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# Prostitutes and popular history: notes on the 'underworld', 1918-1939\*

Stefan Slater<sup>1</sup>

*Un grand répertoire d'archives variées a été consulté pour la réalisation de la première étude critique de la vie des prostituées pendant l'entre-deux-guerres à Londres. La première partie du document examine les caractéristiques sociales qui unissent la plupart des femmes impliquées dans la prostitution à la pointe ouest de Londres à l'époque. L'enquête montre que la prostitution était un choix conscient pour la majorité des femmes de classe ouvrière afin d'améliorer leurs conditions de vie. La deuxième partie est composée du développement de l'histoire de la main-d'œuvre britannique et de l'investigation du monde social de la prostitution. Plutôt que de considérer les prostituées comme faisant partie d'une «pègre» nébuleuse, la vie d'une prostituée est interprétée dans son propre contexte de la culture ouvrière. La dernière partie de l'étude aborde les conditions de travail dans le monde de la prostitution. Dans l'ensemble, concentré sur la vie et les expériences des prostituées, cet article donne un aperçu inestimable d'un domaine ignoré de la vie ouvrière et une compréhension plus nuancée de la réalité sociale de cette «pègre».*

*This article uses a variety of archival material to produce the first critical study of the lives of prostitutes in interwar London. The first section examines the social characteristics that linked many of the women involved in prostitution in the West End. As will be seen, prostitution was, in most cases, a conscious choice by working-class women to improve their lot. Section two builds upon the labour history framework, and explores the social world of the prostitute. Rather than viewing prostitutes as inhabitants of a nebulous «underworld», the lives of the prostitutes are interpreted in the context of working-class culture. The final section investigates employment conditions involved in prostitution. Taken together, this study into the lives and experience of prostitutes offers a valuable insight into a neglected area of working-class life, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of the social reality of the «underworld».*

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Slater is a Research Associate in the Department of History at the Open University. His interests cover the history of crime and policing in late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth-century London. Publications include *Pimps, Police and Filles de Joie: Foreign Prostitution in Interwar London*, *London Journal*, 2007, 32, 1 and *Containment: Managing Street Prostitution in London, 1918-1959*, *Journal of British Studies* (forthcoming, 2010).

On 9 May 1936, the body of Constance Smith, known locally and exotically as «Dutch Leah» was found in a flat in Old Compton Street, Soho, central London. A gruesome sight greeted the police: Smith had been strangled with a length of copper insulated wire. Severe head wounds had also been inflicted with the use of a rusty flat iron; that her skull was fractured was obvious by the visible brain matter. She had been killed at her most vulnerable: lying on her back with her clothes arranged for the purpose of sexual intercourse. There was no sign of a struggle.

The murder of Smith holds a dual significance for historians. First, a murder offers the rare opportunity to trace the life history of a prostitute. Despite her «Dutch» soubriquet, Smith lived her life in and around London. Smith was born in 1912, the illegitimate daughter of Kathleen Hind in East Ham. She married Robert Smith in 1933, though the union was not a success. The police pointed out that she had also lived with at least four men, including, as if to stress the inevitability of her career path, a «coloured» man, all of who had lived off her illicit earnings. She earned the first of eight convictions for soliciting prostitution on 28 March 1930 at the tender age of 18 years. By the time of her death, she was well known as a «low sort» of prostitute who frequented the environs of Old Compton Street and the Charing Cross Road. Yet for a «low sort» of prostitute, the examining pathologist noted that she was a well-nourished young lady. Internally, she was healthy too; neither was there any sign of venereal disease, nor was any reference to alcohol consumption made<sup>2</sup>. As will be seen, barring her premature death, Smith's life history was not untypical for a 1930s prostitute of London's West End.

Secondly, the press linked the killing to the Soho murders of two other alleged prostitutes, and a pimp involved with marriage-of-convenience rackets: Josephine Martin, Jeanette Cotton, and Max Kassel<sup>3</sup>. Only the killer of Kassel was caught, adding to the fascination of these cases; these stories feature in the recent work of popular «true crime» historians. According to Donald Thomas, the three prostitutes were murdered «to set an example»<sup>4</sup>. While for James Morton, these crimes signalled the end of French control of prostitution in Soho; the five Messina brothers stepped in to fill the power vacuum<sup>5</sup>. Ed Glinert, while not a «true crime» historian, picks up the thread, adding for good measure: «The perpetrators may or may not have been the Messinas»<sup>6</sup>.

The Messina brothers were pimps of Italian-Maltese origin, involved in the trafficking of prostitutes to Britain from 1934. Duncan Webb, a journalist who exposed the activities of the Messina brothers for the *People* in the early 1950s, described the crime family as: «the most complicated and certainly the most powerfully organized gang of vice this nation has ever known»<sup>7</sup>. However, Geoff Dench, in his

<sup>2</sup> MEPO 3/1707, PC F. Hangar telegram 9 May 1936; Divisional Detective Inspector «C» L. Burt minute 22 May 1936; report of Sir Bernard Spilsbury, honorary Home Office pathologist, 5 June 1936; Chief Inspector Sharpe to Superintendent (Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard) Askew, 25 June 1936.

<sup>3</sup> *John Bull*, 8 February, 2 May 1936; *News of the World*, 2 and 9 Feb., 19 April, 10 May 1936.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas (2005, p. 268).

<sup>5</sup> Morton (2008, pp. 75-79; 2003, p. 193).

<sup>6</sup> Glinert (2007, p. 212).

<sup>7</sup> Webb (1953, p. 149).

measured analysis of Maltese crime adds: «The dramatic nature of this public exposure and campaign, as much as the vice operations themselves, made the overthrow of the Messinas into the notorious affair it was»<sup>8</sup>. Even at the pinnacle of their influence, the Messinas had not much more than 20 prostitutes under their control<sup>9</sup>.

But whatever the fancy of the «true crime» historians, not one shred of evidence suggests the involvement of the Messinas in these deaths. Indeed, the police believed the murders to be an unconnected series of curious coincidences<sup>10</sup>. Max Kassel was not, in the words of historian Fergus Linnane, an «overlord of vice»<sup>11</sup>, but as investigating officer Chief Inspector Sharpe recalled «a very small time ponce»<sup>12</sup>. Josephine Martin, a French prostitute of Russian extraction, secured her stay in Britain via a marriage-of-convenience; she may have had connections with «underworld» figures. While it is interesting to note that she was heavily in debt, her case file mentions that only an American boyfriend and her brother were «poncing» off her earnings<sup>13</sup>. There was nothing remotely salacious about the murder of Constance Smith; she was simply the victim of a brutal robbery, an extreme example in a sequence of all-to-common violent assaults committed against numerous prostitutes in the sixteen months prior to her murder<sup>14</sup>. As for Jeanette Cotton the police were emphatic: «She was a woman of good character and there is no evidence which would suggest that she had at any time been a prostitute»<sup>15</sup>.

These types of crimes tend to interest what may be loosely termed as «true crime» historians. Christopher Wilson observes that «true crime» histories are a «murder-based genre [...] “ripped” from headlines [...] what might best be described as a hybrid literary genre: a pop-culture of modern police departments, combing conventions from autobiography, political exposé, and crime news itself»<sup>16</sup>. The headlines in the 1930s concentrated on the «foreignness» of those involved with vice. And the linking of the Messina brothers with «vice» made for good copy, for journalists and «true crime» historians alike<sup>17</sup>. Clive Emsley remarks that these histories are «geared more to telling interesting stories rather than presenting any detailed analysis»<sup>18</sup>. In particular, these accounts concentrate on the unifying theme of the «underworld». Yet it would be churlish to over-criticize these authors; «true crime» books are aimed at a mass market. Rather than bemoan the gap between academic and popular histories – a loaded and controversial distinction – it is far more fruitful to try and sidestep this breach and engage with these stories<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Dench, (1975, p. 67).

<sup>9</sup> MEPO 2/9633, Superintendent Mahon to Chief Superintendent CID, 15 Jan. 1952.

<sup>10</sup> Sharpe (1938, p. 125).

<sup>11</sup> Linnane (2003a, p. 330).

<sup>12</sup> Sharpe (1938, p. 106).

<sup>13</sup> MEPO 3/1702, Divisional Inspector John Edwards to Superintendent «C» Ralph, 8 November 1935.

<sup>14</sup> MEPO 3/1707, Burt to Ralph, 19 May 1936.

<sup>15</sup> MEPO 3/1706, Sharpe to Askew, 7 May 1936.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson (1997, pp. 719-720).

<sup>17</sup> Publishers have a penchant for exotic and «out of the ordinary» cases: Rawlings (1998).

<sup>18</sup> Emsley (2005, p. 131).

<sup>19</sup> Shore (2007).

It is established that no group «controlled» prostitution in London, though a number of foreigners were involved in marriage-of-convenience rackets and assisting the passage of foreign prostitutes to the metropolis. Contrary to media concern, foreigners constituted only a minority of women involved in prostitution<sup>20</sup>. Moving beyond a social constructionist approach to crime, which tends to focus on perceptions at the expense of participants<sup>21</sup>, this essay examines the «underworld» from a microhistorical perspective, using prostitution to offer a more nuanced understanding of «vice» in interwar London. Not only are the lives of prostitutes missing in the «true crime» genre, this absence is noticeable in the historiography of prostitution<sup>22</sup>.

Judith Walkowitz notes in a historiographical review of Victorian prostitution: «All these works fail to give us a precise social portrait of prostitution»<sup>23</sup>. Yet any attempt to construct a history of prostitutes is constrained by the source material. As official and media representations of prostitution were constituted by, and constitutive of, a specific geography of policing, this analysis centres on the West End of London. Evaluating archival material alongside contemporary printed literature results in an impressionistic portrait of prostitution that serves as a counterpoint to the «true crime» genre produced by certain historians today, and offers a more judicious interpretation of the «underworld». While the contents of these sources cannot be wholly disentangled from the discourses concerning their production, they still offer perspective<sup>24</sup>. Literary texts allow imaginative access and insight into the subjective experience of social reality<sup>25</sup>. In particular, use is made of interwar sociological analyses and police memoirs.

While all memoirs are problematic, more a reflection on memory than a window of truth, police officers were keen to show their familiarity with the social world of criminals and the poor<sup>26</sup>. Many former police officers highlighted the more high profile cases of their careers, thus it is possible that more mundane subjects, such as prostitution, were prone to less exaggeration<sup>27</sup>. While some officers expressed hostility to prostitutes<sup>28</sup>, and others stressed the degraded side of the profession and the inherent laziness or deceitfulness of the women involved<sup>29</sup>, there is evidence of a degree of sympathy for the plight of the prostitute<sup>30</sup>.

The first section of what follows examines the social characteristics that linked many of the women involved in prostitution in the West End. It will be seen that prostitutes did not form a homogeneous category, rather the trade was shaped around class divisions. Moreover, a variety of factors led women of differing backgrounds to walk the streets. Yet the results of this introductory survey suggest that contemporaries were quick to highlight the non-economic factors influencing

<sup>20</sup> Slater (2007, p. 55).

<sup>21</sup> Bier (2005).

<sup>22</sup> Gilfoyle (1999, pp. 137-139).

<sup>23</sup> Walkowitz (1972, p. 113).

<sup>24</sup> Gilfoyle (1999, pp. 138-139).

<sup>25</sup> Laub (1984, p. 32).

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence (2003).

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence (2000, pp. 78-79).

<sup>28</sup> Fabian (1954, p. 52); Fitch (1933, p. 228); Thorp (1954, p. 105).

<sup>29</sup> Cherrill (1954, p. 131); Higgins (1958, pp. 111-122); Sharpe (1938, p. 108).

<sup>30</sup> Cornish (1935, p. 243); Harvey (1958, pp. 36-75); Wyles (1952, p. 67).

women's decision to practice prostitution. Prostitution was, in most cases, a conscious choice by working-class women to improve their lot.

Section two builds upon the labour history framework, and explores the social world of the prostitute. Rather than viewing prostitutes as inhabitants of a nebulous «underworld», the lives of prostitutes are interpreted in the context of working-class culture. While aspects of the trade fostered the development of a prostitute sub-culture, in which the pimp had a particular role, this did not mean that prostitutes were cut-off from the wider community.

Developing the socio-economic context outlined in the previous sections, part three investigates employment conditions involved in prostitution; in particular, economic considerations and wider social consequences. Taken together, this study into the lives and experiences of prostitutes offers a valuable insight into a neglected area of working-class life and a more nuanced understanding of the social realities of the «underworld».

## SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Forty years after Charles Booth produced his pioneering survey of London life and labour, Hubert Llewellyn Smith (an aide to Booth) and the London School of Economics attempted to replicate his methods by showing, in the words of one contemporary critic, «the social progress of the last generation»<sup>31</sup>. This exercise in «national stock-taking» resulted in the *New Survey of London Life and Labour*<sup>32</sup>. Sybil Neville Rolfe, a prominent social hygienist and founder of the Eugenics Society (which viewed class as hereditary and saw poverty as an inherited defect), was deputed by Smith to write «Sex-Delinquency», the classic study of interwar prostitution. Neville Rolfe sketched the histories of five «typical» 1930s prostitutes. Four had their first conviction, though not necessarily for prostitution offences, between the ages of 17 and 23 years. Apart from soliciting, the other convictions related to indecency, disorderly conduct, and drunkenness. Only one of the five was deemed to have a background in a skilled occupation<sup>33</sup>.

A special Metropolitan Police study for Neville Rolfe's analysis confirms that the majority of prostitutes were young. Of 318 women arrested for prostitution and indecency offences in 1927, 137 came to the attention of the police again in the period up to 1932. The vast majority of re-offenders were aged 21-30 (53 percent of the women in this age cohort were recidivists). Rates of recidivism were slightly less (45 percent) for those aged 17-21, and only 25 percent for those over 30 years of age<sup>34</sup>. Yet an examination of Bow Street and Marlborough Street police court registers for 1937 suggests that the demographic of prostitution may have changed.

1937 is an interesting year to examine. The coronation of George VI and complaints from residents in Mayfair about soliciting in the district, led to an increase in

<sup>31</sup> Ware (1932, p. 142). The project had its faults. For example, Smith was so eager to show the decline in absolute poverty, that Booth's definition of the «poverty standard» was violated: Yelling (1990, pp. 205-206).

<sup>32</sup> Cardog Jones (1941, p. 825).

<sup>33</sup> Neville Rolfe (1935, pp. 301-302).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

police action against prostitutes – though it is likely that officers intensified their efforts against «known» prostitutes<sup>35</sup>. The police undertook 1,571 arrests for soliciting in the bounds of Bow Street and Marlborough Street police courts in the West End; 641 women were apprehended. This figure is an approximate total, as variations in spelling, ages, missing data, and occasional illegible handwriting, render the court registers a problematic source. In particular, the ages of prostitutes cannot be taken at face value. Younger prostitutes may have exaggerated their age as a means to ensure the penalty of a fine when appearing in court. Magistrates were keen to reform younger prostitutes, which entailed probation, recognizances, or even a spell in prison; fines were for the «irredeemable»<sup>36</sup>. For example, in November 1935 Gladys May was arrested on suspicion of brothel keeping. She said that she was 35 years of age when in fact, she was only 22. Presiding magistrate Mr. Marshall stated:

This is a very serious matter. She is still of an age where she may be reformed if she is taken in hand. The best thing in her own interests and in the interests of the public is to send her to prison for three months<sup>37</sup>.

Nonetheless, organizing the chronological material in alphabetical order, aids the process of ironing out age discrepancies. In the minority of cases where a variance cannot be resolved, the last age recorded is used, as the face-to-face nature of policing prostitution meant that officers became more familiar with these women. Some ages were corrected with reference to the «Secret Foreign Prostitutes and Associates Album». However, the difficulties in interpreting these registers need not be exaggerated. As prostitutes were fingerprinted from 1917<sup>38</sup>, the police had detailed records as to who was involved in prostitution, which probably encouraged women to disclose accurate information when appearing in court.

These caveats aside, the police court registers show that while those aged 24-9 years account for just under 50 percent of the individuals arrested, those aged 17-23 and 30-9 years comprise respectively 16 percent and just under 30 percent of prostitutes arrested in the West End<sup>39</sup>. While it is probable that the police were targeting the more successful and well-established prostitutes, it may be thought that most of these women would be in their twenties; after all, their prime asset, physical appearance, would be at its optimum. The prominence of women in their thirties, as compared to Neville Rolfe's study, suggests that women were pursuing prostitution for longer periods of time, and that the trade may have been becoming a more full time occupation. It is certain that the police were targeting the more professional women. In 1936 the police compiled a list of foreign prostitutes based in London, the dossier named 102 women<sup>40</sup>. 73 of these women have been located in the police court registers, amounting to 11.3 percent of the individuals arrested. Yet these foreign prostitutes comprise 28.8 percent of total arrests<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Slater (2008).

<sup>36</sup> Slater (2007, p. 62).

<sup>37</sup> *Westminster and Pimlico News*, 15 November 1935.

<sup>38</sup> MEPO 2/9998.

<sup>39</sup> PS/BOW/A1/170-6; PS/MS/A1/154-61.

<sup>40</sup> Secret Foreign Prostitutes and Associates Album.

<sup>41</sup> PS/BOW/A1/170-6; PS/MS/A1/154-61. For an analysis of the official and public concern with foreign prostitutes, see Slater (2007).

Contemporary printed sources on prostitution present further problems for the historian. Investigations into prostitution and delinquency focused upon the environment. In 1926, a survey of 113 prostitutes by Cyril Burt, a eugenicist and later professor of psychology at University College London, showed that 69 percent came from broken homes, while only 23 percent were brought up in institutions or came from a family who lived below the poverty line<sup>42</sup>. Yet if those who were classed as poor (even if coming from families living above the poverty line) were factored in, the figure rose to a high 66.4 percent<sup>43</sup>. Neville Rolfe concluded: «There are strong grounds for believing that mental weakness [...] plays an important part in predisposing a girl towards sex-delinquency»<sup>44</sup>. In an earlier essay, Neville Rolfe stated that, if economic causation were a significant motive, arrest rates would have risen significantly in times of economic slump, whereas they did not<sup>45</sup>. Gillian Hall, in the only other major contemporary study of prostitution, enumerated three pieces of evidence in her monograph denying the link between poverty and prostitution. She believed only that poverty was an *indirect* influence, and that the environment was more important<sup>46</sup>. However, this concentration upon social factors did not take into consideration how the economy impacted upon social/environmental stability<sup>47</sup>. Ex-Inspector Lilian Wyles reflected on this dilemma:

With an intelligence that was never high, the girls were lazy by inclination; regular work, regular hours, and punctuality they detested utterly [...] had I been born and brought up in the same environment as these girls, would I have been any different from them<sup>48</sup>?

Historians need to seek time-specific explanations which, moving beyond ahistorical rationales such as moral delinquency or psychological «backwardness», aids understanding as why women became prostitutes. Thus any study of interwar social history needs to account for the impact of the Great Depression. Helen Ware states that few contemporary sources detailed the impact of economic woes on prostitution, indicating its decline as a social problem<sup>49</sup>. Such an assumption needs to be handled with care. Some sources do hint at a rise in the number of prostitutes outside the more established haunts of professionals. In 1932 the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) initiated an inquiry into the link between poverty and prostitution. Unfortunately the project failed due to the impact of the Depression upon the AMSH's finances<sup>50</sup>. A Salvation Army report in the early 1930s indicated an

<sup>42</sup> Neville Rolfe (1935, p. 306). Furthermore, of the children in Burt's survey, 19.5% had one dead parent or the couple were divorced, 15.9% had violent, criminal or alcoholic parents, 8% were reared by step parents, 9.7% were illegitimate, and 5.3% had been sexually assaulted as a child by a parent or relative. Just over one quarter used to live in overcrowded houses: *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>45</sup> Neville Rolfe (1934, pp. 11-13).

<sup>46</sup> Hall (1933, pp. 84-86).

<sup>47</sup> Ware (1969, p. 527).

<sup>48</sup> Wyles (1952, p. 67).

<sup>49</sup> Ware (1969, p. 524).

<sup>50</sup> 3/AMS Box 44, Executive Minutes, 8 November 1932; Extraordinary Meeting of the Financial Committee, 24 April 1933.



increase in the number of prostitutes soliciting in the Edgware Road and Hyde Park<sup>51</sup>. The London Public Morality Council voiced similar concerns<sup>52</sup>.

An understanding of the interwar female labour market also suggests the importance of poverty in prostitution. The research of Selina Todd shows that employment opportunities for women, especially young women, expanded during the interwar years, and that only a minority experienced dire poverty<sup>53</sup>. However, most of the expansion in female employment occurred in the commercial sector, which people of a lower class found hard to enter<sup>54</sup>. The notorious economic depression of the early 1930s attracted migrants from depressed regions, such as Wales, to London. Labour transference schemes introduced from 1928 increased the mobility of those seeking work, especially females for domestic service<sup>55</sup>.

While it is impossible to state the number of London's prostitutes who had migrated from the regions, there is evidence that some did travel from depressed parts of the country in search of work, and then drifted into this more lucrative profession<sup>56</sup>. Miss Macpherson, Marlborough Street probation officer, commented that many «Hyde Park girls» were provincial migrants who had travelled to London for better wages and drifted into the profession following a row with an employer. They would often sleep out in the Park in the summer and prostitute themselves in the winter<sup>57</sup>. Miss Peto, superintendent of the newly created A-4 (Women Police) Branch from 1932, noted that the vicinity of Paddington was popular for girls who travelled to London from distressed areas<sup>58</sup>. No figures exist for the interwar years, yet in 1954, only 28 percent of the 247 women listed in the Paddington police prostitute register were born in London<sup>59</sup>.

A report in 1935 indicated that 46 percent of the women serving time at Holloway Prison for prostitution offences in 1930 were domestic servants. If waitresses were included to make a general «services» category, then the figure rose to 50 percent. If those who were unemployed are excluded from the survey, the proportion in service industries was 58 percent. These figures are confirmed by Cyril Burt's 1926 study of 292 young women who had been in trouble for «promiscuous sexual misconduct». 35 percent of these women were domestic servants, and a further 16 percent waitresses and barmaids<sup>60</sup>. However, a more detailed study of data from two anonymous London police courts by Hermann Mannheim, part-time lecturer in criminology at the London School of Economics, shows that 20.3 percent of prostitutes had a background in domestic service or waitressing in 1921, the figure rising

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Executive Minutes, 9 February 1932.

<sup>52</sup> 4/NVA Box 195, Executive Minutes, 2 July 1931.

<sup>53</sup> Todd (2004, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> White (2003, p. 190).

<sup>55</sup> Todd (2004, p. 135).

<sup>56</sup> MEPO 3/1002, PC Thomas [or Thorne] to Sub-Divisional Inspector Bacon [?], 22 September 1937; MEPO 3/1001, Inspector Burmby to Chief Inspector Cornish, 14 January 1929; and AC[?] to Home Office Under-Secretary, 26 January 1929.

<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the majority of women who were arrested for indecency in Hyde Park were not prostitutes: HO 326/7 SOC 5, 2 Dec. 1927, pp. 6, 8-10, 18, qq. 1955-1956, 1971-1978, 1984, 1998, 2096, 2099.

<sup>58</sup> Peto (1970, pp. 69-71).

<sup>59</sup> MEPO 2/9713, Paddington Station Return, 24 August 1954.

<sup>60</sup> Neville Rolfe (1935, pp. 302-303).

to 27.8 percent for the period 1929-35. The prominence of women involved in sweated trades, such as dressmaking, millinery, and tailoring is striking. These account for 28.8 percent of the total in 1921, yet 41.2 percent for 1929-35<sup>61</sup>.

The court registers confirm the shift noted by Mannheim. Those involved in domestic service and waitressing amount to 31.5 percent of the total, and women who worked in millinery, tailoring and dressmaking accounted for 17.3 percent<sup>62</sup>. Taken together, they account for a significant proportion, yet suggest a fall in the number of women recruited from such backgrounds. As Mannheim and Neville Rolfe's figures pertain to the late 1920s and early 1930s, they may reflect that an increased number of women undertook prostitution on a casual basis during the depression.

Evidence exists of female workers undertaking prostitution on a casual basis to subsidize meagre wages. For example, Lady Emmott, JP, representative of the National Council of Women, stated in evidence to the Street Offences Committee in 1928:

I think that sufficient recognition is not perhaps taken of the fact that so many of these women are engaged in other trades and that they do not make their living solely by prostitution. One gets it again and again. I spoke to a girl the other night. She was a tailorress. I asked her her wage and she said that she made about 25/- a week. She said: – «I pay 15/- for my room, and there is not much to go on with»<sup>63</sup>.

However, it would be misguided to overestimate the number of these part-time casual prostitutes, as the practical difficulty of working in the day time and walking the streets at night, made it a problematic choice for more than a few young women<sup>64</sup>. For example, 18-year-old Ethel Einarson walked out of the family home in the Grays Inn Road after a row with her mother. According to her testimony, she accepted the offer of shelter from a young man. Following her rape and numerous acts of intercourse – they had sex ten times in two days – she found a job as a waitress at the Royal Free Hospital working for £1 a week. He confiscated her money and groomed her into prostitution. When she refused to go out, he would beat her. Her dependence on prostitution was increased after she was sacked for missing two days of work, due to the exhaustion of having to serve as a waitress all day and walk the streets at night<sup>65</sup>.

However, it is doubtful that many women were coerced physically into prostitution. The prevalence of prostitutes with a background in low-skilled trades suggests that prostitution was often a survival strategy. According to Walkowitz, the move to prostitution in the late nineteenth century, constituted a choice to avoid what the young women regarded as even worse alternatives<sup>66</sup>. Similar explanations were offered during the 1920s. Ada Chesterton, a journalist and philanthropist, wrote an

<sup>61</sup> Mannheim (1940, p. 354).

<sup>62</sup> PS/BOW/A1/170-6; PS/MS/A1/154-61.

<sup>63</sup> HO 326/7 SOC 16, 3 March 1928, p. 43, q. 7804.

<sup>64</sup> Walkowitz (1980, pp. 14-15).

<sup>65</sup> CRIM 1/944, statement of Ethel Einarson, 9 June 1937.

<sup>66</sup> Walkowitz (1980, p. 19).

exposé of poverty for the *Sunday Express*. Her findings were also published as *In Darkest London* (1926):

You must understand that the attitudes of these young people towards sex cannot be described as immoral; nor is it immoral. It is a result of the will to live; they are unable to keep themselves in any other manner<sup>67</sup>.

One Wardour Street prostitute was adamant:

Why should I give up the profesh. for any job I could get? [asked a Wardour Street prostitute]. A skivvy! Not on *your* life... My mother was one before she married dad... And talking of marriage, I'd sooner walk the streets till I dropped than have to go through what mother did<sup>68</sup>.

It would be mistaken to claim that all prostitutes walked the streets out of economic hardship. Even during the nineteenth century, few women were motivated to undertake prostitution out of sheer want at the point of starvation<sup>69</sup>. In the police court registers for 1937 it is remarkable that just under a quarter of women arrested for soliciting described themselves as «independent», «married», or «modiste», which may serve as a code for being a full-time prostitute. It is notable that these descriptions were used by 68 percent of the foreign prostitutes<sup>70</sup>. Moreover, it would be naïve to assume that all prostitutes experienced the same type of upbringing. In one of the more judicious and sympathetic interpretations of prostitution, former police sergeant Harvey wrote:

Some of these street-women are obviously weak in intellect, others are not; some have deliberately chosen their particular profession, others have adopted it through force of circumstances or by accident; a number are regretful and ashamed, even afraid; while many have no remorse, and a few are just intrinsically bad. They come from all kinds of homes: some have had a good education and exceptional opportunities in life, more have received the normal breaks that fate bestows upon the average; a few have never had a chance at all<sup>71</sup>.

However, it is difficult to analyze the lives of the higher-class prostitutes, as it was exceptional for them to come to the attention of the police. Stories exist of women prostituting themselves to help partners, or pay for their children's education at public school<sup>72</sup>. Anecdotal evidence hints that some entered the profession for a brief period of time so as to secure enough money in order to attract a suitable spouse<sup>73</sup>. Independence was highly prized by some prostitutes. One man reportedly offered a lady her own flat and an allowance of three pounds a week. She politely refused<sup>74</sup>. These literary sources are suspect: they pathologize prostitution, reflecting a tendency to focus on non-economic explanations for prostitution.

<sup>67</sup> Chesterton (1927, p. 64).

<sup>68</sup> Cited in White (2003, p. 195).

<sup>69</sup> Walkowitz (1980, p. 19).

<sup>70</sup> PS/BOW/A1/170-6, PS/MS/A1/154-61.

<sup>71</sup> Harvey (1958, p. 40).

<sup>72</sup> Chesterton (1927, p. 81); Croft (1932, p. 33); Stringer (1925, p. 102).

<sup>73</sup> Glicco (1952, pp. 26-27, 30).

<sup>74</sup> Croft (1932, p. 31).

It would be wrong to assume that only one distinct prostitute «type» existed. Three groups of prostitutes can be discerned, and the structure hinges on class divisions<sup>75</sup>. Prostitutes were also classified in terms of their professional habits and appearance. Those at the height of this hierarchy relied on introductions and telephone arrangements to attract clients<sup>76</sup>. These top professionals could theoretically earn a substantial amount of money, and rented a furnished flat at between £5 and £12 a week. Prostitutes who solicited on the streets yet rented rooms for sex, formed the second category, and accounted for the majority of streetwalkers in and around the West End. Most of these prostitutes took their clients to a hired bedroom, sparsely furnished, in order that the client did not feel too at home. They were seen as gay girls with a taste for life who wanted access to money without needing to «work» for it. Ex-borstal girls were believed to account for a proportion of this section<sup>77</sup>. The final group, the poorest of prostitutes, were provincial migrants whose move to the metropolis for financial purposes had gone wrong. They used the streets both to attract business and to perform.

The success or failure of the individual prostitute in attracting clientele allowed for a degree of social mobility between these groups. Smithies states if a high-class call girl fell ill, she would have to take to the streets in order to re-build her clientele<sup>78</sup>. There is no concrete evidence of such behaviour, and a sociologist in the 1950s stated that such upward mobility was rare. It is probable that the potential for downward mobility existed. For example, the effect of ageing and the harshness of life working the streets would eventually impact upon an attractive Mayfair prostitute's appearance, leading her to seek out new haunts<sup>79</sup>.

Philippa Levine notes that discerning causation in prostitution is unique to labour studies, which is of itself pathologizing. For example, historians do not seek to ask why a woman undertook domestic service; economic rationales are seen as self-evident<sup>80</sup>. Yet the subject merits attention in view of the fact that contemporary «experts» were keen to downgrade the importance of economic factors. There is no single answer as to why women undertook prostitution. A combination of external socio-economic circumstances and internal psychological motives, led to some women, rather than others from a similar background, to walk the streets, offering their bodies in return for money. The impossibility in discerning psychological traits from the sources, combined with the heterogeneous composition of the prostitute «class», renders reducing prostitutes to a category or typology a fruitless task. While contemporaries concentrated on trying to elucidate such motives, there is no doubt that poverty was a strong factor in leading women into prostitution.

<sup>75</sup> HO 326/7 SOC 5, 2 December 1927, pp. 3-4, 6, qq. 1920, 1929, 1955-6, evidence of Macpherson; Smithies (1982, p. 133).

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, HO 45/24649, Divisional Detective Inspector «C» Vanner to Superintendent Bastable, 7 February 1923; Greeno (1960, p. 73); Thorp (1954, pp. 106-107).

<sup>77</sup> Fabian (1954, pp. 56-57).

<sup>78</sup> Smithies (1982, p. 133).

<sup>79</sup> Rolph (1955, p. 48); Matthews (1959, p. 115).

<sup>80</sup> Levine (1993, p. 269).

## SOCIAL RELATIONS

The law mediated social relations between prostitutes and the community, for as Philippa Levine observes, legislation dealing with offences associated with prostitution denied «women engaged in prostitution a separation between their private and public lives, because they insisted on maintaining an inappropriate and public persona»<sup>81</sup>. The question as to whether prostitutes were mainly part of the working-class community, formed their own sub-culture, or were part of the criminal underworld has been analyzed by historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries<sup>82</sup>. There is little reference to prostitutes' involvement with wider crimes. Hermann Mannheim claimed that most offences committed by prostitutes were of a petty nature, such as drunkenness and theft, though a minority were involved in receiving stolen goods and issuing counterfeit coins<sup>83</sup>. Apparently in the 1920s prostitutes were paid a commission to steer clients to illegal gambling dens<sup>84</sup>. For some, theft was part of the struggle for survival; it was commented during the Depression that more prostitutes were stealing from clients in taxis<sup>85</sup>.

For the interwar years, the evidence presents a contradictory picture of the relationship between prostitutes and wider society. Prostitutes often experienced uneasy relationships with their neighbours. Mrs «C», recalling her poverty-stricken childhood in 1920s Birmingham, commented that one woman was looked down upon as a fallen woman. However, the status of the lady in question was mitigated by the fact that she used her earnings to pay the rent of certain neighbours in times of need<sup>86</sup>. In 1931, George Orwell noted extreme hostility to prostitutes when observing people in Trafalgar Square:

On this occasion an old, very ugly woman, wife of a porter, was violently abusive to prostitutes, because they could afford a better breakfast than she could. As each dish was brought to them she would point at it and shout accusingly, «There goes the price of another fuck! We don't get kippers for breakfast, do we girls<sup>87</sup>?»

Wives and mothers tended to be most resentful of the presence of the prostitute, as they feared that husbands and sons may succumb to carnal temptations, or that daughters may be attracted to the «gay life» and «easy money». Unmarried women took a more relaxed approach. Hostility stretched from name calling – in the Campbell Bunk children referred to certain prostitutes as «Old Muvver Woodbine» and «Dust'ole Kate» – to assault<sup>88</sup>.

However, research into London's Jewish community in Soho during the interwar years indicates that friendly relations existed between prostitutes and locals. Indeed, it would be rash to make too sharp a distinction between prostitutes and locals.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>82</sup> Henderson (1999, p. 4).

<sup>83</sup> Mannheim (1940, p. 355).

<sup>84</sup> Lucas (1969, p. 16).

<sup>85</sup> 3/AMS Box 44, Executive Minutes, 9 February 1932.

<sup>86</sup> Chinn (1988, p. 34).

<sup>87</sup> George Orwell's diary for 26 August 1931, communicated in a letter to Dennis Collings c. 12 October 1931, in Orwell, Angus (1968, pp. 53-54).

<sup>88</sup> White (2003, pp. 93-94).

Former Jewish residents in and around the Soho district attested that some Jewish women prostituted themselves<sup>89</sup>. A sprinkling of Semitic surnames can be found in the police court registers. One former resident recalled prostitutes being enlisted to turn the lights on and off during the Sabbath. A resident of Wells Street (running north from Berwick Street, through Oxford Street into Fitzrovia) recollected that «there were many prostitutes in our street but they never bothered us and we never bothered them»<sup>90</sup>. According to Chaim Lewis, Rosie «seemed to have made a patch almost outside our Synagogue. As I passed her she gave me a broad endearing smile almost as though she were maternal love itself»<sup>91</sup>. Some bonds were strong indeed:

My *cheder* was in an area surrounded by prostitutes. I was only 10 or 11, or even younger, and we boys became very friendly with them and had nicknames for them. There was one very nice person we called «Gifty» because she always gave us sweets and little presents. When I came out of *cheder* I used to go and stand with her in Frith Street. She gave me a squash of the cheek and a peck, and I would stand with her because I liked her. I knew what she was, and she knew that I liked her. If she had a customer, she would say, «I won't be five minutes, Louis, if you want to wait, wait». In those days they were very quick! She would come down and carry on as if nothing had happened. She never said a wrong word to me, or swore, was always very kind, and when she thought it was time for me to go home she would say, «Go on Louis, see you tomorrow». My parents never knew this. My brother knew, he was part of it<sup>92</sup>.

It is appropriate to remark that Soho was a relatively poor working-class district. Residents probably viewed prostitutes as belonging to the same background; prostitute and pot washer were alike in the struggle to make ends meet.

Aspects of the trade integrated prostitutes within the broader nighttime economy. Both the court registers and Cyril Burt's study show that approximately 10 percent of prostitutes worked previously or concurrently as chorus girls, dancers, dance hostesses, film extras and musicians<sup>93</sup>. It is possible that some prostitutes capitalized upon contacts, and formed acquaintances with club, hotel and restaurant waiters and attendants in order to facilitate business<sup>94</sup>. For example, the Café Royal (at the junction of Air, Glasshouse and Regent Streets) was used by prostitutes seeking clients, and the police observed the former exchanging monies with waiters<sup>95</sup>. Street prostitutes also worked in collaboration with taxi drivers. The vehicles themselves would be used for sex, thus avoiding the need to rent premises, and the taxi drivers would be guaranteed an additional income<sup>96</sup>.

Nonetheless, for some, prostitution could be quite a lonely experience. Many would lose contact with family and friends, the only relationships being casual acquaintances due to the often unsettled and unreliable nature of their work<sup>97</sup>. For

<sup>89</sup> Black (1994, pp. 52-53).

<sup>90</sup> Recollection cited in *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>91</sup> Lewis (1965, p. 132).

<sup>92</sup> Recollection cited in Black (1994, p. 52).

<sup>93</sup> PS/BOW/A1/170-6; PS/MS/A1/154-61; Neville Rolfe (1935, p. 305).

<sup>94</sup> Bishop (1931, pp. 58-59); Croft (1932, p. 126).

<sup>95</sup> MEPO 2/10108, Inspector Rice report, 11 April 1920.

<sup>96</sup> Croft (1932, p. 41); Hall (1933, p. 37).

<sup>97</sup> Cornish (1935, pp. 243, 256).

example, Millicent Warren was a waitress before she took up prostitution in 1934; her family still thought that she was a waitress<sup>98</sup>. Isolation may have been a deliberate choice. Some women solicited quite a distance from their home environment in order to avoid identification as a prostitute. Unfortunately, most police courts did not record the residence of defendants, making it impossible to explore the relationship between a prostitute's place of home and work. Fragments of evidence point to some separation. For example, in April 1937, a 34-year-old married woman was tried for soliciting at Old Street police court for soliciting in Commercial Street, Spitalfields, in the East End – she lived in Pimlico<sup>99</sup>.

This sense of isolation probably hastened the integration of fledgling prostitutes into their newfound trade. In common with wider working-class culture<sup>100</sup>, prostitutes would help each other in times of need by loaning each other money, clothes and trinkets when a particular rich and gullible man appeared on the scene, lend money in times of need, and even approach probation officers if a new girl had recently taken to the streets and was thought to need help<sup>101</sup>. Indeed, some prostitutes paid regular subscriptions into «fine clubs» in order to always to be in a position to pay the usual 40/- on arrest<sup>102</sup>.

Like their relationship to the wider community, this comradeship was probably unreliable. Prostitutes were known to patrol well-defined beats in the interwar years<sup>103</sup>. Competition for these beats was fierce, Chief Inspector Sharpe counted 78 prostitutes one evening in a street while on patrol near Piccadilly<sup>104</sup>. Such competition had the potential to spill over into violence. The Chief Constable of the CID at Scotland Yard noted in 1935 that «it is [...] a very common sight at the back of the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square, to see prostitutes striking at each other with their handbags and kicking with their feet»<sup>105</sup>. Apparently it was extremely difficult for a woman to ply her trade in the more established streets of London without a pimp<sup>106</sup>. Pimps, or «bullies» as they were known, also helped prostitutes to secure accommodation by posing as a respectable tenant looking for a flat<sup>107</sup>.

Contrary to the representations provided in some «true crime» histories, there were few organized gangs involved in prostitution. While the numbers of foreigners involved in marriage-of-convenience rackets increased during the interwar years, they consisted of loosely connected individuals and small networks<sup>108</sup>. It has already been noted that the influence of the Messina brothers over prostitution was exaggerated, and the police observed that they had no knowledge of any other gangs

<sup>98</sup> MEPO 3/1702, 6 November 1935, statement of Warren.

<sup>99</sup> PS/OLD/A1/108: court appearance 13 April 1937.

<sup>100</sup> White (2003, pp. 73-75).

<sup>101</sup> HO 326/7 SOC 5, p. 2, q. 1906-7, evidence of Macpherson; Bishop (1931, pp. 68-69); Croft (1932, pp. 39-40); Stringer (1925, p. 101); Wyles (1952, p. 77).

<sup>102</sup> HO 326/7 SOC 13, 18 February 1928, pp. 15, 26, qq. 6647-6649, 6759, evidence of Dr Morton (governor and medical officer, Holloway prison) and Rev. Glanvill Murray (chaplain at Holloway).

<sup>103</sup> TNA, MEPO 3/1702, Edwards to Ralph, 8 November 1935.

<sup>104</sup> Sharpe (1938, p. 108).

<sup>105</sup> MEPO 3/1702, Horwell to Assistant Commissioner (Crime) Norman Kendal, 11 Nov. 1935.

<sup>106</sup> Fabian (1954, p. 55); Sharpe (1938, p. 107).

<sup>107</sup> Neville Rolfe (1935, p. 321).

<sup>108</sup> Slater (2007, pp. 57-59).

operating at their limited level<sup>109</sup>. «Organized vice» was a literary term used by journalists to describe the role of people involved in marriages-of-convenience, pimping, and the letting of flats to prostitutes at exorbitant rents<sup>110</sup>. Moreover, Clive Emsley comments that «even including these gangs, it is unlikely that more than a few offenders were “professionals” for whom crime was the principal source of income»<sup>111</sup>. However, some of the pimps who came to the attention of the police were involved in other criminal activities, including assaulting a police officer, long-term fraud, receiving, robbery and other «immoral earnings» convictions<sup>112</sup>.

While evidence exists of women being coerced physically into prostitution<sup>113</sup>, such examples were in the minority<sup>114</sup>. The relationship between pimp and prostitute was complex. Joanna Bourke explains that the privatization and relative isolation of prostitution led to women establishing «relationships» with one man<sup>115</sup>. The isolation that many prostitutes would have felt in new surroundings reinforced their dependence on a pimp<sup>116</sup>. Hence it was not unknown for prostitutes to defend their bullies against the arm of the law<sup>117</sup>. However, evidence of a relationship does not preclude coercion, there are also some reported cases of husbands forcing their wives to prostitute themselves<sup>118</sup>. It is important to note that while most pimps were male, there were exceptions to that rule. Women functioned as brothel keepers or as stereotypical pimps, inducing women into the «gay life»<sup>119</sup>. Moreover, it was not unknown for mothers to initiate their daughters into prostitution<sup>120</sup>.

## CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

While prostitution was a risky form of employment, it was attractive for some women in the sense that there was the potential to earn a reasonable amount of money. Appearances, however, were often deceptive. The prostitutes involved in the West End rackets had between 15 and 20 customers a day, thus earning up to £20<sup>121</sup>. Edward Smithies in his study of crime in World War II takes this figure at face value, favourably comparing the £80-£100 a week earnings of a prostitute with those of the £2 «shop girl»<sup>122</sup>. «Sheila Cousins» made the more realistic claim that she could

<sup>109</sup> MEPO 3/2582, Superintendent «C» Cole to DAC1, 28 August 1939.

<sup>110</sup> HO 45/2565, Chief Inspector «C» to Superintendent Walters, 18 May 1953.

<sup>111</sup> Emsley (2002, p. 210).

<sup>112</sup> CRIM 1/772, 926, 993; TNA, MEPO 3/769, 1622; White (2003, pp. 180-182).

<sup>113</sup> See the 31 cases between 1918 and 1937 documented in MEPO 3/1001.

<sup>114</sup> Harvey (1958, p. 61).

<sup>115</sup> Bourke (1994, p. 38); Hall (1933, p. 40).

<sup>116</sup> Harris (1928, pp. 53-54); Watts (1960, p. 139).

<sup>117</sup> CRIM 1/993, 31 Jan. 1938, evidence of S.D. Inspector Thomas Stickley, «X» Division; Wyles (1952, p. 67).

<sup>118</sup> MEPO 3/1001, Burmby to Cornish, 21 February 1927; «K» Division return, 2 January 1929.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, «F» Division return, 2 January 1933; TNA MEPO 3/1003, Sub-Divisional Inspector «C» Swinney minutes, 19 May, 5 and 7 June 1939.

<sup>120</sup> MEPO 3/1001, Kendal to Home Office, 23 June 1922; «R» Division return, 2 July 1937.

<sup>121</sup> Sharpe (1938, p. 106); Samuels (1970, p. 130).

<sup>122</sup> Smithies (1982, p. 132).



make £10 a week without even leaving her flat, that her life was comfortable and that she had no wish to change it, and that most weeks, she earned £20-£30<sup>123</sup>. Yet at the hearings of the Street Offences Committee, the chairman Hugh Macmillan noted that £30 amounted to a significant amount of money for a prostitute<sup>124</sup>. Even allowing for effects of inflation on a prostitute's earnings, as late as the 1950s a social worker doubted that even a Mayfair prostitute would make more than between £60-£100 a week<sup>125</sup>.

To be fair to Smithies, he did not have access to the unpublished sources that form the base of this analysis. However «true crime» historians have depended on the work of Smithies in their interpretation of prostitution. Some of these historians have also relied on Sheila Cousins's autobiography of her life streetwalking to portray a relatively favourable picture of prostitution in the interwar years<sup>126</sup>. While the work of «Cousins» has its uses, «Cousins» is generally believed to be the novelist Graham Greene and Ronald Matthews<sup>127</sup>. The analysis of «true crime» historians is flawed for two reasons. First, they overstate the economic benefits of prostitution. Second, they fail to address the broader social consequences of a life of prostitution.

£1 for sexual intercourse during the interwar years was probably towards the higher end of the market, considering that just over half of London's male workforce earned over 61/- a week and a tenth earned over £4 a week<sup>128</sup>. Furthermore, £1 was significantly more expensive than other so-called luxury goods. For example, in the early 1930s, running ale and bitter cost between 1/- and 1/2 a quart, while an ounce of Imperial Tobacco was 9½ pence<sup>129</sup>.

These writers also assume that all prostitutes in and around the West End earned a reasonable amount of money. The West End is not a homogeneous district. Soho was known in the 1930s as the resort of low-class prostitutes<sup>130</sup>. For example, police investigations into the murder of Josephine Martin in 1935, revealed that she «was heavily in debt and led a hand-to-mouth existence»<sup>131</sup>. The autopsy noted that «from the contents of her stomach [...] she must have been rather hungry»<sup>132</sup>.

Even if prostitutes were earning large sums of money, they would have to remit a great deal back to the pimp<sup>133</sup>. There were bills to be paid. Heavy rents were a perennial problem<sup>134</sup>, though «Messina girl» Marthe Watts did not think her £6 a week rent for her flat was unreasonable<sup>135</sup>. This sum was significantly higher than the average rent which was *circa* 12/- for a tenement and 4/- for a room. Rents were

<sup>123</sup> Cousins (1938, pp. 3-4, 148). This figure is corroborated by Fabian (1954, p. 55).

<sup>124</sup> TNA, HO 326/7 SOC 4, 2 December 1927, p. 36, q. 1840.

<sup>125</sup> Rolph (1955, p. 83).

<sup>126</sup> Linnane (2003b, p. 241); Murphy (1993, pp. 13-14); Thomas (2003, pp. xii-xiii, 2), (2005, p. 267).

<sup>127</sup> In the British Library integrated catalogue, it is noted that *To Beg I am Ashamed* was written by Ronald De Couves Matthews with the assistance of Graham Greene.

<sup>128</sup> Bowley (1934a, pp. 67-68).

<sup>129</sup> Smith, Marsh (1930, p. 95).

<sup>130</sup> MEPO 3/2138, Cole to ACA, 27 August 1942.

<sup>131</sup> MEPO 3/1702, Edwards to Ralph, 8 November 1935.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, Horwell to Kendal, 11 November 1935.

<sup>133</sup> Fabian (1954, p. 55); Sharpe (1938, p. 106).

<sup>134</sup> Scott (1936, p. 128).

<sup>135</sup> Watts (1960, p. 144).

the highest in Westminster with sub tenants paying 7/4, or tenants being charged 5/5 for a room in a divided house<sup>136</sup>. Other expenditure for the more successful prostitute included a maid or a char to help maintain the premises. Clothes and accessories, such as furs, had to be bought or hired, acting as a drain on income<sup>137</sup>. Overall, the sheer number of professional prostitutes on the streets, meant that it was an extremely competitive and thus not too lucrative trade<sup>138</sup>.

At this point, it must be stressed that prostitutes cannot be said to be victims of systematic police persecution, though the unequal power relationship between the two groups was complex. The Metropolitan Police provided a breakdown of arrests for prostitution offences for the first half of 1933. 315 prostitutes committed 521 offences. 64.7 percent were arrested once only, 21 percent twice, and a smaller number of women more frequently<sup>139</sup>. The West End police court registers for 1937 present a similar picture. 52.5 percent (337) of the 641 prostitutes were arrested once only, 18.8 percent (121) twice, and a smaller number more frequently<sup>140</sup>. However, foreign prostitutes were targeted more frequently. Rosa Polivka suffered the most, being arrested 19 times in 1937. Polivka was born in France in 1911. She married British born Marcel Polivka at Neuilly sur Seine on 15 September 1936, and had a British passport issued to her at Antwerp eight days later. Moving to London to work as a professional prostitute – she described her occupation as «married» – she lived at 21 Maddox Street<sup>141</sup>. On 21 August 1937 she had the misfortune of being arrested at 8.35pm, being bailed half an hour later. She was subsequently arrested at 9.55pm<sup>142</sup>. For most prostitutes, however, the police were the least of their worries.

Prostitution cannot be reduced to a simple cost-benefit economic analysis. The trade entailed notorious physical hardships. For a prostitute to earn £20 a day entailed sexual intercourse with a large number of men. The process of having sex with at least 20 men a day seven days a week was physically and mentally tiring, as well as emotionally traumatic. One Canning Town prostitute complained: «I cannot stand any more I have had eight short times tonight and I feel ill»<sup>143</sup>. Exposure to multiple sexual partners to maximize earnings, combined with the hazy legality of prostitution, meant that violence was an occupational hazard for most streetwalkers. In 1935 Chief Constable Horwell of the Criminal Investigation Department stated that:

It would be difficult to find a street prostitute in the West End without bruises, even around the neck. They daily come up against vicious men, and always demand more money than they bargained for<sup>144</sup>.

It may be thought that exposure to a life of prostitution increased the risk of contracting venereal disease. Venereal disease has often been associated with prostitu-

<sup>136</sup> Bowley (1934b, pp. 46-47, 50).

<sup>137</sup> Scott (1936, p. 128); Peto (1970, p. 108).

<sup>138</sup> Scott (1936, p. 127).

<sup>139</sup> Neville Rolfe (1934, p. 323).

<sup>140</sup> PS/BOW/A1/170-6; PS/MS/A1/154-61.

<sup>141</sup> Secret Foreign Prostitute and Associates Album, no. 1.

<sup>142</sup> PS/BOW/A1/173: court appearance 23 August 1937.

<sup>143</sup> CRIM 1/626, 10 Nov. 1932, statement of Daisy Louise Jones.

<sup>144</sup> MEPO 3/1702, Horwell to Kendal, 11 November 1935.

tion, both serving as symbols of moral and physical degeneracy<sup>145</sup>. Yet while contraception was still expensive and unreliable during the 1920s, and as late as 1924 syphilis killed 60,335 people, venereal disease was declining in incidence; moreover, venereal disease was increasingly contracted via forms of extra-marital sexual contact outside prostitution<sup>146</sup>. During the 1930s, married women accounted for approximately half of the patients treated for venereal diseases<sup>147</sup>. Though some prostitutes described themselves as married in order to access treatment facilities<sup>148</sup>, one sociologist stated, rather bluntly, during the 1950s that: «the more the promiscuous girl attains to the status of an organized professional prostitute the greater the control of her venereal disease»<sup>149</sup>.

There is no doubt, however, that some women suffered terribly from venereal disease. On 22 January 1920, Louis Marks was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour for brothel-keeping in the East End. The sober *Times* noted that:

Two girls had been referred to. That they would soon die of the practices in which they indulged that he [the pimp] might live comfortably was absolutely certain. One of them was now suffering from two separate forms of venereal disease<sup>150</sup>.

Alongside venereal disease, substance misuse has a long association with prostitution. Social commentators in the Victorian era suffered a tendency to blame a woman's «fall» on alcohol, ignoring, the fact prostitutes sought solace in alcohol as a means of coping with the harsh realities of the job<sup>151</sup>. This association persisted into the interwar years. Patrick Hamilton in *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky* uses the myth of the alcoholic prostitute: «“All through a glass of port”, Jenny the girl of the streets, had said. She had said it in jest, but who shall decline to surmise that she had stumbled on the literal truth»<sup>152</sup>. Dr. Morton, governor and chief medical officer at Holloway prison observed that a number of the «old chronic alcoholic cases that I have spoken about were prostitutes in their younger days»<sup>153</sup>. Yet it is striking that there are few references to prostitutes and alcoholism in the source material as a whole. In Neville Rolfe's five «typical» cases, there are only two references to drunk and disorderly behaviour<sup>154</sup>. Certainly fewer drunk prostitutes came to the attention of the police in the twentieth century as compared to the Victorian era, reflecting the decline in drunkenness as a social problem<sup>155</sup>. From 1900

<sup>145</sup> Self (2003, p. 53).

<sup>146</sup> Bingham (2005, pp. 1061-1064); Cook (2004, pp. 51, 123, 126-7, 133, 135, 137-139); Davenport-Hines (1990, pp. 246-247).

<sup>147</sup> PCOM 9/141, «The Replies of Voluntary Organizations to the League of Nations Enquiry into Rehabilitation» (1934), pp. 13-16.

<sup>148</sup> Neville Rolfe (1935, p. 315).

<sup>149</sup> Rolph (1955, p. 93).

<sup>150</sup> *The Times*, 23 January 1920.

<sup>151</sup> Bartley (2000, p. 6).

<sup>152</sup> Hamilton (1935, 1987, p. 329).

<sup>153</sup> HO 326/7 SOC 13, p. 33, q. 6830.

<sup>154</sup> Neville Rolfe (1935, pp. 301-302).

<sup>155</sup> Dingle (1972). For a contemporary temperance advocate's description of this social shift see Carter (1932).

most prostitutes were arrested for soliciting<sup>156</sup>, whereas between 1875 and 1886, 70 percent of the prostitutes apprehended in the «E» (Holborn) police division of the West End were apprehended for being drunk<sup>157</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The «underworld» may be an analytically imprecise term, yet it is culturally embedded in public discourse<sup>158</sup>. Engaging with the work of «true crime» historians provides fruitful avenues of research. In their later work James Morton and Donald Thomas hint at the complexity of prostitution<sup>159</sup>, yet the prostitutes play second fiddle to the male crime lords in their descriptions of the underworld. Discussion of prostitution tends to reproduce contemporary myth rather than shed light on their role in criminal «underworlds». Their picture is mainly the result of a narrow source base. Over-reliance on one or two literary texts without interpreting them in a wider evidential and socio-economic context, leads to the danger of material assuming the status of «proof» on the simple basis of utility<sup>160</sup>. While it is impossible to access directly the «voice» of the prostitute, the use of a multi-layered source base allows the historian to avoid the one-dimensional interpretations provided by «true crime» writers, providing a wider context for interpreting the usually narrow material that such works rely on. However, this necessitates acknowledging that representations of crime are «imaginative reconstructions of events based on what is always inadequate evidence»<sup>161</sup>.

This analysis raises a number of questions that cannot be tackled within the confines of this essay. To avoid a synchronic picture, there is need to address differences in prostitution over space and time. A vast gap existed between the world of the Soho prostitute and her Mayfair sister, let alone between these more established haunts and the East End. Although professional prostitutes patronized premises and streets frequented by seamen, and «shilling whores» still lurked the backstreets of Stepney, «vice» manifested itself in a cruder, less commercialized form<sup>162</sup>. Insight would also be gained from comparing the experience of prostitution in the capital with other urban environments, such as Cardiff, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Manchester.

Changes also occurred within space over time. The area around Victoria station serves as an interesting case study. The secretary of the National Vigilance Association noted in the summer of 1936 that conditions, to his surprise, had improved around Victoria. He ascribed this to the increased presence of the Women Police<sup>163</sup>. Prostitutes solicited the area around the Seven Sisters, Finsbury Park, during the 1920s, the district being subject to anti-prostitution drives in 1919-1920, 1933-1934

<sup>156</sup> HO 45/21766, prosecutions for soliciting, 4 July 1929.

<sup>157</sup> Reports of the Superintendent of «E» Division to the Commissioner, 1875-1886.

<sup>158</sup> Levi (2002, p. 879).

<sup>159</sup> Morton (2008, p. 78); Thomas (2005, pp. 267-268).

<sup>160</sup> Smith (1977, p. 185).

<sup>161</sup> Herzog (2002, p. 41).

<sup>162</sup> Goldman (1940, pp. 66-68); Neville Rolfe (1935, p. 298); Wyles (1952, pp. 58-59, 67).

<sup>163</sup> 4/NVA Box 192 A. Station Work 6, F.A.R. Sempkins to Superintendent Peto, 24 June 1936.

and 1936-7<sup>164</sup>. Yet by the end of the 1930s, the police observed that in the vicinity «the activities of prostitutes have declined almost to extinction»<sup>165</sup>. It is doubtful, however, that the mere presence of police would have caused such a dramatic fall. In conjunction with more detailed research into the police court registers, further enquiry is needed into the geography of prostitution in London.

While there was no «average» prostitute, in the sense that it can be argued that there is no «typical» historian, an impressionistic portrait of the West End street-walker can be painted from the available evidence. Hailing from a poor background and a far from settled family life, the London prostitute who features in most of the sources was probably in her mid-to-late 20s, and had a criminal record. However, it would be rash to suggest that all prostitutes had weak family ties. Prostitution may be an economic strategy to preserve the family unit<sup>166</sup>. After all, the unfortunate Josephine Martin was keeping her brother on her «immoral earnings».

As was the case throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such people were probably quite tenacious, and possessed an independent cast of mind<sup>167</sup>. Unlike the nineteenth century, alcohol does not appear to play a significant role in the lives of most prostitutes. The threat of violence was ever-present, and the prostitute had a close, yet precarious, relationship with her sisters and her pimp.

Judith Walkowitz writes that legislation during the Victorian era increased the dependence of the prostitute on her pimp, and isolated her from the wider community<sup>168</sup>. Yet this analysis demonstrates that not all prostitutes were cut off from society. Her work was integrated with other occupations in the service sector, and the evidence from Soho suggests that it is more accurate to conceptualize the prostitute as part of the working classes than a criminal underworld. While the evidence suggests that prostitution became a more organized enterprise in the 1930s, it would be the Street Offences Act of 1959 that undermined the relatively open market in sexual services and tightened the bonds between prostitutes and the criminal «underworld».

S.A. Slater  
History Department  
The Open University  
Walton Hall  
UK – Milton Keynes MK7 6AA  
S.A.Slater@open.ac.uk

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<sup>165</sup> MEPO 2/6622, Superintendent «N» (Stoke Newington) to Deputy Assistant Commissioner 2, 30 November 1938.

<sup>166</sup> White (1985, pp. 207-208).

<sup>167</sup> McLeod (1982, pp. 33-34).

<sup>168</sup> Walkowitz (1980, p. 211).

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