Criminal Conversations

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SECTION TWO

“External” Threats to the Security of Society

This section features the chapters examining Victorian conversations around the threats from those considered “other” within respectable Victorian society on some basis of difference. This includes those identified as “different” on relatively predictable grounds, such as race (in chapters by Rowbotham and Swift), or the evidence of their sexual practices, as in Crozier’s chapter. Well-established fears associated with Ireland’s capacity for spawning revolutionary feeling to trouble England’s happiness were readily increased by the regular reports of Irish men and women featuring in court cases for brawling, for drunkenness, and so forth. As with the examples provided in Rowbotham’s chapter, this concerned petty crime for the most part, but it assumed sinister proportions because of the xenophobic overtones of popular stereotyping.

The issue of the threat by those felt to have demonstrated the “uncivilized” and “primitive” aspects of their nature by their use of poison is also dealt with in Ward’s chapter. However, this section also explores wider aspects of “otherness” within Victorian society, such as the expressions of discomfort and consequent alienation voiced by many ordinary Victorians when faced with new professions and practices that seemed dangerously unfamiliar, or when evidence indicated that aspects of daily life which seemed secure were, in fact, threatening to health and happiness. Thus the new medical experts touched on by Crozier both comforted and alarmed contemporaries, and the extent of distrust of the conclusions of such “new” experts and their methodologies is demonstrated in Morton’s chapter on food adulteration. The conversations here point to the tensions caused by the impact on domestic Victorian society of intrusions from “outside,” whether those external factors were in some senses familiar (as in the case of the Irish and even denizens of the British Empire) or products of the industrial urban age and its need for professionals. This section thus points to the commonalities, quite as much to the discontinuities between these various external threats to the stability and happiness of Victorian society, highlighting the need to conflate types of “other” often examined in isolation.