acting on his intuition, both in terms of the commendation and in a prize of five shillings for his efforts from the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.²⁹ In this account, taking the initiative was a police officer’s only guarantee of distinguishing himself from his colleagues and putting him on the road to promotion as detective. As Wensley reflected, ‘When I reached a position where I often had to consider a detective’s capacity and energy, I found that the best standard by which to judge him was by what he had done ... judges, juries, magistrates, and Commissioners do not consistently praise a man unless he has done good work’.³⁰ If this sounded a little defensive in tone, there is reason to suppose Wensley felt it was necessary. The conventions of the literary genre he had joined by writing a ‘detective autobiography’ were dictated traditionally, as Shpayer-Makov argues, by its authors’ ‘intense identification with their vocation’.³¹ Asserting that Edwardian examples of such works ‘do not exactly constitute life histories but rather work histories’, Shpayer-Makov observes that individual officers’ triumphs were often subsumed beneath ‘the detectives’ self-perception as organic members of the police who have taken on the task of spokesmen for their vocation’.³² Concentrating on how police operated as a team to enforce the law for the public good, Edwardian detectives were known for using their autobiographies to defend the police from press attacks on their inefficiency and the cost of the service to the taxpayer. For Wensley, this was patently not the guiding principle for his work.

Indeed, as Figure 1 shows, by the early 1920s the organization of Wensley’s scrapbook had been honed into a careful juxtaposition of visual and literary sources about himself and broader journalistic commentary on what role and attributes distinguished the ideal detective from others. Creating what Walkowitz describes as a ‘proliferation of meaning’ on the page, the immediate visual impact of no fewer than five portraits of Wensley giving orders at crime scenes, striding from a victim’s grave, and gazing sternly at the viewer or appearing deep in thought in studio portraits appended to press articles, offers a striking commentary on his apparent embodiment of the attributes praised in the surrounding reports. One of these, a May 1920 essay entitled ‘A chief detective for England’ by journalist G. T. Crook, opined:

I would like to see appointed a Chief Detective for England. His business would be to take supreme charge of the investigation into any serious crime committed

²⁷BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929), ‘Dalston’, *Morning Advertiser* (undated), 1. I have dated this clipping from an identical report published in the *Illustrated Police News*: ‘Dalston’, *Illustrated Police News* (8 March 1890), 3.

²⁸*ibid.*

²⁹Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 6–7.

³⁰*ibid.*, 7.

³¹Shpayer-Makov, ‘From menace to celebrity’, *op. cit.*, 288.

³²*ibid.*, 287–9.

Figure 1. Scrapbook page compiled by Frederick Porter Wensley from BLA, WENSLEY/3/1, Scrapbook with News Cuttings (1890–1929), iii (reproduced with the permission of the Bishopsgate Institute).

Figure 2. Detail from BLA, WENSLEY/3/1, Scrapbook with News Cuttings (1890–1929), iii (reproduced with the permission of the Bishopsgate Institute).

in London or any part of the country. He would have to be a man whose detective ability commanded the confidence of provincial as well as London police officers – a man of ripe experience, sound judgement, of virile mind, and cool and swift in action.³³

Comparably, in neighbouring articles ‘The real detective’ and ‘Detectives of the future’ Crook expanded on the qualities required, significantly arguing that ‘I do not say that every detective is a success’ and explaining ‘Detectives are just ordinary human beings. ... Their success will depend largely on their study of mankind. Individual effort, and not the magician’s art, will decide their future.’³⁴ Wensley’s montage of portraits seemed to confirm this. Visibly present at the scene of the action and collaborating energetically with fellow-officers to solve crimes, his individual portraits (see Figures 2 and 3) were posed with harsh lighting to emphasize his distinctive strong-boned facial profile – regarded as a ‘hawk-like’ physical manifestation of his ‘iron will’ and penetrative intelligence by his admirers.³⁵ Similarly, drawing attention to his attendance at the funeral of murder victim Percy Thompson served to highlight his personal dedication to his work. These ‘heroic’ attributes

³³BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929), G. T. Crook, ‘A chief detective for England’, *Daily Mail* (24 May 1920), iii.

³⁴BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929), G. T. Crook, ‘The real detective’, *Daily Mail* (12

November 1919); G. T. Crook, ‘Detectives of the future’, *Daily Mail* (27 May 1920), iii.

³⁵BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929); see, for example, a description of Wensley’s ‘hawk-like face’ in ‘Great record of new CID chief’, *Lloyd’s Sunday News* (4 December 1921), 124.

Figure 3. Detail from BLA, WENSLEY/3/1, Scrapbook with News Cuttings (1890–1929), iii (reproduced with the permission of the Bishopsgate Institute).

and markers of investigative skill then proceeded to be channelled by Wensley in *Detective Days*. For example, in chapter thirteen, describing his involvement in the 1911 case of ‘Clapham Common murderer’ Stinie Morrison, it was Wensley’s unique knowledge of local criminal ‘characters’ and their haunts that was construed as fundamental to justice being served, exceeding the capabilities brought to bear even by his fellow Detective Inspector, Alfred Ward:

‘Fred,’ he [Ward] said, ‘I’ve come along for your help. There was a murder on Clapham Common last night, and we think the man who was killed may be one of your Yiddish friends. The thing looks as stone cold as it is possible to be. ... You’re our only hope.’³⁶

In this recalled exchange, both Ward and the officers assisting him (signalled through the use of ‘we think’) were shown to be simply incapable of pursuing the necessary avenues of enquiry, as it was Wensley’s peculiar experience with, and comprehension of East End life that facilitated the avenues of communication between police and suspects from local racial communities. Henceforth, this impression was magnified as Wensley’s powers of

³⁶Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 110.

recollection promptly identified both victim and potential suspect. ‘As soon as the victim was described to me I remembered him,’ wrote Wensley of the murdered Jewish jeweller, Leon Beron, while his identification of Morrison suggested an almost encyclopaedic, superhuman knowledge of the criminals he encountered: ‘Hazy as the description was it struck a chord in my memory. “I know this man,” I exclaimed. “I have seen him quite recently – within this last month or two. He has not long been out of prison and was reporting here.”’³⁷

It was not just local knowledge of his former beat that was portrayed as distinguishing Wensley from other detectives who had not, like him, risen from the anks.³⁸ His recollection of being invited to assist in investigating the stabbing to death of Percy Thompson in 1922 (when Wensley had risen to Superintendent of the CID) was presented as resulting from a plea by Superintendent Hall of ‘K’ Division that Wensley alone could make the victim’s wife, Edith, talk: ‘Hall added that he had himself seen the woman, but she was very much distressed and he was unable to elicit any more relevant information from her.’³⁹ In contrast, Wensley ‘managed to get her to explain in fair detail what had happened up to the moment just prior to the murder’ and furthermore elicited the crucial information that she had a brother, whose subsequent testimony implicated Edith and her lover Freddy Bywaters in the crime.⁴⁰ As with the Morrison case, following this revelation only Wensley’s individual powers of perception and leadership ensured the couple’s arrest. As Wensley wrote,

The case was one of those which were a striking demonstration of the value of detective superintendents with broad powers in dealing with a complicated criminal problem. I was in a position to see that instant action took place over a wide area without requests and explanations. . . . I used the Flying Squad and the local CID staffs pretty freely.⁴¹

This amounted to a practical, rather than intellectual, delegation of responsibilities. The revelation that Wensley could direct enquiries ‘without requests and explanations’ not only indicated the power with which he was invested as head of the Metropolitan Police CID, but also inferred his own ‘panoptic’ vision of every possible dimension of the case and understanding of how to orchestrate police tactics to suit. The absence of Hall in Wensley’s narrative of co-ordinating these efforts only emphasized the latter’s omnipotence. Genius was in no short supply where Wensley was concerned, for his sending ‘a group of Flying Squad men under my instructions’ to the house of Bywaters’s mother resulted in the discovery of a collection of love letters from Edith to Freddy. The significance of these was realized by Wensley alone: ‘When these came into my hands I did not expect to find in them anything beyond the endearments usual between lovers. But as I read them I could not fail to remark a sinister under-current in some passages.’⁴²

³⁷*ibid.*, 110, 113.

³⁸As Clive Emsley notes, promotion for police recruited from working-class backgrounds in London was restricted during the inter-war years by preferential treatment towards ‘young gentlemen’ of the upper middle and upper classes by Metropolitan Police Commissioners

like Lord Trenchard. See C. Emsley, *The Great British Bobby: A History of British Policing from the 18th Century to the Present* (London, 2009), 223–4.

³⁹Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 223.

⁴⁰*ibid.*, 224–5.

⁴¹*ibid.*, 226.

⁴²*ibid.*, 230–3.

The 'under-current' was a vague allusion that seemed to suggest Edith had put glass in Percy's food and, when referring to romantic literature of the period, fantasizing about what her life would be like if her husband were dead. As it turned out, this was enough to see Edith hanged for incitement to murder along with Bywaters, despite there being no concrete evidence to connect her with the stabbing.⁴³ Although in subsequent years this was regarded as a gross miscarriage of justice, in *Detective Days* Wensley celebrated how his attention to the minutiae of the evidence and ability to infer meaning from seemingly trifling snippets of a suspect's writing had sealed Edith's fate – and clinched his superior talents in comparison with his colleagues.

Setting himself up as the 'hero' of his past professional triumphs was not just a canny post-retirement move on Wensley's part. During the last decade of his career, journalists themselves – whose comments Wensley had meticulously scrapbooked – had begun to mythologize the detective's character, appearance and intellect, eulogizing about his 'capacity and resourcefulness' (*Evening Standard*, 1920), 'eyes which seem to penetrate one's brain' (*Daily Dispatch*, 1921), 'exceptional memory' (*Sunday Express*, 1928) and 'deductive mind informed and ripened by experience' (*Evening News*, 1929).⁴⁴ In perhaps the ultimate accolade, by 1921 journalists were drawing comparisons between Wensley and that colossus of fictional sleuths, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character, Sherlock Holmes.⁴⁵ Elevating Wensley's reasoning abilities to the almost 'magical' yet quintessentially 'modern' and ultra-scientific (as Michael Saler's estimation of Holmes's appeal suggests), the popular alignment of these two figures stood in contrast to previous decades of criticism levelled by newspapers at police officers for lacking the apparent 'brilliance' of the fictional hero.⁴⁶ Indeed, such rhetoric was strikingly at odds with other popular representations of professional detectives during the period after the First World War when, as Clive Emsley notes, inter-war murder mystery fiction consistently portrayed them as 'dullards' by comparison with other well-known fictional amateurs like Agatha Christie's sleuths, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple.⁴⁷ Yet Wensley's growing celebrity already rested in part on such assertions, and his own understanding of this was manifested in the way he recycled the Sherlock Holmes analogy applied to him in his *Sunday Express* pre-publication articles and autobiography. 'Sherlock Holmes in real life' was the tagline of five of the articles he delivered to the *Express* between September 1930

⁴³For an important study of the Thompson case that considers the trial and execution in relation to contemporary fears about the increasing sexual and social agency of women in the 1920s and the imaginative possibilities engendered by reading new romantic fiction like that published by Mills & Boon, see M. Houlbrook, 'A pin to see the peepshow: culture, fiction and selfhood in Edith Thompson's letters, 1921–22', *Past and Present*, 207, 1 (May 2010), 215–49.

⁴⁴BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929), 'Famous sleuth as CID chief', *Evening Standard* (1 December 1920); Acton Lane, 'Wensley of the Yard', *Daily Dispatch* (2 December 1921); 'Detectives in real life', *Sunday Express* (11

March 1928); 'How PC Wensley began', *Evening News* (26 June 1929), 119, 123, 133, 150.

⁴⁵BLA, WENSLEY/3/1 (1890–1929), 'Great record of new CID chief: a Sherlock Holmes in real life', *Lloyd's Sunday News* (4 December 1921), 124.

⁴⁶M. Saler, "Clap if you believe in Sherlock Holmes": mass culture and the re-enchantment of modernity, c. 1890–c. 1940', *Historical Journal*, 46, 3 (September 2003), 604–6; on the negative comparisons drawn between police officers at Scotland Yard and Sherlock Holmes during the Edwardian period, see Shpayer-Makov, 'From menace to celebrity', *op. cit.*, 291–2.

⁴⁷Emsley, *Great British Bobby*, *op. cit.*, 223.

and January 1931, mimicking Wensley's assertions in *Detective Days* that 'The discerning detective is always liable to make a coup in the Sherlock Holmes manner' and that there were 'occasions on which a Sherlock Holmes faculty of quick observation and deduction had proved useful'.⁴⁸ These comparisons may have acquired added potency since the death of Conan Doyle in July 1930. The *Daily Mirror's* obituary of the author betrayed that the novelist's death was greeted as a tragic loss, not merely for his family but also for a nation of Holmes admirers, for whom the accompanying loss of future Holmes stories was almost as great, or possibly even greater a blow. Asserting that 'Holmes will be the medium of his immortality', the *Daily Mirror's* nostalgia for the fictional hero as having 'set a standard by which all other crime stories will be measured' can hardly have escaped the notice of Wensley, whose appropriation of Holmes's traits thereby situated him as the new 'vessel' into which popular affection for the fictional hero could be transferred.⁴⁹

In this light, Wensley's inviting the analogy between himself and Holmes emerges as a very particular mode of appeal to a popular readership. First, it functioned (cheekily) to mimic the appellation 'Raffles in real life', used as the title of former burglar 'Gentleman' George Smithson's autobiography published in 1930 – sections of which Wensley actually plagiarized in *Detective Days*.⁵⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, Smithson's appropriation of the name 'Raffles', a famous fictional 'gentleman' burglar who never used violence to effect crimes, sought thereby to garner sympathy from the public and invite a measure of absolution as Smithson returned to public life after serving successive terms in prison.⁵¹ Popular admiration for Holmes was similarly predicated on readers' tolerance of the character's flaws, including Holmes's cocaine habit, apparent asexuality and scorn for the company of anyone other than his beloved companion, Dr Watson. Although Wensley apparently did not share (or wish to be seen to share!) any of these traits, there were clear benefits to be reaped from sustaining an imaginative connection with the 'assured, confident liberal' masculinity Holmes embodied, that celebrated 'independence and individuality' as integral to the detective's brilliance.⁵² Not least, the comparison did to some extent mitigate the aggressive

⁴⁸Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 19–20, 265.

⁴⁹Sir A. Conan Doyle, the famous novelist, dead', *Daily Mirror* (8 July 1930), 2.

⁵⁰BLA, WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947). For articles with the tagline 'Sherlock Holmes in real life' see 'The greatest detective of all time', *Sunday Express* (28 September 1930); 'The man who caught the murderers', *Sunday Express* (9 October 1930); 'Wensley reveals the Flying Squad in action', *Sunday Express* (19 October 1930); 'Stinie Morrison: was the real murderer executed in America?', *Sunday Express* (2 November 1930); 'Sherlock Holmes in real life', *Sunday Express* (16 January 1931), ii, iii, vii, x, xii, 5; G. Smithson, *Raffles in Real Life: The Confessions of George Smithson alias 'Gentleman George'* (London, 1930); chapters fifteen and twenty-nine of *Detective Days* repeat

(with the names changed) incidents in *Raffles in Real Life* in which Smithson assuaged a police officer's suspicions by asking for directions and assistance in carrying his bicycle, resulting in a successful burglary, and the theft of two Gainsborough portraits. See Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 135–6, 180–5; Smithson, *Raffles*, *op. cit.*, 155–8, 197–203.

⁵¹E. Moss, "'How I had liked this villain! How I had admired him!': A. J. Raffles and the burglar as British icon, 1898–1939", *Journal of British Studies*, 53, 1 (January 2014), 159–60.

⁵²J. Chapman and M. Hilton, 'From Sherlock Holmes to James Bond: masculinity and national identity in British popular fiction' in S. Caunce, E. Mazierska, S. Sidney-Smith and J. K. Walton (eds), *Relocating Britishness* (Manchester, 2004), 129.

individualism Wensley maintained in the persona he crafted in *Detective Days* that, as this article has demonstrated, often led to negative characterizations of fellow-officers' abilities in contrast to his own. 'Sherlock Holmes in real life' was an epithet that had occasionally been applied by the press to other police officers whose detective abilities had distinguished their actions, notably seen in articles on the retirement in 1913 of Detective Frank Froest, Wensley's predecessor at the CID.⁵³ It could be suggested that Wensley in part paid homage to these earlier figures by associating himself with the title, albeit in a way that was still commercially astute. Nevertheless, Wensley's patriotism and service to the state could hardly be presented in a better light than to invoke the fictional defender of Victorian London's moral and social order, even if his efforts appeared to leave a trail of less competent police officers in his wake.⁵⁴

Second, Wensley's 'fictionalized' celebrity persona was one aspect of the way he sought to generate the affective ties with popular audiences that underscored prevailing forms of inter-war masculine celebrity. As Edward Berenson and Max Jones have argued in regard to Edwardian 'explorer heroes' Henry Morton Stanley (famed for recovering the missing Dr Livingstone from Africa), and Captain Scott of the Antarctic, the enduring popularity of these figures, even posthumously, was embedded in emotive accounts of their charisma and sacrifice promulgated by journalists and playwrights.⁵⁵ Wensley could lay claim to having survived similarly trying circumstances, as had these explorers. He had routinely risked his life in the dangerous criminal 'underworld' of London's East End – an area compared to 'darkest Africa' in the imperialist rhetoric of Victorian social surveyors – in feats of detection that had required physical endurance as well as intellectual effort.⁵⁶ Describing the practice of 'stake-outs' where officers had to watch suspected criminals for hours undetected, Wensley wrote:

I myself once went for four days and nights without taking my clothes off. ... On one occasion, Arthur Neil and myself, having done our full day's work as superintendents of the CID, went out to keep observation for a whole night, under anything but pleasant conditions, to demonstrate by example that we – then men over fifty – had lost neither our interest nor our stamina.⁵⁷

Here, the detectives' physical strain as they struggled to stay alert and subjected their bodies to an 'unpleasant' environment for prolonged periods of time not only echoed the masculine capabilities of earlier explorers, but also suggested an inherent strength and athleticism. Additionally, Wensley fulfilled his duties in the face of immeasurable

⁵³A "Sherlock Holmes in real life", *Penny Illustrated Paper* (7 September 1912), 1.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁵E. Berenson, 'Charisma and the making of imperial heroes in Britain and France, 1880–1914' in E. Berenson and E. Giloi (eds), *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New

York, 2010), 25–33; M. Jones, *The Last Great Quest: Captain Scott's Antarctic Sacrifice* (Oxford, 2003), 125–6, 270–2.

⁵⁶On the East End as 'darkest London', see Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, *op. cit.*, 19–20, 27–8.

⁵⁷Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 72.

sacrifice, persevering with police work despite the loss of both his sons during the First World War. In a poignant interlude in his recollections of famous crimes and criminals, Wensley wrote of the 'gay and steady courage' of his eldest son Frederick, killed by a shell in the trenches in France on 5 August 1915 after returning to action despite suffering an earlier injury.⁵⁸ Shortly thereafter, Wensley and his wife suffered another 'unforgettable if proud tragedy' when seventeen-year-old Harold Wensley followed his brother to the front and contracted influenza on Armistice Day 1918, dying four days later.⁵⁹ Although it might appear cynical to identify these passages as aspects of Wensley's celebrity-making, the glimpse of personal loss he offered would undoubtedly have engendered an imagined intimacy with a generation of inter-war readers still reeling from their own catastrophic losses of friends and relatives in the war. At the same time, making an emotional appeal to readers by encouraging them to trace connections between Wensley's own life and those of heroes fictional and fantastic might, one supposes, have been viewed with incredulity by friends of Edith Thompson, whom Wensley saw executed for doing just that.⁶⁰

It is tempting to point to the work of a ghost writer in *Detective Days*. There is certainly a strong possibility that someone working for the *Express* collaborated with Wensley in encouraging comparisons with Holmes and other heroes in his autobiography.⁶¹ Yet in addition to evidence that *Detective Days* drew heavily on material Wensley had scrapbooked, the correspondence of press baron Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the *Express*, with his editor, John Gordon, suggests that Wensley had an active hand in his post-retirement life-writing. As Gordon wrote to Beaverbrook in a letter dated 26 September 1930, 'Wensley's reminiscences begin on October 5th. They are fascinating reading. He is anxious to have a preface to the book when it is published, by a really outstanding personality and to-day hinted that he would like to approach you. Would you care to do it?'⁶² Gordon's failure to mention any contribution by his staff to Wensley's series in this letter appears a convincing testimony of the originality of the articles. This is especially notable since other letters reveal Gordon was under pressure from Beaverbrook to ensure that the *Express* obtained stories directly from high-profile figures of the day (at which tactic Beaverbrook felt the *News of the World* was winning).⁶³ Further, the letter attests again to Wensley's media savvy, as he forsook courting a senior police officer to write his preface in favour of the better-known and more influential Beaverbrook. In this object Wensley was, alas, unsuccessful, having to settle for 'true crime' author and journalist George Dilnot instead.⁶⁴ None the less, the formula worked. As E. J. Robertson, in charge of the *Sunday Express's* accounts, reported

⁵⁸Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 207–8.

⁵⁹*ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁰Houlbrook, 'Pin to see the peepshow', *op. cit.*, 218–219.

⁶¹As Houlbrook notes, such practices were a common feature of inter-war 'true crime' writing. Houlbrook, 'Commodifying', *op. cit.*, 327.

⁶²Houses of Parliament Archives (henceforth HPA), Beaverbrook Papers BBK/H/75, Letter

from J. R. Gordon to Lord Beaverbrook (26 September 1930).

⁶³HPA, BBK/H/79, Letter from 'A. B. B.' to John Gordon (1 September 1930).

⁶⁴D. George Boyce, 'Aitken, William Maxwell, first Baron Beaverbrook (1879–1964)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edn, January 2011, <http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/30358> (accessed 10 May 2014); G. Dilnot, *The Crook's Game* (Boston, 1927).

to Beaverbrook in December 1930, 'The £8,381 for Newspaper Advertising was principally incurred by the "Sunday Express" in advertising Wensley, which has proved so successful.'⁶⁵ *Detective Days* was greeted with uniform praise by reviewers in the national, regional and local press, and then reprinted in America as *Forty Years at Scotland Yard: The Record of a Lifetime's Service in the Criminal Investigation Department* by publishers Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., again to rave reviews – all of which Wensley duly scrapbooked.⁶⁶ Which leads to the question: how were the actions of this very 'human' celebrity detective greeted by politicians and his former colleagues at Scotland Yard?

PRESS-POLICE RELATIONS AND THE NEGATION OF AUTHORITY

Improving public relations presented particular difficulties for police during the inter-war years. A Press Bureau for monitoring and authorizing information to release to the press was not established at Scotland Yard until 1927, a delay of some twenty years after it was first proposed, resulting, as Emsley notes, from the reluctance of the then-Commissioner William Horwood 'on the grounds that it was no part of police duty to give information to the press'.⁶⁷ Subsequent events proved that this attitude grossly underestimated how newspapers had effectively become a rival 'authority' for the policing of behaviour, enjoying similar confidence with the public – and able to turn the tables on the police at will. As John Carter Wood observes, in early 1928 police forces around the country, including those of Liverpool, Essex and Cornwall, were accused by the press of using unduly harsh interrogation tactics on suspects which were judged prejudicial to the evidence produced in court; while later that year the 'Savidge inquiry' into police conduct when interviewing female suspects was provoked by press furore over the lengthy interview twenty-two-year-old Irene Savidge endured at the hands of two male Metropolitan Police officers.⁶⁸ When Savidge accused officers of sexually harassing her during the interview, Wensley was himself implicated as the officer-in-charge responsible for summoning her to Scotland Yard, although he was cleared of all wrongdoing in the

⁶⁵HPA, BBK/H/79, Letter from E. J. Robertson to Lord Beaverbrook (11 December 1930).

⁶⁶BLA, WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947), British reviews in the *Daily Express*, *Sunday Express*, *The Times*, *Weekly Chronicle*, *North Mail and Newcastle Chronicle*, *Daily Herald*, *Nottingham Guardian*, *Yorkshire Observer*, *Dundee Courier*, *Daily Mail*, *British Weekly*, *Country Life*, *London Mercury*, *Midland Daily Telegraph*, *Yorkshire Post*, *Bookman*, *Scotsman*, 13–25; international reviews in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, *Otago Witness*, *Herald* (Melbourne), *Australasian*, *Herald Times Texas*, *Atlanta Journal*, *Camden New Jersey Post*, *Philadelphia, PA Public Ledger*, *Elizabethtown Tennessee Star*, *Syracuse, NY Post Standard*, *New York Graphic*, *Star Gazette* (New

York), *New York Herald Tribune*, *Philadelphia PA Enquirer*, *Columbus Ohio State Journal*, *Turin City Sentinel*, *Louisville KY Courier Journal*, *New York Book Review Digest*, *Detroit Michigan News*, *Charleston Post SC*, *Cleveland Ohio Plain Dealer*, *News Aga Herald*, *Oregonian*, *Syracuse New York Herald*, *Calgary Alberta Herald*, *Jersey City New Jersey Journal*, *Douglas Arizona Dispatch*, *Spokane Washington Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *World's Press News*, 26–36.

⁶⁷C. Emsley, 'PC Dixon and Commissaire Maigret: some myths and realities in the development of English and continental police' in D. W. Howell and K. O. Morgan (eds), *Crime, Protest and Police in Modern British Society* (Cardiff, 1999), 109.

⁶⁸Wood, 'Third degree', *op. cit.*, 476–7.

tribunal that followed.⁶⁹ What these incidents demonstrate is that, by the 1920s, judgements about what was ‘in the public interest’ in regard to the flow of information about crime and criminals passing daily through police stations was increasingly contested by the press, who sought naturally to extend their influence by calling for more ‘openness’ in police procedure. Indeed, at a 1929 meeting between Viscount Byng of Vimy, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and members of the Press Association, representatives of *The Times*, *Daily Express*, *Daily News* and *Daily Mail* complained that the ‘Press Bureau organization is not generally satisfactory and that the attitude of Police to Press is not sympathetic, and altogether too secretive’.⁷⁰ The wording of this complaint was apt. Whereas the journalists who attended this meeting might have assumed it had been convened purely to negotiate for a kinder treatment of the police in newspapers, internal communications in Metropolitan Police files show that Byng sought to find ways to frustrate the press from bribing the police for information in the broader context of proposed amendments to the Official Secrets Act of 1920.⁷¹ These amendments, which enabled senior police officers to question from whom journalists, editors and publishers had got their sources, in cases where a breach of the Acts was suspected, were enshrined in an informal agreement between the Press Association and the Home Office in 1931 – on condition that officers had acquired permission to do so from the Attorney-General or the Secretary of State.⁷²

It was in reference to the Official Secrets Acts that concerns over Wensley’s pre-publication articles for the *Sunday Express* were aired in the House of Commons in November 1930. Sir Nicholas Grattan-Doyle, MP for Newcastle upon Tyne North,

asked the Attorney-General whether his attention has been called to the publication in a Sunday newspaper of a series of articles by a former high officer of the Metropolitan Police Force; whether he has considered the articles in relation to the Official Secrets Act; and whether he proposes to take any action in the matter?⁷³

Receiving a response in the negative from Lord Advocate Craigie Aitchison, Grattan-Doyle was then joined by the MP for Nottingham South, George Wilfrid Holford Knight, KC, who expressed himself similarly troubled that ‘this series of articles contains extensive references to this person’s recent official duties’ and urged Aitchison to ‘reconsider the matter’.⁷⁴ The weighing-in of Holford Knight on this issue indicated how Wensley’s autobiographical writing spoke to broader questions about the extent to which it was appropriate for public servants to exploit their professional position by selling

⁶⁹*ibid.*, 477; BPP, *Inquiry in regard to the interrogation by the police of Miss Savidge. Report of the tribunal appointed under the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act, 1921, 1928* (3147), 13–14.

⁷⁰The National Archives (subsequently TNA), MEPO 2/8172, file *Leakage of Information from Police to Press (1929–1936)*, Minutes of meeting between Lord Byng of Vimy and Press Association (9 January 1929), 2.

⁷¹*ibid.*, Byng of Vimy, ‘Irregular communications with the press’ (11 December 1928).

⁷²TNA, HO 144/20992, file *Official Secrets Act (December 1930)*, N. F. Warren Fisher (Secretary to the Treasury), Circular entitled ‘Official Secrets Acts’ (6 February 1931).

⁷³*Hansard* (London, 1803–2005), ‘Official Secrets Act’ (10 November 1930), vol. 244, cc. 1317–19.

⁷⁴*ibid.*

stories to the press, regardless of seniority or retirement from service. Holford Knight was a prominent lawyer who frequently contributed to debates in parliament about the administration of justice (including advocating the rights of women and prisoners) both in England and internationally, and also took a keen interest in the power of the press to monitor the activities of those in public office.⁷⁵ Indeed, a few weeks later, in December 1930, Holford Knight took part in a heated exchange in the House of Commons over a proposed bill to allow journalists to report on local government committee meetings; he cautioned that while the public had a right to know how its servants were performing, such reportage should be prohibited from hearings dealing with poor relief in order to 'safeguard' citizens making applications from being exposed to 'the full glare of publicity' on their private lives.⁷⁶ This caution echoed a similar sentiment that police leaks to the press constituted a 'breach of trust' between police and victims of crime, an opinion given by the Secretary to the Metropolitan Police, Hamilton Maurice Howgrave-Graham, CBE, in correspondence with the Commissioner on the subject in November 1928.⁷⁷ As Howgrave-Graham wrote, 'I dislike very much what seems to me breaking faith with people who ask our assistance to clear up crimes,' adding that he was going 'to appeal to the honour of our own men' at a conference for senior CID officers the following week.⁷⁸ Like Holford Knight's admonition of the revelations Wensley had published in the *Sunday Express*, which he considered a 'disclosure of confidential official information' [author's emphasis], the language of Howgrave-Graham's description of police leaks implied that much more was lost in such exchanges than mere knowledge about police procedure.⁷⁹ Public confidence resided in the belief that police – and, by extension, the state – would treat everyone impartially in matters of justice, and that officers would not be mentally recording what potentially tragic or embarrassing fragments of civilians' lives would later make for a lucrative press story while discharging their everyday duties.

Lord Advocate Aitchison was not immune to this implication. Although he countered the fears of Grattan-Doyle and Holford Knight by arguing that 'the fact that an official draws upon his official knowledge and experience in writing an article does not necessarily make him guilty of an offence under the Act', Aitchison acknowledged that 'the circumstances . . . in this case have been very fully considered in consultation with the Home Office on the one hand and the Director of Public Prosecutions on the other'.⁸⁰ Unfortunately the file dealing with Wensley's case appears no longer to exist, so we will never know which specific instances of criminal or police activity in the *Sunday Express* and *Detective Days* had already attracted the attention of these government offices. However, the fact that Wensley's writing had caught the eye of the Home Office in the first place suggests that the retired detective's conduct and publicized opinions continued to be scrutinized for their bearing on public attitudes towards the police. The reasons for

⁷⁵'Mr Holford Knight', *The Times* (27 April 1936), 16; *Hansard*, 'CLAUSE 1 (Defence of poor persons committed for trial)' (2 May 1930), vol. 238, cc. 524–83.

⁷⁶*Hansard*, 'Local Authorities (Admission of the Press) Bill' (5 December 1930), vol. 245, cc. 2644–6.

⁷⁷TNA, MEPO 2/8172, file *Leakage of Information from Police to Press (1929–1936)*, Correspondence no. 95/GEN/49, note no. 4 (dated 3 December 1928).

⁷⁸*ibid.*

⁷⁹*Hansard*, 'Official Secrets Act' (10 November 1930), vol. 244, cc. 1317–19.

⁸⁰*ibid.*

this were twofold. First, there was a precedent for the autobiography of an ex-detective to provoke controversy over the judicial system, as had occurred in 1927 when Wensley's fellow-member of Scotland Yard's 'Big Four' detectives, former Superintendent Francis Carlin, published his autobiography, *Reminiscences of an Ex-Detective*. In it, Carlin revealed that the evidence on which 'taxi-cab murderer' Alexander 'Scotty' Mason had been convicted and condemned to death was provided by a convicted criminal who had himself originally been a suspect in the case.⁸¹ As *The Times* later recounted in Carlin's obituary (he died in 1930 at the age of just fifty-nine), these insights, 'which shed considerable light on many of the crimes he had been called upon to handle', led to a 'controversy' that was ultimately dismissed by the Home Secretary Sir William Joynson-Hicks, who refused to consider this as 'new evidence' of Mason's possible innocence.⁸² In fact, in Joynson-Hicks's words Mason's case had 'often been considered by my predecessors and myself, but nothing has been presented that would have justified recommending further clemency', indicating that doubts over the conduct of the police work involved continued to resurface even after Mason's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.⁸³ The enduring nature of the professional position senior police officers occupied was even demonstrated in one of Wensley's scrapbook pages, where a *Pearson's Weekly News* article was pasted that detailed how many retired Scotland Yard officers were setting up their own private detective agencies. Ironically, this article sat next to a *Daily Express* cutting about the House of Commons debate on whether Wensley's *Sunday Express* articles breached the Official Secrets Act. Speculating about whether Wensley would do the same, the *Pearson's* article proclaimed that 'In many instances, it looks as if the old maxim "once a detective, always a detective" must hold good', noting that very often large shipping companies employed these 'confidential enquiry agents' to search for stowaways.⁸⁴ This was by no means a diminution of responsibilities, as in the build-up to, and during, the First World War it was the security of Britain's navy and shipping trade with other countries that was judged most at risk from sabotage by German agents, as David Stafford writes. These fears continued to recur in inter-war spy fiction, especially as tensions began to mount again during the 1930s.⁸⁵

Detectives thus retained skills and experience that could see them employed as British representatives on the international stage, rendering their 'retirement' an inherently unstable and transient state, and entailing that anything they published had the potential to be read as an official or semi-official edict. Wensley's post-retirement 'career' exemplified this. *Detective Days* made several suggestions for new police practices and reorganization of the service, yet again implicitly criticizing the intelligence and methods of the organization he had just left. These included the recommendation that 'motor bandits' should have their licences reviewed by police after being convicted of driving offences, anticipating the introduction of compulsory driving tests in 1935; and a proposal for the creation of a centralized national detective agency that would replace the practice

⁸¹F. Carlin, *Reminiscences of an Ex-Detective* (London, 1927), 111–12.

⁸²'Mr F. Carlin', *The Times* (29 September 1930), 14.

⁸³Hansard, 'PRISONERS (SENTENCES)' (1 March 1928), vol. 214, cc. 578–9.

⁸⁴BLA, WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947). W. J. Blackledge, 'Do sleuths grow old? Crime-hunters can't resist', *Pearson's Weekly News* (1 March 1930), 15.

⁸⁵D. Stafford, *The Silent Game: The Real World of Imaginary Spies* (Athens, Georgia, 1991), 8–11.

of loaning out detectives from large urban forces to smaller ones or to rural constabularies in the event of a high-profile criminal case, an idea that was not adopted.⁸⁶ He was also famously said to have been courted by police in New York to join them in tackling the city's gangsters in 1931, although with characteristic self-promotion he was reported to have turned them down because

I would be, from the American point of view, an alien as soon as I reached America, and as such I should only be able to act in an advisory capacity. ... I should not be averse to dealing with the American gangs either, but if that is to be done, the man who does it must be given absolute control of the forces fighting the gangs.⁸⁷

Wensley's willingness effectively to commandeer the New York Police Department to 'deal with' the gangs illustrated that the ex-detective considered himself far from redundant. It even bespoke a desire to take on a new challenge by masterminding transnational methods of policing based on the British model, a role that would elevate his policing authority to one transcending national boundaries, and raise his celebrity profile accordingly. Whether or not the invitation was real, the publicized possibility of Wensley making this transition clearly confirmed that there was more than pure popularity at stake in the content of his writing.

When trying to assess the reception of Wensley's post-retirement writing in the eyes of his former police colleagues, however, one can perhaps infer their reaction from the restrictions placed on senior officers' contact with the press introduced in 1937. In 1928, Howgrave-Graham's detailed discussion with Commissioner Byng of Vimy about press-police relations had summarized that there were 'two schools of thought' about how to handle leaks. The first recommended banning all communication unless it had been authorized as being 'in the *positive* interests of justice' [original emphasis]. The second suggested:

Others think that as news happens to be a by-product of our industry, and as newspapers are prepared to go to any lengths in trouble and expense to obtain this by-product, our only hope of *not* making it worth their while to put temptation in the way of members of the force is to give them everything we can give them, provided, of course, that the interests of justice are not thereby jeopardized.⁸⁸

Howgrave-Graham had noted in addition that the burden of press responsibility for putting this monetary 'temptation' in the path of police lay with 'papers like the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Chronicle*', where in contrast 'better class newspapers

⁸⁶Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 193–4, 284; Driving Standards Agency, 'History of road safety, the Highway Code and the driving test' (16 July 2013), online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/history-of-road-safety-and-the-driving-test/history-of-road-safety-the-highway-code-and-the-driving-test> (accessed 6 April 2014).

⁸⁷BLA, WENSLEY/3/2 (1930–1947), 'CID ex-chief asked to help wipe out US gunmen', *Sunday Dispatch* (2 August 1931), 25.

⁸⁸TNA, MEPO 2/8172, file *Leakage of Information from Police to Press (1929–1936)*, Correspondence no. 95/GEN/49, note no. 4 (3 December 1928).

like *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Morning Post* would never ‘descend’ to such methods.⁸⁹ The then-Superintendent Wensley had in fact displayed his agreement with this assessment in 1923 (inserted into the file for the Commissioner by Howgrave-Graham as evidence for his report), ensuring that journalists were given equal access to police information, irrespective of the publication they represented, by ordering inspectors to report immediately to the CID officer in charge if a press representative came enquiring during hours when the Press Bureau was closed.⁹⁰ Yet the contrast between this and Wensley’s subsequent relations with the *Sunday Express* – whose twin daily publication was listed among those known to bribe police by the Secretary – can only have rubbed salt into the wound of a Commissioner determined to ‘restore the confidence of the public in the Police and for the Police to deserve their confidence’.⁹¹ As such, the insertion of the following into Metropolitan Police General Orders in 1937, with the stern warning that it applied to senior officers as well as to the ranks, must be considered an attempt drastically to revise the culture of a police force for whom Wensley had set an unexpectedly mercenary example:

Articles on any matter connected with police work, or the administration of justice, or dealing with matters of a political nature, must not be submitted for publication in the Press without the consent of the Commissioner, to whom all such articles are to be submitted for approval. ... This applies not only to articles in newspapers and periodicals, but also to the publication of books, the giving of interviews to the Press and the delivery of lectures.⁹²

CONCLUSION

In the published evidence of the 2012 Leveson Inquiry into the Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press, sociologist Chris Greer and criminologist Eugene McLaughlin wrote of the relationship between newspapers and police that

a perception of a corrupt or inappropriate relationship between police and press can have far reaching consequences: a loss of public confidence in the police and a belief that the press have impunity leads to worsening behaviour. A perception that the senior officers are too close to individuals in the press makes it more difficult for their subordinates rigorously to pursue investigations into media wrongdoing. All this has obvious adverse consequences.⁹³

⁸⁹*ibid.*

⁹⁰TNA, MEPO 2/8172, file *Leakage of Information from Police to Press (1929–1936)*, ‘Memorandum’ signed Superintendent Wensley (11 August 1923).

⁹¹TNA, MEPO 2/8172, file *Leakage of Information from Police to Press (1929–1936)*, Minutes of meeting between Lord Byng of Vimy and Press Association (9 January 1929), 1.

⁹²TNA, MEPO 3/3084, file *Senior Officers and the Press: Revision of General Orders (1937)*, Correspondence marked ‘CONFIDENTIAL –

to Assistant Commissioners, Deputy Commissioners and Chief Constables’ (5 February 1937).

⁹³C. Greer and E. McLaughlin, ‘Module 2: the press and the police’, *Leveson Inquiry: Ethics, Culture and Practice of the Press* (10 July 2012), published online at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122145147/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Submission-from-Core-Participant-Victims-Module-2.pdf> (accessed 6 April 2014), 1.

The Leveson Inquiry followed up on reported leaks to members of the press by senior officers about recent high-profile criminal cases and the way in which ‘friendships’ were engineered between editors and officers to secure positive reportage of their efforts.⁹⁴ Yet what this document neglected to consider were the long-term historic foundations of these relationships and the legacy for the culture of the police force of former high-ranking officers acquiring new forms of celebrity from selling their memoirs. By failing to historicize understandings of what exactly counted as ‘too close’ when it came to police contact with the media, Greer and McLaughlin obscured how the incompatibility of celebrity culture with notions of public servants’ authority was identified by police and politicians during the inter-war years at the advent of mass culture; and, therefore, that the damage wrought to police reputation by these interactions had much longer and less easily soluble implications for public trust in the police force.

As this article has shown, the post-retirement writing and media career of Detective Frederick Porter Wensley functioned to elevate his personal talents and masculinity at the expense of a collectivist version of the policing of crime. In the process, Wensley compromised the trust invested in him by state and citizens in the eyes of certain politicians. Against attempts to discourage police officers from viewing their profession as a money-making enterprise, he demonstrated the commercial value of his intimate acquaintance with criminal activities and police procedure – to the extent of exposing the latter’s apparent weaknesses to cement his marketability. In 1977 Steve Chibnall’s influential book *Law-and-Order News* exposed the fact that British crime reporters relied on a ‘mechanics of symbiosis’ with the police in order to obtain newsworthy stories; in essence, journalists could only cultivate friendships with high-ranking officers by first demonstrating that they reported police activities sympathetically and without impeding police operations.⁹⁵ While this might suggest that the police were therefore upholding a much more discriminatory and restrictive dialogue with journalists than had been formalized before the Second World War, these relationships still took on a pecuniary aspect, with journalists taking officers out for meals or drinks on a regular basis with no guarantee of a story at the end of it. Furthermore, journalists often became ‘socialized’ into a particular officer’s viewpoint, consequently displaying reluctance or downright refusal to report a story that cast that officer in a bad light.⁹⁶ Subsequent studies by Rob C. Mawby and Yvonne Jewkes have traced continuities from Chibnall’s account into recent decades, with Mawby’s 2010 analysis of press–police relations arguing that journalists still give detectives ‘special attention’ as sources.⁹⁷ Paradoxically, negative press reportage of heavy-handed police tactics in response to the industrial disputes and strikes of the late 1970s and early 1980s has, according to Mawby, entrenched a policy of police working to obtain public trust by ‘winning while appearing to lose’ – disseminating images of police being injured or appearing vulnerable in the line of duty, even in situations where they ultimately emerged triumphant.⁹⁸ What remains at stake is the

⁹⁴*ibid.*, 1–70.

⁹⁵S. Chibnall, *Law-and-Order News* (London, 1977), 142–71.

⁹⁶*ibid.*, 150–5.

⁹⁷R. C. Mawby, ‘Chibnall revisited: crime reporters, the police, and *Law-and-Order News*’,

British Journal of Criminology, 50 (2010), 1070; Y. Jewkes, *Media and Crime*, 2nd edn (London, 2011), 160–71.

⁹⁸R. C. Mawby, *Policing Images: Policing, Communication and Legitimacy* (Cullompton, 2002), 23–4.

authority of the police, who must use the media to maintain their public support but cannot allow that relationship to intersect with perceptually 'vulgar' or mercenary media functions like the creation of celebrity.

Wensley's celebrity, and the individualist stance it took, was not isolated at the time. Ex-Chief Detective Walter Dew's 1938 autobiography, *I Caught Crippen*, for example, provides another, instantly legible example.⁹⁹ Wensley does, however, offer a unique lens through which to chart the process by which he crafted his celebrity persona, as his scrapbooking habit witnesses the way he progressively recognized the qualities he needed to appropriate or enhance as they appeared foregrounded in contemporary press coverage of crime and policing. It thereby gives us an early indication of a turning point in the impetus of those working in the service as they negotiated the possibilities of their enhanced interaction with the media. At the conclusion of *Detective Days*, Wensley wrote: 'After forty years I still do not know what the public expects from a detective.'¹⁰⁰ This seemingly disingenuous comment could not have rung less true.¹⁰¹

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⁹⁹W. Dew, *I Caught Crippen* (London, 1938).

¹⁰⁰Wensley, *Detective Days*, *op. cit.*, 281.

¹⁰¹No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.